

When the Cloud Pandemic happened, nobody was prepared. Before we knew it, people were falling ill fast. At first, it wasn't your textbook pandemic, with people transmitting the pathogen through cough or sneeze. Rather it was a lot of very important people, a lot of them, suddenly falling ill without us foreseeing it.

Day one. Patients, both young and old, began to exhibit symptoms of a neurodegenerative disease. Hallucinations, seizures, dementia, all the packages of a textbook disease spawned from a deadly but simple biological mechanism unleashed by nature. The sudden influx of sick people overwhelmed our hospitals just like the last pandemic we suffered.

Although they were equipped to handle a lot of people, what the staff were not equipped with was the right tools and experience to keep multiple patients suffering from their brains turning to mush from dying.

I work at one of those hospitals as a brain specialist, and the morphology of the pathogen surprised me when I was summoned to one of the world's first autopsies of obliterated brains from these people. It was not a virus, nor a bacteria, nor a fungus, or even a parasite like *Naegleria Fowleri*. We expected the pathogen to exhibit a structure which would minimally be of a viral origin.

We were wrong. You know what we found?

A protein. A fucking protein. A few strands of basic molecules folded in such a simple but ultimately destructive structure. We were dealing with a Prion.

But how did these people get infected?

Day Six. The World Health Organization, in its state of panic, sent out thousands of intelligence officers around the world. Their goal? Find out why suddenly twenty-two percent of the world's population suddenly had their brains turning to mush. They found no origin for the prion. This wasn't Mad-cow.

Cows, livestock, pigs, deers, oxen. You name it. They surveyed every meat that was eaten in abundance around the world. People who had jobs similar to mine, but for animals, were working on stressing overtime shifts. They desperately tried to find out where the pathogen came from.

Nothing.

Day Twenty. The pandemic was in full swing and people were still dropping like flies. A family of vegetarians came down with the prion. They were admitted. Their case was the first among vegetarians, and confirmed to everyone that this wasn't about meat.

I was in charge of their autopsies when they passed away. What bothered me was that their blood content had a high percentage of Nicotine; the active ingredient that makes cigarettes or vapes addictive. Even the children had it.

Upon seemingly concluding the autopsy, I turned to an assistant. He was a doctoral student named Carl. Good kid. Sad to say he passed during Day Forty-Six of the Cloud Pandemic.

"Have you noticed a pattern?" I had set down my dissection tools on the table beside the autopsy table.

"Yes. A majority of patients who died from the Prion were heavy smokers."

I stared in contemplation at the cadaver of Mrs. Davidson.

It couldn't be.

It's not possible.

They could not have possibly been infected in that way.

I turned back to Carl. "What is the composition of Nicotine?"

"I'm sure you would know already, Doctor. Carbon, Nitrogen, Oxygen. All composed into an addicting combination." Carl looked confused as to my questions. How could this possibly connect with our goal of catching this thing? We still had cases of people who died from the prion despite not touching a single cigarette in their life.

Now I leaned on the autopsy table. "Let's say we have a machine that can make fine manipulations to any known chemical compound. A hypothetical *Molecular Synthesizer*. Energy is preserved when we form or destroy individual atoms. Every possible engineering difficulty is already addressed."

"Okay..."

"Could we reconfigure the composition of Nicotine into a Prion? More precisely, is there a natural mechanism we can inscribe into the very structure of a Nicotine molecule such that this mechanism can yield a Prion?"

Carl paused.

Slowly, fear consumed his face. His skin grew pale and began to coldly shiver. His legs were visibly shaking and he could barely keep himself standing.

"Oh my god," he finally blurted out.

With that conversation, the world went wild.

Day Fifty Two. The World Health Organization had reconfigured itself to the full study of what we called the NSE-1 Prion, or NSEP-1 (short for Nicotine-derived Spongiform Encephalitis Prion 1). Every university in the world suddenly became a laboratory, and academia became a free-for-all; peer review be damned.

Any product derived from Nicotine was outlawed in pretty much every country in the world. People who were caught smoking or chewing on nicotine based candy were isolated and studied comprehensively. Tobacco farms were burnt down. Prominent cigarette manufacturers such as Winston, Marlboro, and Camel were pre-emptively shut down. Although their products caused the pandemic, no one was charged of murder, due to the fact they could never have found out the deadly secret of Nicotine.

However, even when we made such steps to curtail the spread of NSEP-1, people were still getting sick. Carriers kissing their loved ones, or fucking their lovers spread the prion further.

Only two decades after the modern Coronavirus Pandemic concluded, the world was under lock down once again. People returned to their philosopher selves and began to ask. Many questions were raised, but of course there was a prominent one that needed to be urgently addressed:

If the prion was spawned from Nicotine, how come we aren't dead yet?

Humanity has used nicotine-based consumables since forever. As early as the 17th century, Tobacco plantations were popular among empires. Spain used its numerous colonies, like the Philippines, to plant Tobacco for cigars. If this is the case, then how are we not dead yet? How come our ancestors never keeled over and die?

Day One Hundred and Two was when the NSEP research wing of the WHO attempted to probe deeper into how the Prion was manufactured by Nicotine molecules in modern human beings. However, atomic probing could only do so much.

Im no quantum chemist, but we run up against uncertainty laws when probing deeper. We cant know the full information of a system of particles. What more if we're dealing with atoms arranged into Nicotine? Every attempt was a failure. Too low an energy and we cant know a lot of information to be useful. Too high an energy and we end up destroying the sample.

Mathematicians all over the world formulated models that simulates the production of NSEP-1 from Nicotine atoms interacting with the human body. However these simulations could only give so much useful information. We just couldnt probe deeper.

With all the physics we created, and the powerful tools we made including Particle Accelerators, Microscopes, and Electron Tunneling Methods, we just couldn't know the origin of this underlying mechanism that gave way to disease.

People once again turned to religion, signalling that God had done it to initiate the end of days. Religious zealots claimed it was God's way of punishing what they perceived to be sinful due to smoking. As an agnostic man, this was an insult to all my efforts. But I kept pushing.

Pushing for some breakthrough. Like all the other countless scientists around the world looking for a miracle. Trying in vain to stop an unstoppable machine made by nature.

But still. Nothing.