

## PROSAIC ENDINGS

Rumours among his colleagues about the man's arrogance were met with a snarl and "What the hell do *they* know?" Comments about his paranoia sent him muttering into his laboratory, like a wounded animal seeking its lair. 'Manic-depression' was the later diagnosis, and explains to a certain degree why he turned from a brilliant career in microbiology to a horrible plan for murder.

Antonio Angeles was his name, a lucky (for him) accident of the alphabet which guaranteed that his name appeared first on the multi-authored papers put out by the Institute. The latter had been built not long before by virtue of a grant from the Steinfeller Foundation. That organization – interested in both science and society – caused a mammoth white edifice of laboratories and offices to rise on the site of what had been dark, rat-infested slums. It ran the full length of a block on East 49th Street, and backed onto a polluted and stinking stretch of the Gregson River. About that water-course, one of the tenants displaced by the new building said "You could walk from bank to bank on a carpet of crap."

It was into a shiny new laboratory on the fourth floor of the Institute that Antonio Angeles moved, shortly after the turn of the century, complete with a new Ph.D. and the conviction that he was God's gift to microbiology. Unfortunately, his colleagues gradually came to the belief that Dr. Angeles was less suited to a research institute than to a psychiatric hospital.

"I tell you it's a virus of the *Poxviridae* class," Angeles had maintained at one of the weekly meetings. "Any fool can see that."

The "fools" in the room exchanged irritated glances. Most of the scientists from the fourth floor were there, from rooms numbered 402 to 462. The Institute had corralled most of the capable biologists in the country, on the theory that quantity might make up for quality in an era when pandemics were decimating the large cities of the world and humankind was threatened by a host of micro-organisms which demanded urgent attention. The head of the fourth-floor researchers was Jayant Nagyvary, a dark-skinned virologist who still retained the polite manner of the Calcutta from which he had been recruited. His bald, peanut-shaped head turned towards Angeles, a frown appearing over his deep-set brown eyes.

“The *Pox* viruses have a size of about three-hundred nanometers, and would have been caught in our filter,” he pointed out diplomatically. “This new one got through, so it’s probably something like *Parvoviridae* with a size of at most thirty nanometers.”

There was a murmur of agreement among the crowd. All of them respected Nagyvary, and most of them liked him. He was well-schooled, and while he seldom laughed, his white-toothed smile had eased the way to resolutions of many controversies.

“That sounds like something from a textbook,” retorted Angeles. A sneer twisted his fleshy lips, and he tossed back his greasy long hair with a flick of chemical-stained fingers.

A shimmer of dislike seemed to flicker over the assembled scientists. The people on the fourth floor had been working under stress for a long period and some had let out the occasional sharp remark, but this was going too far. Over time, Angeles’ corrosive nature had etched out a hole of isolation around the man, and he now sat with vacant seats on either side in a room that was otherwise packed. The person in the next-but-one seat to him was Gretchen Solly, a dumpy, somewhat unimaginative researcher, who however was not afraid to voice her opinion.

“That’s not helpful,” she said in response to the snide comment of Angeles. “We are all in this together, and we all need to work towards a solution to the problem.”

Somehow, her “we” seemed to excise her arrogant neighbour along the row.

Antonio Angeles flashed the woman a contemptuous look. He muttered something which sounded like “fat cow”, and then closed his dark eyes and folded his arms across his chest. He maintained this dismissive posture until the meeting ended.

While the stragglers left the conference room, Gretchen Solly approached the head of the group as he collected his data. “That man’s becoming impossible,” she stated bluntly.

“Yeah,” agreed Jayant Nagyvary, looking relieved that things had not gotten more hostile. He was grateful for her bluff support. In some way, the unattractive female and the immigrant male had developed a friendship in the antiseptic atmosphere of the Institute. It was not common knowledge, but the leader of the team had confided to the woman that a few days ago Angeles had threatened several of his coworkers. This at the end of a nasty discussion about the course of the team’s research. Nagyvary had briefly considered calling Security, but Angeles had quietened down and even made a half-hearted apology for his outburst. Nevertheless, they were supposed to be fighting a common enemy, and a colleague inclined to violence was something they could ill afford.

