

Amoebic Dysentery

The general attitude- when looking at samples from local reservoirs, at least- has been nothing short of dread.

It's not disconcertment, or anxiety, or even simple fear. No, it's stone-cold dread, so icy that it gives Maia Danvers the shivers.

She's young enough that she's never really been this deep in something becoming a pandemic before. Oh, she's experienced *pandemics*, but only as a citizen, never a researcher- the last truly terrible one began when she was seventeen, and while it pressed deeply into her mind, she's never stared down the barrel of oncoming doom like this before.

Dysentery. It sounds like something out of a historical novel, pandemic-level dysentery. Maia's never been one for those, thinking them far too over-dramatic, but sometimes, that really is the way it feels- as if the world is slowly falling around their ears in a car crash played back in slow motion, where every fault can be seen and picked apart with perfect accuracy.

The world seems to slow, when something terrible is about to happen. It's as if it can't come too quickly, as if something rapid that will blindside all who watch it would be too *easy*, would be too *gentle*, wouldn't let the horror set in like tetanus, sending their bodies rigid with it.

She's not sure what she's expecting. Somewhere, deep down, the hope had still been brimming, she supposes, waiting for some break of relief to tell her that not everything is lost.

It's the hope that kills, really- the ever-present reaching, the ever-present thought that something could turn out *right* and *safe*, the denial of the horror and death on the horizon.

It shatters easily, as if it was made to.

"There's enough of the amoeba in the last few samples to qualify the water as contaminated," she says, scrubbing a hand across her face, "Ours, Puce's... given the trends-well, I'm a researcher, not a public health professional, but I'd say we're running out of safe water."

Her co-workers look between themselves. None of them want to be the one to pass on the news, to tell people that yet again, the water supply is restricted and unsafe, and instead of passing over their city like before- no, now it's far more personal, far more dear and close.

“Has anyone figured out any scalable water treatment yet?” Michael, one of her co-workers, asks, “It started picking up steam in Lavender, no? They have to have something by now.”

“Are you sure? Lavender’s never been the most proactive about this kind of thing,” Sarah, another of Maia’s co-workers, points out, “Nobody really is. Not anymore.”

“You’re saying that like they *asked* for this,” Maia hisses reproachfully. Sarah, at least, has the decency to look ashamed at her implication, and stares down at the table in silence.

“There’s no point to throwing blame around,” Michael points out, “We’re all in the same boat *now*.”

“Well, that much is obvious,” Maia agrees, “I can’t even imagine being the kind of person who has to explain this whole situation to a politician.”

She sinks back into her seat, rubbing at her eyes.

“Just remember to boil your water. We don’t need anyone here getting sick on top of everything else.”

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“You’re joking.”

Alex Golightly is a short, older gentleman going white far before his time, mostly due to stress. He’s weathered many a pandemic and epidemic before, more than aware of what dangers may come from a lack of preparation. He’s had more than his fair share of experiences with the lackluster efforts of those in charge in response to what may come, and more than his fair share of experiences with people who simply panic in response instead of bothering to do anything helpful.

The woman standing in front of him right now is not the type to do either of those things.

“I’m afraid I’m not.”

“You can’t honestly expect me to be able to strong-arm the rest of the public health committee into doing anything about this when you barely have any information on how we need to start mass water treatment,” Caroline Thierry replies, crossing her arms over her chest, “Or any committee, actually.”

“I’m aware,” Alex agrees, “I assume you’re planning to try regardless.”

Caroline sighs, and runs a hand through her hair, resting her elbows down on the table.

“I am, don’t get me wrong,” she says, “I just...”

“It’s going out in our statement tomorrow morning. I just figured I should let you know,” he hums. They’ve been friends for a long time. It’s only reasonable.

“Giving me extra time to plan my own points to bring regarding how to respond to the situation?” she asks. Alex nods.

“If you’re asking for my professional recommendation-”

“The one you’ll be giving in the statement tomorrow, I’m sure?” Caroline prods. Alex raises an eyebrow.

“You seem awfully sure that my recommendations will be the ones making it all the way to the official statement- or that I’ll be the one giving it.”

Caroline leans back in her chair, visibly surprised.

“I suppose I’m asking for your professional recommendation, then,” she replies, unsettled. Alex says nothing, but tips his head to the side. For one long, long moment, they both stare at each other, letting the quiet settle in between them.

Neither of them want to admit what the plan is, not really. Admitting this kind of thing makes it *real*, makes them both have to consider how close their time is to running out, how soon it must be before their luck goes with it. They’ve both survived their shares of pandemics. They’ve both managed to wring careers out of them relatively unscathed, winning reputation off the back of a history of stable decisions and shrewd minds for reducing casualties.

This beginning, this admittance that a plan is *needed* and ahead of them... even if it’s already been spoken allowed, been discussed between epidemiologist to epidemiologist for weeks (which, of course, it has been- Alex is nothing if not careful), breaking the silence between them is always what makes it feel the most like a genuine threat. They don’t warn each other about this sort of thing otherwise, and both of them know it well.

Alex leans forwards on the table, pressing his hands together and staring Caroline down as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

“Well, first of all,” he says, “I believe we'll need to start with the issue of boiling.”

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“These regulations are a *joke*,” the pundit says, waving her arms in the air, “How are people supposed to follow any of this reliably?”

“It really does go to show that despite decades of weathering pandemics, we still don't seem to have any reliable plan in place,” Donna Ross adds, leaning forwards on the table. Diana Rogers, the other host of D.R. Squared, a popular political podcast, nods in agreement.

