

The Plague of Fur

The Plague of Fur began, as such things do, with a faint smudge of peach fuzz. The fur, once invented, contained the capacity to grow and spread. Like all life, it wanted to make more of itself. The fur originally grew behind doors sealed with an airlock. The fur grew in vats placed in a vault. For several months after it had been invented, the substance thrived in its contained environment, pushing, spreading, and waiting for a hole to appear where it could spread through the world.

A postal carrier contracted the fur from the lobby of an engineering firm in a new building overlooking Lake Union in Seattle on the Pacific Coast of North America. The architect had added accents of exposed timber to the concrete and rebar frame. The timber was composite wood similar in most respects to fiberboard except the process made the timbers look whole and natural, and they were in fact, stronger than natural timber. The fiber had been

engineered to carry structural strength. Construction has long entered the realm of the invisible. A building begins with molecules and ends with microfiber, static-free carpets. Entering the building the postal carrier felt as if he had entered a rustic hunting lodge with exposed beams; antique (period) kayaks hung from the rafters; a collection of historic snow shoes clung to the massive wall behind the front desk. Display lights beneath each pair made a massive wall of glowing, wicker butterflies. A lab technician, dismissed from his prior position in a blood cancer lab for not washing his hands, had worked in the nanolab behind the lobby. Repeating his behavior he carried the invisible, mechanical life form, a self-replicating filament, from the lab, and into the lobby. He left a coating of wool in the mailroom. During the day as everyone checked their mail, they contracted the fuzz and carried it into their various networks of contact.

The fur began as a test to make something that could assemble itself from readily acquired molecules: H_2O and CO_2 . The factory was much smaller than a head of a pin; in fact, it was so small it would take a hundred-thousand factories to cross the width of a pin. A cluster of these factories began as a thin layer and then began to assemble itself more and more rapidly into lattice strands that grew from several micros to a millimeter (where on careful inspection it could be seen with the naked eye) and in several minutes began to appear to be a fur just as mold appears to be a fur. However, the lattice structures could support columns that grew to a dozen or more centimeters long. This looked like classic animal fur. As the strands grew in length, the weight of the fiber grew too heavy for the lattice support and then cleaved into another section. The broken strand in turn could find purchase on most surfaces. The base, a mess of microscopic roots would fill nearly any surface. The broken strand then grew back to

the full length before becoming too heavy and breaking again. In this way, the fur spread. To see the fur spread across the room was like watching someone scribble in slow motion. Gradually the surfaces began to grow thick with strands, and then finally the entire room was a dense, fuzzy clump. It began as nothing that could be seen, a smear of microscopic particles, and it ended in fur.

By the time the postal carrier had reached the end of his shift, he had left peach fuzz on his letters and hair grew on his truck. He looked into the rearview mirror, and he was unsure what was growing on him. Back at the postal center, he went to the nurse. The nurse examined him and said there was something growing on him, but he didn't know what it was. Fungus?

The fur, in an abundant quantity, was ice colored. It was translucent and turned bluish or whitish depending on the light coming down against it. In the lab, it appeared mostly silver and white.

During the day, buildings seeded by the carrier began to gain fur and then by the end of the evening, the fur had spread through Seattle. Fuzz traveled on the freeway north to Vancouver BC, South to Los Angeles, East to Missoula. The block along Lake Union where it had first escaped was covered with a thick layer of fur that looked like snow, except as snow it covered vertical walls, it covered the area under the roofs, it covered trees, it covered animals, and it continued to spread at a steady pace: a meter a minute.

First, the fire department was called and came, but they walked around the fur and the fur began to grow on them. They called an ambulance. There was nothing they could do. They called the Army. The Army sent a team from ReCon. Troops mobilized and began to collect at Fort Lewis, the base south of Tacoma.

The team arrived twelve hours after the technician

seeded the mailroom. Lt. Col. Sarah Fog wore short gray hair and a pair of bluish BDUs with an orange HAZMAT badge on the shoulder. From the air, as Fog approached she could see the news helicopters like fruit flies flying around a puddle of apple cider vinegar. The incident from the air was beautiful; the strands of fur from a thousand feet glittered and sparkled like an oil slick. It comprised a disc covering, now, twenty city blocks. One margin ended at Lake Union, and the other progressed up the hills around the lake. Fog could see new incidents of growth occurring in other areas of the city where traffic through the site had carried fur. It followed patterns like cancer: metastasis. Smaller but sizable dots grew at intersections and coffee shops. In turn, any traffic moving through these clumps would contract fur and carry it deeper into the city.