“Maybe,” suggested Gretchen in a half-humorous effort to cheer up Jayant, “he’ll commit suicide.”

“Or maybe,” was the moody response, “he’ll kill somebody else.”

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On his way back to his own office, Antonio Angeles walked slowly, to avoid having to pass the people ahead of him in the corridor. The few he met coming the other way, he pointedly ignored. The head of the group, Jayant Nagyvary, occupied the room at one end of the corridor, number 402. The conference room where the meeting had been held was next door. All along the passageway were offices on either side, numbered alternately. Angeles’ office was at the far end, number 462. As he walked along, looking at the scrupulously clean floor, it seemed to him that he was passing through some warren, its holes occupied by so many rabbits.

At his door – as anonymously white as all the others – he entered the appropriate code and let himself into his laboratory. Unknown to him, the fact that he locked his door was viewed as a sign of paranoia by his colleagues: most of them left their doors open during the day; and even at night the locked doors all shared the same code. This had been Nagyvary’s suggestion – a gesture to encourage cooperation among the occupants of the fourth floor, even if it was only in so simple a matter as one person loaning a file from another. For a while, however, nobody had come to loan anything from Angeles, or even to chat.

It had not always been so. Angeles walked over to the window of his laboratory, moody in thought. A tap on the control, and the transparent pane dissolved. Immediately, the disinfectant tang which emanated from his instruments was displaced by a fetid odour that came up from the river. That polluted waterway, he thought, mocked the work they were doing at the Institute. Originally, he had been enthusiastic about his job. It was not that he was actuated by any great moral purpose, like some of his colleagues. Rather, he was motivated by the challenge of tracking down the new viruses which were scourging the great cities. It was a difficult task, and it appealed to his own complicated mind. The microscopic killers challenged his own ego. And he had certainly done his part in identifying them and trying to annihilate them. In the beginning, he had produced a series of solid data, to which his colleagues had added their own complementary results, leading to a stream of well-respected papers. But that stream had gradually dried up. Bickering had evolved into argument, which in turn morphed into hostility – a psychological mirror of the changes that caused the viruses to transmute into ever-more deadly

strains. The viruses had changed, under the prodding of the team's well-intentioned 'cures', into resistant strains that were now close to invulnerability. And Angeles had turned, under the weight of his colleagues' growing disdain, into a man hardened by hate.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. His nose wrinkled, partly at the stench from the river and partly from the disgust he felt for his fellow-scientists. And that immigrant idiot Nagyvary was the worst of the lot. The fact he had been compelled to grovel to the project leader was still a sharp edge in Angeles' thoughts, honed by the hint his position might be "terminated" if his behaviour did not improve. *He*, Antonio Angeles, to be fired? The suggestion was absurd. But it was also repellent. Abruptly, he felt depressed.

Leaving the window and its sordid but somehow captivating view, he walked across the laboratory. There were benches with instruments all around, but he disregarded the clicking of the D.N.A. sequencer and went straight to a plain cupboard. Inside was a collection of containers with cryptic labels. With a practiced hand he grabbed one of these, opened it and shook two pills into his palm. The skin was stained purple by the acid he was using to track the genetic makeup of the latest virus to come under his study. The two pills were yellow, with red stripes that implied a warning. Disregarding this, he shook out two more, and popped the lot into his mouth. Disregarding the flagon of distilled water which sat on a nearby bench, he ground the medicine between his teeth as he walked slowly back to the window. Held on his tongue in a concentrated paste formed with saliva, the drug would quickly be absorbed by the membranes in his mouth. He understood and trusted chemicals. When the depression had first made itself noticeable, he had gone automatically to drugs, with no thought of psychiatric help. The latter option was effectively fenced off, trapped between the mountain of his arrogance and the gorge of his paranoia. But he was finding, as many and more simple folk before him, that a chemical cure can develop into a dependency and then into an addiction. He knew this, but resented it only slightly. The main objects of his fear and anger were not in bottles, but in the offices that lined the fourth floor of the Institute.

