

“There’s Something Happening Here” by Dean Gessie

I was sent into the field to investigate an alarming number of incidents and applications. I would collect data relevant to the causes and effects of disease and injury [incidents] and identify the most efficient means to deny financial claims [applications]. The Company’s logo [an ancient Greek sphinx] is figurative expression of our mission and our success. We challenge applicants [typically, health plan subscribers] to answer a riddle and kill and eat those who fail to do so.

Our clients are listed on the Forbes Global 2000 and they are united in their desire not to incentivize human suffering [beyond the bell-to-bell degradation of body and soul on the shop floor, so to speak]. For our clients [and for their shareholders, in particular], any policy or agreement that indemnifies an employee only has *psychometric* value; when an application is actually filed and the Company intervenes, these policies and agreements should have no value, whatsoever.

On that particular morning, my son and I were driving through an apocalyptic landscape. Green ash and Siberian elm lay everywhere. They took shapes that recall the faked landings of extraterrestrial craft. A rare Florida cracker – its horns and legs pointed skyward - was impaled on a church spire, looking much like an hors d’oeuvres of steak tartare. Boats from a river marina were strangely stacked into a kind of indigenous totem or inukshuk. And to make matters worse, ubiquitous smoke from Canadian wildfires blanketed the sky. Not only was our red sunrise eerily Martian, but drones of some sort skittered about like metallic dragonflies.

Anyway, Ezekiel, my son, was travelling with me because his mother was visiting her mother. Regrettably, my wife and I had not parted on good terms. The Florida Panhandle and my spiritual landscape were equally bereft.

In any event, my task was to investigate the seedlings of a *pandemic*, for lack of a better word. In the wake of an EF5, long-track tornado, cases of *blindness* were [forgive the wordplay] coming to light in eye-popping numbers. Those who would talk to us at roadside shared similar stories of the storm: “We never saw it coming.”

As eyewitness reports go, these were reasonably accurate. Tornadoes in the Dixie Alley are often camouflaged by rain and they often strike at night. Global warming was moving tornados south and east where applications to the Company are even less likely to succeed. Case in point: the population is denser and many live in trailer parks. They do not have access to basements or saferooms, as their insurance policies clearly require. When it comes to disasters and pandemics, the poor have not suffered enough if they can say, *this is the worst*.

My son, that rare teenager hunched over a computer, said, “Have you asked Addy?”

*Addison* is an AI chatbot that works for the Company. His name has an Old English origin and means, loosely, *child of God*. Addison’s predictive powers had already suppressed thousands of applications. He was, well, a godsend.

Nevertheless, I was about to tell Zeke that it was too early for that line of inquiry. Zeke had other ideas. For him, AI was, indeed, *deux ex machina*, or god in the machine. And you could speak directly to God whenever you wanted.

“Hey, Addy,” he said, “what’s up with the Dixie Alley Tornado and blind folk?”

Addison returned a diagnosis of *mucormycosis*. I listened to his reporting and to Zeke’s commentary.

“It sounds like these people have *black fungus syndrome*,” said Addison.

“Holy shit,” said Zeke, reading ahead. “Did you know that fungal infections kill more people than tuberculosis or malaria? Two million a year! And get this. There are more than twelve million species of fungus!”

“One of the symptoms of mucormycosis is vision loss,” said Addison.

“Holy shit,” said Zeke. “Did you know that black fungus has an overall mortality rate of 54%?”

“Well,” I said, “these blind folk are alive and kicking. Addison’s diagnosis is a big reach.”

Zeke wasn’t listening to me. “Holy shit,” he said. “Fungi attack immunocompromised people. The U.S. has seven million of these and millions more with genetic disorders or diseases that hamper immunity. If Addy’s right, we’re in a shitload of trouble.”

As we pulled into a trailer park that looked like a demolition derby, I asked Zeke if he could clean up his potty language, but he wasn’t listening to me. “Holy shit,” he said, “some of the other symptoms are blackened skin, facial swelling and altered consciousness.”

I regret what I said. “According to Jesus, the poor will always be with us.” It was cruel and unnecessary. “The Lord helps those who can afford to help themselves.”

My boy was already a better man than me. He rebuked my cynical attitude in a way that had far more emotional cache. “Why can’t you and mom get along?”

