

CHAPTER 1

An Inauspicious Start

We were all sick. A great start to the year of our Lord, AD 2020. I was vaguely not well; with what exact symptoms I cannot remember. My wife was also somewhat sick. Our eighteen-year-old son was very sick. He ran a high fever for a couple of weeks and had severe aches all over. This was very unusual as we are not a “sick” family and seldom feel unwell, with nothing more than a very odd cold every few years. None of us was sick enough to require any specific treatment as I remember, and certainly none of us saw a doctor as a result. But the symptoms did drag on for at least a couple of weeks, and I think about a month or more before we all felt completely well.

We had gone to a resort in Cuba for Christmas. Why we picked Cuba again I don’t remember. Probably it had something to do with my son’s exams as he was in his first year in university studying engineering and business. Maybe we did not know when his examinations would be finished, and it is always possible to book a last-minute trip to Cuba as their resorts are never full.

A decade before, when he was a child, we used to go to Cuba for holidays as it was very safe. The beaches and resorts were patrolled by serious people. This was and still is, after all, a communist police state. Locals were never allowed on the beaches, so there were no annoying people trying to sell cheap knockoff junk from China. There was always the odd shady character trying to sell counterfeit cigars. Everyone was sternly warned numerous times not to buy these as unless they had the official stamp of government approval, they could not be taken out of Cuba.

I am sure that there was some unwary traveler who bought these cigars. There always is. I wonder if anyone remembers the movie *Midnight Express*, which told the story of a poor unwary boy being caught in the hashish scam. The terrible thing about that movie was that I knew it was true to life. I still remember watching it with pity and sorrow.

More than fifty years ago, I was on holiday from medical school and was on a train going from Athens to Istanbul. It was the end of term, and all the Greek university students were going home for the summer. There were a few students from other countries as travel then was safe, cheap, and easy. The Greek students spoke some English, and I had my high school Attic Greek that no one understood, but it was great fun, loud, boisterous, and noisy. Cans of beer and lamb kebabs were bought at every stop. On the train there was singing, dancing, laughing, and shouting.

This was so many years ago that the train pulled into a siding up in the mountains of northern Greece to let the famed Orient Express go by. Every child in Europe had heard of that train and longed to ride it. Alas, nowadays, it only runs from Paris to Vienna.

When the train left Greece and pulled into Turkey, the drug dealers boarded with their cardboard suitcases full of hash. Everyone told the foreign students not to buy it, and none of the locals touched the stuff. A few young Americans threw caution to the wind and bought it, against all advice. I still remember leaving the main train station in Istanbul, walking down the steps and seeing the ring of police waiting for these unwary American students carrying these cardboard suitcases. In some cases, the dope dealers were pointing out their prey to the police.

What I still don't understand to this day is who benefited? Cui bono? At that time, I thought the Turkish government were reasonably honest people as they were still the remnants of Mustafa Kemal's men, who were trying to Europeanize Turkey. They were not at all like the current leaders who seem determined to take Turkey back to the Middle Ages. So who made money? I don't know, but these poor US students went into a Turkish jail. So why would anyone buy cigars in a communist state, which surely everyone knew had so many of its own people in jail?

The reason we used to go to Cuba was that the beaches were superb for a little child. When he stopped being a little child, we stopped going as there was never much of anything else to do in Cuba. The island was, after all, bankrupt, as is true for every socialist economy, such as today's Venezuela and the African countries that still remain socialist. Starvation

is always the outcome of socialism, so the food in Cuba always was of limited choice and poor quality.

The food, which is one reason many people go to a resort, had hardly improved in the decade since we were last there. Sadly, in spite of being a Spanish-owned resort, this was no different. In contrast, the food in numerous Caribbean resorts is now often superb.

The year before, we spent Christmas in Ocho Rios in Jamaica. As a surgeon, I have worked with nurses from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands ever since I got to Canada decades ago. I know and have always liked Jamaican food, such as jerk, salt fish, and curry, especially goat curry. The food in that resort in Ocho Rios was spectacular. The problem was weight gain from eating a couple of irresistible entrées every meal.

In the resort in Cuba, the food was very limited in variety. We were told that it used to be imported from Venezuela as being communist state, of course, very little was locally produced. The collapse of the Venezuelan economy, with widespread starvation in that country, meant that there was none for export at the former “give away” prices. The Spanish Manchego cheese and chorizo sausages were good, and for the last few days, that was all I bothered eating. Maybe I was getting sick by then without knowing it.

Of interest, there were numerous mainland Chinese guests holidaying in the resort. I had not seen these people in such numbers in any other place in the Caribbean. I knew they were mainland Chinese because my wife is mainland Chinese, from Shanghai. I spent most of my time at the resort writing, completing a scheduled book, so I was not terribly active, and perhaps because of that, I did not really realize that I was not well until I returned to Toronto.

In Canada, we knew nothing in December and January about this Wuhan virus, so the reason we were all sick was not clear. It was only a couple of months later I realized that that was what it was as we now know that the virus was on the loose in China sometime in the fall and, by December, was widely established and was being exported to the West.

The genesis of the plague therefore began before the year 2020.

CHAPTER 2

I still had little knowledge or interest in the virus but had just had another book, a novel, published with my longtime friend and scrub nurse, Edna Quammie. Ominously, it dealt with two contentious issues, one being post-traumatic stress disorder in medical military personnel and the other with the difficulties of caring for inmates in nursing homes. We had no idea how prophetic that would be as nursing homes became a focal point of the disaster and were where almost all the subsequent COVID deaths occurred.

Equally prophetically, we had almost finished a new book dealing with bioweapons, in this case prions, released from China. We chose prions as they are more easily controlled than a virus. The lockdown has prevented us from completing that book as we are both in the high-risk category and thus had to isolate, especially as I continued working, seeing patients, but we hope to finish it soon. We were thinking of calling it *Prion*, but perhaps *The Plague from Wuhan* might be more apropos.