Reports began to come in from cities up and down Interstate-5 that there were growths. “Call central command,” Fog said. “This growth must be contained.”

It was dusk, and traffic was diverted from the area, and as a result, traffic moved at a crawl through the entire Puget Sound basin. The growth continued unabated and in fact accelerated as a result of the sluggish movement of cars.

The ReCon team had to capture a sample and so the helicopter landed in an empty parking lot. On the ground, things were different. The evacuation of the blocks around the growth had gone well. The team landed in the middle of an occupied and full city at rush hour, and yet walking down the block it seemed they were alone. The soldiers knew this feeling from doing drill. They came to the end of the block and in front of them, there it was, the world covered in fur. The fur grew from lampposts, along the curbs, from the rims of tires. Fog, in full hazmat gear (gas mask, rubber boots, charcoal cover layer) advanced on the

plague and then extracted a sample. She drew the sample back, placed it into a sealed container. She retreated. The fur grew while she watched until it filled the container.

She advanced to the helicopter and discarded her gear on the sidewalk. The team decontaminated her. She climbed into the helicopter, and the team flew to the Command Center set up on Blake Island in Puget Sound.

It had been noted that it did not grow on water. During the night, they analyzed the growth and discovered then the molecule sized factories that created the strands. This was a deliberate synthetic organism.

It wasn't life, but it was really close. They held their fingers together, gallows humor, because what is the different if live ends on earth from something manufactured or a virus or a natural disaster? Life will still end. They were relieved because working in a rapid response Hazmat team, they often wondered how the world would end. They dreamed of the world's end and their futile, though noble battle against the horror of a plague that would leave bodies in the streets of the cities. To think, the world would end in fur. It was a relief to know.

Puzzling, though, was that the people with fur growing on them, about two hundred people they rounded up from the initial site who were in a contained unit with an air lock in a building surrounded by barbed wire, they were alive even though they were covered, mostly in fur. It didn't grow in their nostrils. It didn't grow in their eyes or mouth.

What was more puzzling was that several of the patients could not be stopped from eating the fur.

It wouldn't grow on water. And during that night they found that the fur would dissolve in water and turn into a simple sugar.

They sprayed the fur with water, and it dissolved.

They sent the report.

During the night it rained, and the rain cleaned Seattle, mostly. The next day a steady drizzle fell and kept the fur down.

The fur still clung to dry places and as the rain abated, and sidewalks began to dry again the fur began to regrow. Within the month, fur grew in every major West Coast city and had shown up in every major world city. Fur covered the arctic ice. In Seattle, by the end of the month fur grew inside everyone's car and inside everyone's houses.

The novelty of fur-covered buildings soon wore off. People worked to remove the fur, and then once a building had been defurred the occupants installed the *Bald Protocol*. A defurring chamber was built. Items were carried in hard plastic shells and sprayed with water. People removed outside clothes and showered and then put on new building clothes, with a badge that said they had been cleaned.

Hair, already unpopular, became even more unpopular. Everyone shaved all of the hair off their bodies so that it was clear they didn't have the beginnings of the plague. Furless animals appeared in houses.

A lack of fur became a sign of wealth and hospitality.

Only the poor remained with hair and fur. Their houses were covered in fur. Their bodies were furry. Sayings began to circulate, "The fur is always with us." Or if you met someone on the street, you might say of them, "He's furry," implying they were low class.

During dry spells fur spread from the crevices where it had flourished. The city kept a fur watch.

Many cities employed defurriers who waited for the dry spells to find catches of fur. They trolled the neighborhoods with water trucks and sprayed away any occurrence of fur.

A president was elected who said he would clean

the nation of fur. For four years, brigades of defurriers removed fur. For a time at the end of his presidency, it seemed that fur had been removed. Even the poor were no longer furry. Fur had been driven into the wilderness and out of the cities. The period when fur was commonly was called *The Time of Fur*. The fur rescinded into dry caves. And when the fur was finally, officially, eradicated, it left the world bald and empty. Such was progress.