

Wildfire in the City Limits
by S.A Thurtle

Barry Tiller, Mayor of Stewartville, took off his glasses and rubbed his burning eyes. He couldn't recall when he'd last taken some rest, let alone sleep. He looked over at the makeshift bed on his office sofa. Judging by the depth of paperwork covering it, it must be sometime.

Around him, the conversation continued, with a sigh he put his glasses back on and turned his attention to the city map which Doctor Barnes, the highest-ranking health official remaining in the city, was gesturing towards.

"...and zone 12 has been reclassified to an emergent status as the third wave of infections become symptomatic. As expected, these tie back to the East Street food distribution centre where we found a cluster of infections earlier this month. We have, of course, put the zone into total lock down and we're transmitting the agreed warnings throughout the neighbourhood, although there is some resistance from the locals at this point." The Doctor paused to flip the page of his notepad.

Barry took the opportunity to break the monotonous drone of his voice by stepping up to the city map. "Sorry Doctor, zone twelve? That would be...?" he asked, squinting at the patch work of red lines slicing up the city.

The Doctor blinked, he looked at the map, thoughts derailed by a question he was not ready for. "Er, those ones?" he said, gesturing towards the area inside the area marked twelve. Barry bit back a sarcastic comment, remembering that the Doctor was on as little sleep as he and not a native.

Like many of the team working within the city, Doctor Barnes had been brought in from a state-level agency when the initial outbreak occurred. With no understanding of what they were facing, and poor equipment, many frontline staff had fallen victim to the Oswego Virus before it had been identified or understood.

Four months since the first deaths, those who survived were still incapacitated, struggling to breathe and a long way from returning to work.

So, they had Doctor James Barnes.

Though his knowledge was formidable, his local geography was zero. Barry had banned the Doctor from leaving the town hall complex after Barnes had gotten lost for three hours having gone to retrieve a phone charger from his car... half a block over.

The mayor focused on zone twelve. South of the river it included some of the poorest communities in the city.

Areas like Farnsworth, Elmor and Adlington had needed investment for decades. The old buildings degraded further each year, whilst the population grew, bring more homelessness, overcrowding and crime.

Elmor had the highest unemployment in the state, let alone the city, whilst the police had stopped investigating crime in Adlington unless bodies were left on the street. When that became common knowledge, sales of chicken wire and cement rocketed in the area, as did the number of body parts found in the river.

Things were dire in the neighborhoods, but then the Great Evacuation happened.

Climate change warnings became reality, with wildfires ravage swathes of the country, devastating towns, and smaller cities. Whole communities burned to the ground. All the while the government at all levels seemed unable to help.

When the country hit record breaking temperatures for the fourth year in a row, residents didn't wait for the fires to start. Many hadn't even finished rebuilding from the previous year when their homes were burnt to the ground again. The year before insurance companies refused to cover anyone who had any type of fire damage in the last five years. Then they increased premiums for anyone predicted to be in an area at fire risk by a factor of five.

Enough was enough, the people left. They loaded up what they fires had left them and moved to cities where the impact of climate change was less.

At first, they arrived in small numbers, a family here or there. But as high temperatures turned into fire season, people began arriving in buses.

Whilst some cities tried to turn them away, or directed them to areas outside the city limits, Stewartville set up temporary housing in parks, then in the grounds of government buildings then anywhere they could pitch a tent.

And where did the previous administration start? The parks and open spaces of what was now zone twelve.

To areas already overcrowded and poor, they added thousands of displaced, traumatised, and deeply unhappy people. Crime and violence flourished. The locals, many of whom were from non-white backgrounds, seeing resources which they desperately needed diverted to out-of-town, mainly white population became increasingly vocal in this discontent with their new neighbours. Ten months ago, discontent erupted into riots in Elmor and Farnsworth. The city called in the National Guard after two days.

Then the Oswego Virus arrived.

