

Distractions

A Short Story
by Andrew B. Crisp

Confession

The old man lay in his deathbed, each breath a faint wheeze. The home nurse beside him couldn't guess how old he was, although she figured him to be in his nineties. Old enough to remember what it was like in the years before the Fertility Plague, when the world held six and a half billion people and poverty was a way of life in all but a few countries.

She remembered what her history professor of ten years ago said about the plague. The Fertility Plague didn't kill anyone, but it made people sterile, unable to bear young. From the time the Plague first appeared, in 2005, to the time a Cure had been found - a period of twenty years - global population dropped to two billion people, and stayed there. The old man beside her, Dr. Nicholas Banstrum, had been instrumental in finding the Cure.

In a way, she thought, it's much better now. There aren't so many people competing for resources. And fusion power and metals from space have helped to put an end to ecological destruction and resource depletion here on Earth...

Banstrum coughed and opened his eyes. The nurse shook herself and turned to face him. "I'm here, Dr. Banstrum," she assured him. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No". Banstrum's voice was a near-whisper. "No, I don't want anything, thanks..." He faltered for a moment, then he said, "You know, Catlain; you look a lot like my daughter when she was your age. I haven't seen her in ten years. Should've visited her when I had the chance..." He wound down again.

"Your daughter is coming to see you," Catlain reminded him. Banstrum started up again, his voice a little stronger.

"Yes, I know; she'll be here tomorrow... But I won't." He coughed. "I won't even make it through the night."

"Don't say that. Of course you will."

"Please, spare me your promises, Catlain. I'm 104 years old; didn't even expect to make it this far. My time's come; I know." He paused for a minute, as if he was having second thoughts. "There is one more thing I have to do before I go.

I have a confession to make."

"Should I call a priest and ask him to come here for this?" Catlain knew that the old man was Catholic.

"No, there's no time; but you'll do... You know about the Fertility Plague?" It wasn't a question.

Catlain nodded. "And that you found the Cure for it."

"Small atonement for what I did. You see, I made the Fertility Plague." He stopped as if waiting for a denial.

"You? But..."

"It's the truth, nurse. I wanted to tell this to someone for fifty years, but I couldn't. Was afraid I'd be strung up for it. Now... what the heck; I'm dying. What could they do to me? Yes I created the Plague and the Cure. No, no; don't interrupt. Let me explain.

"I grew up in the 1980's, you see. I heard a lot about the population explosion and the environmental crisis. By the time I got out of college and got a job as a geneticist, the predictions were dire. And no one was doing enough to save the world."

"There were the environmentalists, Dr. Banstrum."

"Crackpots, most of them. Bunch of teenagers looking for something to believe in; and a gaggle of mystics venting their spleens. By '99 there were probably only two thousand truly responsible environmentalists on the planet, against six billion people all wanting the old ideas of the 'good life'. There was no way they would win; the numbers were against them."

"The basic problem was there were too many people. The world's population was doubling every forty years; which meant that by this year, 2075, there would be twenty billion people on the globe. Now if you could reduce the population to an acceptable level, say two billion; or even slow down the growth, the transition to cleaner technologies and a more responsible lifestyle could happen more easily; could actually be possible. But the only ways you could get such a big drop would be either by having a nuclear war or having four billion people voluntarily neutered.

"Now there's no way you could get four billion people to agree to anything, and a nuclear war would just kill everybody; so there had to be a third way."

"The Plague."

"Yes. It would have been easier to make a virus that could kill by the millions, but I didn't want a few billion deaths on my conscience. So I made a virus that could be passed on by direct contact, and would stop the sperm production process and prevent the release of eggs from their ovaries. I figured

that there would be about ten percent of humanity that would be untouched, another fifty percent of humanity that would be sterile. I also began work on the Cure, to keep the virus under control; but I miscalculated."

"You got a higher sterility rate," said Catlain, understanding.

"Yes, about seventy, seventy-five percent of the global population, about four billion people sterilized in two years, much faster than I estimated. Most people, once they knew about the Plague, began looking for someone to blame (cough). I was going to announce what I had done, but I chickened out to save my own hide. The rest's in the history books." Banstrum tried to reach the nighttable by his deathbed, but couldn't. "In the top drawer is a gold-plated key," he told Catlain. "You'll find a safe behind my wedding photo on the wall. Use the key to open the safe and take everything out."

Catlain did so, and pulled out an old 3 1/2 inch diskette and two vials full of liquid.

"Don't open the vials," Banstrum continued. "The vial with the red cap has the last living sample of the Fertility Plague. The other vial, with the green cap, has a sample of the Cure. The diskette holds all my notes on the virus. There is a computer in perfect working order in the basement (cough) of this house. You can access the diskette's files on it... I want you to tell the world what I told you."

"But sir..."

"No buts, please. I have already made my peace with God; now it's time to make peace with humanity. Can't do it myself, so you'll have to do it for me. You'll do fine, trust me." He closed his eyes. "When you see my daughter, tell Angie I love her."

He was silent for a moment, then muttered, "I just wanted to save the world God gave us..." He exhaled on the last syllable and did not inhale.

After a minute, Catlain checked his pulse; nothing. Banstrum was dead. She stood for a moment, holding the vials and the diskette in one hand. She didn't know how to operate the old computers, but she knew a few people who could help.

Catlain went over to the visiphone and called the hospital, telling them about Banstrum's death and requesting for an ambulance to take his body to the mortuary. Then she began to think about what to say to Angie.

The Future

The future! What does it hold?
What's in store for me?
Will I live in a hermits cave?
Or across the mainland sea?

The future is wild and exciting,
Adventures around every bend,
Continents to explore and conquer,
Lives to heal and to mend.

Each day brings us closer to it,
Every minute closer the brink,
But what's out there- what's ahead...
Is it as important as we think?

We live in a world of futures;
Of dreams of things that will be,
But is what lies ahead as big,
As what's before us presently?

Now is the time to live on,
To do what God has in store,
To give of our best to the Master,
To strive on to serve the Lord!

The future is of no consequence,
What will be is already planned.
But now is the time to proclaim,
The Kingdom of Heaven's at hand!!

Bereft

A rusted razor slowly draws blood
that paints crimson the lines of damaged floor.
A mind races finding 'what have I have done?'
Glimpses of a past: a mother, a father,
and sexual acts that shouldn't have been.
Why would he call Katie a whore
while pressing down upon her?
Mother sleeps as father cries from guilt
and knowledge of what he will do again.
Katie hugs her teddy bear as though
it were a lover come to take her away.
When the door slowly creaks ajar,
she huddles, feigning sleep or simply staring
as the preacher becomes poltergeist.
Closing her eyes she goes far away
to where flowers grow and licorice is everywhere.
Why is she so quiet wonders her mother,
smiles thinking she can protect her all the more.
But when prom night came and father became lover;
the passage to womanhood became road to hell,
she kissed the blade knowing it can be no worse.

by A. Barchild

The Light

It glowed like no other
A sight not for sore eyes
With an everlasting presence
Uplifting to say the least
Brought intense heat to my body
Made me feel safe around all living matter
I was content to let myself become engulfed into sheer
ecstasy.

By Takia Pal

Uppermost Branches

Where is the one who will never know flight?
Let me see the sky from a different space.
Never strain again to see the blue infinite.
I will be in the uppermost branches
Someday.
Once it has been seen
Down I will fall.
Float into the river. Gone to a home.
From the faraway hills, the smoke can rise
Never to touch me in the uppermost branches!

by Colin Thomson