Reflections on Contagion

JD Schraffenberger

Adrianne wants to begin stockpiling bottled water, cans of beans, oil lamps and Sterno. Her father Robert seems to enjoy frightening her with stories of the impending avian flu pandemic. His grandparents, after all, died in Boston of flu in the 1918 outbreak. This time, though, it'll be worse. We're all so interconnected these days. Globalization, right? It hardly matters where you live. Each one of us is a potential carrier. We go to the grocery, are sneezed upon by the bag boy whose mother has just returned from the city, where she was served lunch at a café by a recently immigrated waiter harboring the first undetected strains of our new Big Bad Flu.

The 1918 children's rhyme was never so apt as today when we, too, fear the fowl: I had a little bird, its name was Enza. I opened the window and in-flu-enza.

Adrianne and I have been together for about a year, long enough for our far-flung families to meet finally, so we're all vacationing in Maine—parents, siblings, et cetera—all in one big house on the beach.

High tide puts us all to sleep at night, wakes us in the morning again—a natural rushing white noise that isolates each of us in our beds from the rest of the house. It feels like Adrianne and I are sleeping in a bubble.

Yesterday evening on the beach, I asked Adrianne to marry me. It was low tide, and I gave her a pearl ring, cheaper than a diamond but apropos of the ocean. After some joyful tears, she said yes, and we announced it with a toast to our families before dinner. Our vacation has suddenly become an engagement celebration.

Talk of the wedding begins right away. Even I, who care little for ritual and ceremony, am caught up in the discussion. We could be married on a boat, at a winery, on the beach. Flowers, yes, you need lots of flowers, maybe a horse-drawn carriage, and doesn't Peter know a DJ? Such imagining is contagious.

At dinner Robert, weary of wedding talk, goes on about the Spanish Flu. He's an old-school historian at a university in Arkansas and has the strongest of faith in facts, evidence, the demonstrable, but he seems giddy and excited by this bit of alarmist conjecture. A few magazine articles, Dateline NBC, a feature on NPR and suddenly we're all damned, doomed to suffer some horrible fluish fate. In 1918, he tells us—the dinner table now like a seminar table as Robert slips rather easily into lector mode—the majority of those who died were 25 to 40 years old, odd for influenza, which usually afflicts the very young or the very old.

"People were preoccupied," he says. "The war was on the wane, peace was in the air."

Death was in the air, too.

"No one really noticed until it was too late."

Adrianne asks if we would be okay here, in Maine, if the outbreak happened today.

"Probably not."

My brother joins in. "This is a tourist town, after all. And Boston's just down the road." I can see him thinking through disastrous scenarios. "A lot of people here probably commute, so…"

"What if we were going to be married?" Adrianne asks.

"I guess there are worse places to be quarantined."

"I wonder what martial law would be like."

"Chaos."

"We'd have to cancel the wedding."

After dinner we play croquet in the yard until it gets too dark to see the balls. We move inside for drinks and poker, two dollar buy-ins, no-limit, winner-takes-all. My father, who never drinks, has a few beers. My mother has one of those bright red Bacardi wine-coolers that taste like melted Jell-O. Her lightweight giggles begin before she's finished half of her drink.

Adrianne has a gin and tonic, and I have bourbon and coke. Poker novice that I am—feeling flush and lucky with bourbon—I'm the first to lose all my chips, going all-in on a pair of eights.

I'm elected, unanimously, all-time-dealer.

As dealer I can relax and observe the game in ways I couldn't before. I watch the faces of my family and my future in-laws. Robert gets a little pursy twitch in his lips when he's bluffing. My transparent father laughs when he has a good hand. My brothers, more savvy than I, remain stone-faced. But they both take compulsive sips from their drinks when they think they've got their opponent beat. Even more interesting, however, is watching them watch each other, trying to figure out what the others have, looking for tells, symptoms of good hands or bad.

"I want to be married by water," Adrianne says.

I suggest the confluence of the Susquehanna and Chenango Rivers in downtown Binghamton, where we live and teach at the university. I like the idea of confluence, two great rushing entities meeting and melding into one, that tension at the place of coming

together, the long diagonal ripple, a wave that never breaks but goes on and on, continual motion that stays in one place.

"It's a literal marriage," I say. "Two rivers becoming one."

"Too smelly."

"Yeah."

Like every river in America, you ask the locals about swimming or fishing there and they make jokes about pollution, three-eyed fish, our genetics altered, like that.

I've lately wondered about contagion. Literally, the word means touching, from the Latin *tangere*. Contagion is etymologically connected in a great web of words: contact, tangible, tact, tactile, tangent. It is a habit of mine, as a scholar and as a writer, to seek out the roots of words, get a firmer hold on them by understanding where they came from originally, poke around in clusters of meaning for familial resemblances. Such etymological pursuits are like hunting for patient zero—tangent touches contact touches contagion, et cetera, until at last there is something like understanding, held whole in the palm of my hand.

We fear the contact of contagion, but we have a mammalian need for touching. Adrianne and I, for instance, walking down the moonlit beach hold hands. There is a comfort in the casual pressing of palms together, the knowing that the other is there. If we are in love, a hand's touch can be the most comforting of feelings. But on the hands of others contagion lurks.