It first appeared Uptown, over the river, but it wasn't long before it arrived in the three boroughs and when it did, it was just as fast, unpredictable and devastating as the wildfires the people in the parks had fled. The dense population, poor conditions and fear spread the virus quickly. As in every area that the virus appeared in those early weeks, the local health officials were quickly overwhelmed. Then the health workers became infected.

Before the Oswego Virus even had an official name, the damage was done.

As the city lost the ability to handle the infected, let alone the dead, there were reports of bodies in warehouses. Not cooled, just in body bags. The system so overwhelmed that, if no-one complained, then it wasn't an issue.

When the first cases appeared which could be traced back to cross-species infection, that changed. It became a new vector for infection as the local rodent population boomed due to the waste management resources being overwhelmed.

In the early weeks it didn't seem to matter what they did, the virus was ten steps ahead and spreading through the city, unchecked and out of control.

And now?

If he was honest, Barry wasn't sure if they were holding their own, getting inaccurate figures or if everyone was either ill, recovering or dead.

In the darkest moments, he wasn't sure it mattered anyway.

The Doctor coughed, bringing him back to the present and the red markers scrawled over the map. Barry sighed and looked down at the pile of paper spread on the table in behind him. The charts with infections trending up, similar for deaths.

The mayor rubbed his eyes again and took off his glasses again, returning to his seat. "So, Doctor, the situation remains mostly unchanged? Where our population is most dense, the Oswego is tearing through the population and our ability to respond is still limited because we don't have the manpower or resources. The latest route that it's found is via food distribution?"

The Doctor nodded, "Yes, the last three outbreaks seem to tie back directly to infections in food distribution centres. We will need to close East Street, test the staff and deep clean before we can reopen it." He added.

Clive Barrow, head of city sanitation barked a short laugh from across the table. "Nice idea, Doc, but my clean-up crews are still working our way through the Berkley food centre. We're at less than half staff because of this bug, and it's getting worse, not better. We're days away from doing a proper job there."

"I understand," the Doctor said, his nasal voice grating on Barry again, "but can't you divert resources from somewhere else?"

Clive closed his eyes, paused a moment, and took a deep breath, "Sure, sure, what should we do? Leave more trash on the streets? Or let the dead bodies and infectious waste pile up at the few medical centres we have left?" he said, a dangerous edge to his voice.

Doctor Barnes heard the tone and wisely didn't respond.

Barry looked again at the map, "Hang on, so East Street and Berkley are closing?"

"No, I've closed them," Barnes replied.

"You've closed two of the five food distribution centres services in zone twelve?"

"What was I meant to do? The latest set of infections clearly started there, and as we're seeing the start of the spike in the last week, this peak is going to rise for at least another two weeks. We can't just leave it open and let more people get sick..." the Doctor said, his tone higher as he defended himself.

Barry shook his head, "No, Doctor, I'm not saying that you should have left it open. But we don't just want to avoid infection, the social breakdown we'll experience if people think that there is a limit on food will be devastating. Let alone if people start to starve. When did you close it?"

"Lunch yesterday, that's when we had enough data to be sure."

Clive put his head in his hands and swore.

"For future reference, that's when I needed to know, Doctor Barnes." Barry said, "if we've lost forty percent of the food distribution to a population of nearly one million people, I need to know as soon as you do." The mayor turned his attention to an unhappy looking man next to Clive, "Okay, you know what's coming Andy..."

"Oh, yes, and you know I don't have an answer for you." Andy replied, "You made me head of city logistics two days ago, I still don't know the names of my zone leads, I haven't had a chance to get a handle on stock levels, loss or..."

Barry held up his hand, "I hear you; I know. Just tell me what can you do? Can we cover some of this by making deliveries from neighboring zones?"