“I mean, really,” Diana agrees, “There's nothing we can work with on any of this. It's all reasonable, given the circumstances, but really, it boils down to nothing we didn't already know.”

“It's not even regulations, really, just a set of guidelines. There's guesswork on what should be done about water treatment plants as a whole, but-”

“There's not even any guidelines for how large scale delivery of safe water should be accomplished, or what someone should do if they aren't able to boil anything,” Diana points out.

“Right? What about that horrible freeze in Lavender? Thousands of people were left unable to heat their homes at *all*, not just turn the stove on. Even if there's issues with mass water treatment, there needs to be some reliably available way to get water to people who can't boil theirs. And will the government be covering the increased costs for gas and electricity?” Donna agrees.

They're both angry, though they're trying to hide it under a veil of simple exasperation. The initial warnings had gone out over a week ago, and even after imposed guidelines, this is the most that the politicians have been willing to budge over thus far.

The anger is hiding something else- fear, to be more precise. They're afraid. There hasn't been any significant common source pandemics like this for decades- pandemics in the modern day tend to be more along the lines of propagated viruses, rather than a mass source of contaminated water. Of course, that implies that there'd be a rapid decrease as well, which doesn't seem to be happening. No, instead of a single set of large cities with significant

exposures, there's been the slow, creeping realization that far more reservoirs are contaminated than any of them had thought.

Donna doesn't like this, the unfamiliar fear. There's being accustomed to large scale outbreaks, and then there's becoming accustomed to large scale outbreaks that are an entirely different variety than what they're used to. She's never seen something this scale that's theoretically avoidable like this before- which is arguably the problem.

Contaminated water is everywhere- it's a risk no matter where people go, and it could theoretically be used for everything. Beyond that, it's a vital necessity. People *need* to drink water, and they *need* to eat food, much of which comes into proximity with some form of potentially contaminated water before it ever reaches the table.

Donna's more than familiar with the kind of hysteria that pandemics bring along for the ride. She remembers empty shelves well, and worries.

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The prices for bottled water have gone up again.

It shouldn't be legal. It *shouldn't* be. They're pretending to be sneaky about it, too, but Cameron's grabbed photos of them the last few times, and every time, they've gone up a cent or three whenever they restock. It's not like he's the first person to notice all of this, of course- far from it. It just so happens that it's not consistent across the state- which makes Cameron think that the emphasis might just be from the distributors, rather than the suppliers. Maybe. He's not an expert at this sort of thing, and he definitely isn't any kind of lawyer.

There's been more than the usual share of squabbles over the amount of bottled water available, lately. It's worse in the areas where people are already suspicious about the water quality- being aware of the fact that there's a chemical-resistant amoeba in most reservoirs in the country does not lend people to being anything other than nervous of the water they find available. For good reason, too- Cameron knows well that even if it being an actively replicating disease is new, water contamination leading to sickness isn't.

In any case, the prices for bottled water- the only relatively reliable safety net that anyone without a working stove has, really- has gone up, slowly but steadily. Of course, that's only for people who can buy it at a real store, stores that have to follow the law. There's been many companies enforcing limits on how much bottled water individuals can buy in one sitting- in other places, like starving coyotes, the price gougers sink their teeth in.

It's not surprising, really. The market, as much as it sickens Cameron to cast his mind in that direction, is theoretically open- water is a basic human need, and the water that's free is unsafe. Of course there would be price gougers, waiting to monopolize all that they can and make as much of a profit in the intervening time that they find possible. Cameron just can't understand the urge. Deep down, it's downright impossible for him to understand the mentality. They're going to get people killed, one of these days. He wonders how long it'll take for that to happen, or if it already has.

Cameron's managed to sidestep the amoeba himself- no severe cramps yet, although given it has around a weeklong incubation period, if he's accidentally consumed enough contaminated water to acquire it himself, he could be faced with the symptoms any day now.

That's the most worrying part, he thinks. It's a form of dysentery, so the symptoms are, well, *familiar*.

It's enough to make almost anybody panic.

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As a general rule, the word *pandemic* tends to stick around in peoples' minds.

No matter how well they think they avoid the worry, it's enough to get them to at least pay attention to what the signs are, to what the symptoms are, to how it's acquired. It's a rare person who doesn't already know about the basic timeline of this new form of amoebic dysentery, and it's a rare person who doesn't have the slightest bit of worry about it.

The thing about dysentery- even the amoebic varieties, though the bacterial equivalent was far more common prior to this amoeba gaining a stranglehold- is that until it reaches the point of its most notable symptoms, it's better known for its more... classic contributions.

It's a gastrointestinal infection.

Now, the thing is, there are quite a few gastrointestinal diseases with awfully similar symptoms, in the grand scheme of things. This, with the addition of the fact that there's a pandemic going around... well-

In the grand scheme of things, most of the patients who immediately flow to the hospitals will not have this amoeba in them. No, they've been rather careful, really- careful enough that they're paranoid. These people, rather than suffering from an amoeba, have a variety of other medical conditions- noroviruses, perhaps, or maybe even salmonella.

Or maybe, like millions of other people, they simply have IBS. Or, like *billions* of people, lactose intolerance.

The issue is, when thousands of people stream towards a hospital with claims of severe diarrhea, it creates quite the problem- there's no ability to test them, not at that scale. No, instead, the backlog gets worse, and worse, and worse, piling high like leaves in the fall.

The more backlog there is, the sicker people get.

Of course, it doesn't help that it's hard enough to get safe water and food as it is- the worst possible combination, really, for a severe gastrointestinal pandemic.

This won't end well.