In the bathrooms of restaurants all across the country signs declare: ALL EMPLOYEES MUST WASH HANDS AFTER USING THE TOILET AND BEFORE HANDLING FOOD. Public health officials say that it takes 20 seconds of washing before your hands are clean, enough time to recite the alphabet, or sing Happy Birthday. Such awareness of the potential

for spreading disease through dirty hands comforts us, makes us feel safe from the unseen, but no amount of washing will ever make the world pure. Not only that, but all this scrubbing and cleaning produces more resistant, more tolerant strains of contagion at the same time it makes us more vulnerable to otherwise innocuous things. Antibacterial soap, disinfectants, pesticides, et cetera: in the killing of small things is the promise of a future crisis.

When Mary Magdalen found the stone moved from Jesus' sepulcher, she wept and lamented. "They have taken away my Lord," she said, "and I know not where they have laid him." I've always wondered why Mary went to the sepulcher, or rather, I wonder why it's not in the gospel what is obvious: she went to grieve, to say goodbye, perhaps to pay her last respects, touch the stone behind which her lord lay dead and imagine it as skin.

In the morning we watch footage on the news of flooding in Pennsylvania and New York. Wilkes-Barre, Binghamton, all the surrounding area devastated. People wading in waist-deep water. A great 30-foot section of I-88 sliced through and crumbled. Unadilla, Sydney, Bainbridge—a bunch of mini-Katrinas.

Our house on the west side of Binghamton is fine, but homes on the low-lying rundown east side, and those down the road on Riverside Drive—million dollar homes with beautiful views and sweeping lawns—are flooded. Lourdes Hospital closes, its patients transferred to Johnson City or Syracuse.

There's a flurry of emails from people we know from afar asking if we're okay.

The confluence looks like a brown ocean.

The university cancels summer session classes. The campus closes. Evacuees are housed at the Events Center, and there's a boil-water advisory for Binghamton, Vestal, Endwell, Endicott.

The water treatment plant can't handle the flooding, so the water is now flowing in a big dangerous loop—what we flush is what we drink.

But we're in Maine, at ease in the clean salt-water hush of the sea, wondering if we'll have to stay on our vacation for another week.

There are worse places to be.

In even the cleanest of homes we live in a world of invisible, insidious things. Fecal coliforms on our toothbrushes. Spores in the basement, dust-mites in our sheets. Formaldehyde in the carpets. Chlorine, chromium, lead in the water. And then you start thinking twice about the surfaces of things. The nap of a hand towel. The grout between tiles. A glass of water on your bedside table that's been there all night, dust like dew settled on the surface.

What doesn't kill you, right?

In Act II of *Julius Caesar*, Portia knows something is wrong with Brutus and won't stop interrogating her husband until she gets the truth:

> What, is Brutus sick,
> And will he steal out of his wholesome bed,
> To dare the vile contagion of the night
> And tempt the rheumy and unpurged air
> To add unto his sickness?
> (III.i.283-287)

An in one of Hamlet's soliloquies, our hero shores himself up for his forthcoming cruelty:

> Tis now the very witching time of night,
> When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
> Contagion to this world: now could I drink hot
> blood,

> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on.
> (III.ii.380-384)

For Shakespeare, contagion hides in the night, cloaks itself in darkness unseen. The breath of hell on unpurged air carries it, will make us sick or kill us. It's a fitting relationship—contagion and night—because night is also beautiful, romantic. In the night we risk unknowable danger, but look, here is the moon, here are the stars, here we are in love on a beach holding hands, intimate, without fear.

The taste of cold salt water. The film it leaves on your skin like days and days of dried sweat. My brother and I, neither of us swimmers, taunt and dare each other farther out into the waves. Adrianne can just run right in. She's a pro, likes the cold and dives in without hesitation. But we inch our way in and scream like girls when the water shoots up our shorts.

Later we sit in the sun with gin and tonics.

Robert, ever the historian, tells us that gin and tonic was originally used as a medicine in the nineteenth century by Brits in India. The quinine in tonic water helps fight malaria. The lime was added for taste. And the gin, of course, helps the medicine go down.

When Mary Magdalen realizes it is Jesus standing before her, risen from the grave and looking like an ordinary gardener, she wants to embrace him, but Jesus says, *Do not touch me*, in Latin, *noli me tangere*. He is not yet ascended to his father in the sky. It's a touch that she wants, of skin, evidence that he is really there. But Mary has to let him go.

When we return to Binghamton, piles of water-damaged furniture line the sidewalks of Riverside Drive. We walk down to the subsided river's edge. Mud stained bushes and tree trunks suggest how high the water had been only a few days ago. People on their

porches, doors and windows opened to the air, watch us walking hand-in-hand watching the ruddy water rush by. It's beautiful and terrible. Binghamton has lost so much, but other towns have lost more. And the people here—rich and poor alike—have come together to help each other out, a small city made smaller after the storm, and more intimate in each other's presence.

Adrianne and I, touched and untouched, count ourselves among the dry another day.