



Better to be Dead: Visitation of the Red Death

David J Dawros

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Crane was a successful university professor with a beautiful, healthy, happy family and an optimistic future ahead. And then one ordinary summer day it was all gone. The Red Death came unannounced.

Indiscriminate, unavoidable and ruthlessly fatal. Most people succumbed to its rapaciousness leaving the minority to seek survival in a post-apocalyptic world. Was the Red Death a freak of nature or something more sinister?

"The contagion had started in Africa, early news sources claimed, but that was never convincing. An Ebola-like connection was too easily made to explain the inexplicable. No conclusive evidence was offered to prove the illness spread from geography to geography. The onset seemed to be more or less everywhere at once with some limited propagation through contact with living sufferers. In the beginning, someone in the media had termed the disease after the Edgar Allen Poe story, *The Masque of the Red Death* because of the bloody wealds rupturing the skin in some manifestations of the sickness.

Scientists quickly said thereafter that the cause was deadly endospores at large in the environment in great quantities. This seemed to be a consensus, but the cause for their presence was postulated widely and wildly, from an act of warfare to a chemical discharge from the ionosphere to an alien spaceship attack, and every stopping point between. However, before long no one was espousing anything anymore, they were too busy succumbing to the pandemic.

After the Ebola speculation faded, casualties were thought to have contracted a super form of Anthrax, because of the symptoms of skin blotches, lesions and boils. However, it soon became clear that the number of endospores required to cause mortality was much lower than with Anthrax. Red Death was fatal at levels with only a paltry number of endospores entering the body, compared with the thousands required for Anthrax to be a killer. Contact with a living sufferer would be enough to transport the infection with deadly results.

Those who survived did so it appeared by an accident of circumstance. A dead body might pass-on only two or three endospores. As long as there were no significant open wounds, warm blood or other fluids for the endospore cells to mutate and propagate their malignancy, the recipient might survive. Some tried to achieve immunity by deliberately seeking to expose themselves minimally to the Red Death, but there was no predictably safe level of exposure. Desperate people just did desperate things.

The first reports of deaths suggested that they occurred in the large conurbations of London, Birmingham and Leeds, but this was then contradicted by subsequent intelligence. People began dying everywhere across the UK and other parts of the world at broadly the same time as far as it could be discerned from the chaotic and often contradictory evidence. From a given point in time, humanity and its livestock started to die on an apocalyptic scale

Very soon, all the trappings of modern civilisation collapsed. Electricity, gas, phone services, running water, transportation, almost everything stopped. Society's guardians of maintaining public order, the police and the army ceased to function, for they had been ravaged even more mercilessly than the population generally. If you tried to help someone who was beset by the Red Death, the probability of contracting it was near certain. The reward for the would-be Samaritan was certain demise. Passing by on the other side was the best way to survive.

Looting and violence eventually became the norm and the strong prevailed over the weak. Eventually the value of a life became less than a bottle of water and everywhere was dangerous. A terrible situation became an opportunity for the 'have-nots' to take revenge over the 'haves.' It was not personal or a class war, it was not even about surviving after a while. It was just that for some people, their time had come to be kings."

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