Our interview with Whitley Boone became something of a Zoom meeting. Zeke and I were *stopped video* in a circle of about twenty-five blind folk seated in a common picnic area. They were sharing what they *knew* about their affliction and its cause.

“It’s mucormycosis,” said one.

I was not surprised to hear that. Everyone had access to AI. Everyone was an expert. An AI chatbot was like the Tyndale Bible, the first English translation to open the world to the word of God.

“We all live near industrial farms.”

“When that tornado struck, the shit hit the fan.”

Zeke whispered, “The science says that mucormycosis spores can grow in animal dung.”

Another of the community said, “And how many of us have property that borders agri-business?”

“They plow gazillions of pounds of fruit and vegetables into the earth just to keep their prices high.”

Zeke whispered, “The science says that mucormycosis spores can grow in rotting organic material.”

We finally heard from Whitney Boone, “And these tornadoes are more violent. We catch debris like pin cushions and the air is like a biblical plague.”

A woman to Whitney’s left added, “These businesses will pay for our suffering. We all have the same group insurance from the Health Exchange.”

I remembered what Zeke had read about fungal diseases, that they had increased dramatically with the onset of COVID. Regrettably, many of the people in these parts would have refused the vaccine, thereby violating the *duty of care* provision in their health insurance

plans. Even before the online autofill function predicted cancer or diabetes or *mucormycosis*, their applications would be denied. The sphinx always wins.

Whitney Boone creeped me out with his last comment. He *looked* at my son and me and said, “Ezekial is the name of a prophet. You should listen to what he has to say.” Was Whitney Boone talking about mucormycosis, my failed marriage or both?

My son channeled a little “Ironic” by Alanis Morissette, repeated the same line he had used when I was served with divorce papers, “I guess you didn’t see that coming.”

The next day, we were in the car on our way to see a hospital administrator in Alabama. Smoke from Canadian wildfires blanketed the sun and darkened the earth. If you were outdoors for any length of time, you became a piece of cured meat for a zombie wedding. And you could still hear the metallic drones in the air, even if you couldn’t see them. I kept thinking of that 1960’s anthem with the lyrics, “There’s something happening here/But what it is ain’t exactly clear”.

And the atmosphere in the car was equally ominous. Zeke was upset with me because I did not appear to be *sympathetic* to those who had fallen into darkness. He cleverly outmaneuvered my usual response - “It’s just my job.” - and commented in a way that had far more emotional cache. “Mom is suffering, too.” The implication was, of course, that I and mucormycosis were toxic bedfellows.

I said to Zeke, “I still don’t think this is a fungal disease.”

“Why not?” he said.

“Because few of them have any other symptoms. That doesn’t make any sense. Besides,” I added, “vision loss is a very uncommon outcome in these cases.”

My son, predictably, turned to AI for help. “Addy,” he said, “show me a map of all industrial farms in the corridor of the Dixie Tornado.”

Zeke turned his computer toward me. There were, predictably, dozens of these farms.

“Hey, Addy,” he said, “on the same map, show me all reported cases of blindness in the wake of the Dixie Tornado.”

Zeke turned his computer toward me. Fresh cases of blindness were clustered around the locations of industrial farms [and well beyond, truth be told]. Zeke would have me believe that fungus spores had been funnelled and dispersed from fields of rotting agriculture and mountains of hog, chicken and cow poop.

“That’s not proof of anything,” I said. “I could cross-reference churches and blind people in the same tornado corridor and call it proof of the judgement of God.”

“You know, dad,” said Zeke, “you and the Company remind me why I don’t create simulation games.”

“Why not?”

“A lot of people aren’t interested in evidence or knowledge or expertise. A lot of people are cynical or indifferent or much worse. How do you *simulate* for that? Public policy in a vacuum ends up in a dust bin.”

I was less annoyed with Zeke than I was with his secular god, Addison. He was pushing an hypothesis that clearly lacked *evidence*. To my way of thinking, Addison was *hallucinating*. His imperfections were making him more human by the day.

The cases at Mercy's Own were much further along in the process. Twelve people had already filed applications with the Company citing negligence on the hospital's part. They claimed that their egregious infections were the result of contaminated medical equipment, such as adhesive bandages, wooden tongue depressors and ostomy bags. My son wanted to hear the truth from the wizard of Oz.