"I doubt it. Zones eleven and thirteen seem to be as close to the wire as twelve was. They're managing but it's unlikely we can do anything of value, certainly not make up forty percent shortfall." He opened a folder and shifted through a few pages, behind him Barry's Assistant,

Shelly, with the Head of City Communications Mike Wilson, who was carrying a thick folder, walked into the cramped office. Mike gave Barry a pointed look and tapped his watch as Andy continued, "We could divert some resources from north of the river, zones one, two and four have months' worth of stockpiles, but I am not sure we'll get away with it. The locals being who they are." He said, looking from the paper to Barry.

"The great and the good will just have to survive, Andy. I am not having communities starve to death so that the golfing set can fill their bellies." The Major said, "But, look at the stocks we hold here at City Hall, I want you to find and distribute some of our food into zone twelve today, then head up to see the banks and bosses to take some of theirs. Clive, keep your teams doing what they are for now. Doctor, next time more warning, please, and you need to get all the staff tested at those food distribution centres before they can reopen. I will expect a full brief of the time frame in which you'll complete that when we meet tomorrow. Is that clear for everyone?" Doctor Barnes went white and scribbled into his notebook as the others around the table nodded, "Very good, I will see you all tomorrow, Andy, let me know if you hit issues with the locals."

Barry stayed seated as the rest walked out of the room in exhausted silence leaving only Mike and Shelly.

Mike flopped into the chair directly in front of Barry and Shelly came around the table, putting a can of soda and chocolate bar on the table by his hand, "Eat." She said.

"It depends, looking at Mike, I have a feeling that what you two have to say to me might ruin my appetite." He replied, opening the soda, and taking a deep drink.

"Well, speaking of locals, you have an 11 o'clock with Byron Withstal and other members of the Residents of Stewartville Association." Shelly said, carefully keeping her voice even.

"The who...?" Barry asked, looking from her to Mike.

"Oh, you remember? Withstal, he runs the Homeowners Association up on Pine View," Mike with forced cheerfulness, "he also runs that big law firm in the city? The friends he's bringing today are in the banking and investment sectors. I told you about them, they're running that Facebook group. The one that sent in a petition to not cancel the Pine View Operatic Festival last month because it was..." Mike opened a folder and read from his notes, "...'good for tourism and held outdoors, plus the food would be barbecued so not a risk.', which we politely rejected." He finished with a dark smile.

Barry sighed for what felt like the hundredth time today, these people made him so tired. "And what does he want now?"

"They demanded a meeting to discuss the unacceptable conditions and limitations in the zones north of the city."

Mike said, he was clearly as frustrated as Barry to be wasting time on this. "They've been running Facebook page which I've been keeping an eye on. It's about as you'd expect, conspiracy theories mixed with a pride in their own ability to resolve the current crisis better than we could."

The mayor laughed, "Any useful hints on there?"

"Not really. Though, if they smell a little funky, the group is currently investigating urine therapy as a way to avoid Oswego." Mike said, Shelly grimaced at the idea.

"Urine therapy, please tell me that doesn't mean what I think it does...?"

"It does. Wash and drink. That's all I'll say." Mike said with an exaggerated shudder.

"Why, may I ask, am I meeting with these idiots then?"

Mike reached into his folder and pushed five pieces of paper over the desk. Barry picked them up and flicked through them. "These are the infection and death rates from early this week, correct?" he said, looking up at Mike.

"They are. They were posted to the social page ten minutes before our meeting with the good Doctor each day."

"How? These aren't public."

"That's correct. Someone is leaking this information and it's driving the narratives within the group. Narratives which

say we should lock down harder on the poorer areas and that this is a virus which targets 'ethnics,' their words, not mine, Mister Mayor. So, I am hoping we can get a source for the leak."

"Agreed, anything else?"

"They're driving here today for our meeting. Which is a neat trick in a city where travel is prohibited, I'd like to know how they pulled that trip off."

"For God's sake." Barry said, just when he didn't think he could feel more tired. He glanced over at the paperwork covered sofa again. No sign of that sleep today then, he thought. Looking back at Shelly he nodded, "Okay, let's get this over with."