"Hey, Addy," he said, staring at the laptop on his knees, "what's up with the infection outbreak at Mercy's Own?" Zeke had forgotten to unmute the sound and reported the answer to me.

"Are you kidding?" I said. "*Mucormycosis*?"

Addy responded to a second question from Zeke. "It is not unprecedented in the wake of a tornado that people suffer burns, fractures, blunt trauma and penetrating wounds. Insufficient irrigation or debridement can increase the risk of infection."

Zeke put an exclamation point on the hypothesis. He juxtaposed our own ignorance with the prescience of those in the Panhandle. "It looks like the people we spoke to in Florida are onto something. If so, the blind are leading the blind."

I was still unconvinced, but not for long. We were seated in the office of Emma Williams, the hospital administrator at Mercy's Own.

“Sorry about the air conditioning,” she said. “It’s deafening, I know. We ramp it up because of the forest fire smoke.”

Emma told us that biopsies, CT scans and genetic sequencing had all confirmed the diagnosis of mucormycosis. However, according to her, the most likely reason was injury and untreated infection caused by the tornado. Anti-fungal therapies were begun immediately.

“But it doesn’t always fit with the symptomology of the disease and other factors. That’s the weird part. How are they getting these infections?”

Six of the twelve patients did not have penetrating wounds. Six of the twelve patients lived well beyond five miles of the tornado path. *None*, she said, was previously immunocompromised. “We can’t necessarily pin the tail on the tornado,” she said. “Are we looking at a novel fungal variant? And what’s the infection path?”

Zeke was about to ask Addy, but Emma wasn’t finished. “Approximately three hundred fungi are known to be pathogenic to humans. No one knows how many more there are. We’re just not prepared.”

Back in the car, the wizard of Oz confirmed for Zeke hundreds of new cases of fungal disease over the southeast states.

“What the hell?” I said. I was referring to the worst air quality in the world and then, coincidentally, to a scene from the Jurassic period.

We stopped at a parking lot outside of Montgomery. A group of people were guiding *metal dragonflies* through the smoky ether to a concrete landing strip. They were wearing N95 masks. Zeke and I got out of the car. This was our chance to get answers.

The gentleman's name was odd, but his work was serious. Eustace Bun was a professor from the university.

"Yeah, you can ask me," he said. "My students and I use the drones to collect air samples in the smoke. The drones have vacuums and filters." He laughed. "Believe it or not, we used to hold up petri dishes on long poles."

I was overcome by an ominous feeling.

"Yeah, you can ask me," he said. "There's already evidence that smoke plumes from very far away are packed with viable bacteria and fungi. The intense wildfires north of the border create their own weather systems and send smoke into the stratosphere."

*Holy shit*, I thought. Was it possible that Addison was producing the right diagnosis with incorrect or incomplete data?

Eustace Bun continued, "We're looking at the potential for a pandemic of fungal infections."

I asked Eustace – forgive me – the burning question.

"I don't know," he said. "we haven't been testing for mucormycosis spores. But that doesn't mean it's not there. Our research is focussed on the alarming increase in *valley fever* after wildfires. The risks of pathogenic fungi for human health are very concerning."

I pulled my son toward the car and heard at my back, "Any number of fungi might be hitchhiking into the lungs on particulates in woodsmoke."

When we were settled, I said to my son, "I think I can help the victims of mucormycosis or whatever fungal infection they have. These people," I said, "need to sue."

Zeke was shocked. “Are you kidding me? You’re going to help them *sue* the Company?”

“Not the *Company*,” I said, “but the *country*.”

“You’re going to sue *Canada*?”

I explained to Zeke that updated provisions in the USMCA trade agreement with Mexico and Canada provide for arbitration in a few sectors.

“It’ll take some time,” I said, “but a class action lawsuit just might work. One way to address a pandemic threat is to lock in the legal liabilities of sovereign states. No one gets a free pass to export pathogens.”

My son was incredulous. “Why,” he said, “would you do this, dad? *It’s not your job.*”

I answered in a way that had more emotional cache. “And I need to repair things with your mom.” I pointed at the woodsmoke. “I can’t ignore what’s right in front of me, anymore, when the need is so great.”

For good reason, Zeke was skeptical. He asked Addison to compare my statements with ground truth categories. I waited to hear how likely I was to keep my word.