Sticking his head out from the window, Angeles' malevolent stare ranged along the side of the building. None of the other numerous windows were open, as far as he could see. But then, unexpectedly, an oval brown head appeared at the end of the facade. It could only be Nagyvary, in room 402. What the hell could the head of the project be doing? Perhaps sniffing

the stink of the Calcutta slums from which he came? Suddenly, Angeles' mood swung from depression to rage.

“Damn you!”

The curse was uttered with an intensity that bordered on the ferocious. Globules of reddish-yellow paste spluttered into the stinking air.

“Damn,” Angeles said again, surprised at the discharge. Some of the medicine had stuck to the side of the building, down whose white walls it proceeded to ooze in ugly streaks. But it did not matter, really, thought the man. Though relatively new, the structure was already runneled with the rufous pollution that drifted up from the river. That brownish-black stream moved sluggishly past the footings of the building, its flow clogged with pieces of discoloured plastic, the rotting corpses of dogs, and the deflated condoms of expired love.

Staring at this derelict scene, Angeles' unstable and under-medicated mind oscillated between despair and hatred. Eventually, it focussed on the peanut-shaped head of Nagyvary, which still projected from the flat side of the Institute.

That excrescence ought to be removed. The complex mind of Angeles began to plot...

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Orange light blinked warningly from the sequencing machine in the centre of the laboratory, its laboured clucking indicating the difficulty of its job. Antonio Angeles looked up from the bench near the window, his dark eyes ringed by the extra irises of fatigue. His lips thinned with annoyance, and the hiss of a curse misted the transparent visor of his protective helmet. In the wan light of the clouded sky he resembled some bloodless god of the nether world. And in a sense he was. For in the glass tube before him, he was creating a new virus. It would be remarkable in its smallness: under ten nanometres across, a tiny fraction of the size of a human blood corpuscle. But it would be swift in its action: a few heartbeats, and the blood of the victim would turn to poison.

The man sealed the glass tube and removed his protective helmet. Though tired, he was still careful. Not that he cared too much for his own life. His cunning and despairing mind had actually considered a double homicide – the murder of the project head Nagyvary followed by his own suicide. But that day the tide of his depression had been held back by a strong dose of the yellow red-striped pills. And his ego had raised a bulwark against the idea of taking his own frustrated life, so his ingenuity had flowed into an intricate murder plot with only one subject.

Wearily, Angeles threaded a path through the other instruments to stand staring moodily at the stuttering sequencer. It was doing its best, mincing larger molecules which, when put together, would make a billion copies of the virus trapped in the glass tube by the window. That prototype was the result of long study and meticulous design. It was a fantastic but deadly experiment in architecture, at the microscopic scale. Hardly more than a hundred atoms across, its volume was packed with lethal radicals, like a tiny fort stubbed with machine guns. In the bloodstream of a person, it would race along, exploding red corpuscles and using their remnants to build more of its own kind, until a veritable tsunami of viruses would wash into the heart of the victim.

Antonio Angeles loved viruses. While most people viewed them as a scourge, he saw them as harbingers of change in a stagnant world. Of course, they carried things like the common cold and smallpox; but was not the broad range of their activity something to be respected, and perhaps admired? Most researchers were contemptuous of viruses, noting that they were not really “living”, because they could not reproduce without the chemical help of their host cells. They were widely regarded as parasites, a mistake of evolution on an Earth where single-celled organisms had struggled for eons, along some ill-understood but benign route that ended in humans. Angeles believed in another genetic option: that the viruses had been the original inhabitants of the primitive Earth, perhaps wafted to it by the radiation winds of other stars; and that they had discovered how to use and even engineer cells for their own benefit; and that now they lay disguised in the microplasm of every living thing on the planet, quietly mutating and multiplying in some grand plan that cared nothing for the good of the misguided hosts called men. In short, Angeles was a proponent of that small but logical group of scientists who believed in the selfish gene. The difference between him and certain others of his profession was that he was willing to help the viruses and turn traitor to his own species.

The sequencer’s display changed from orange to green, and a relieved sounding *ping* marked the end of its work.

“Good!” Angeles chuckled. He would have rubbed his hands together in satisfaction, but they were covered in skintight gloves which might carry other microscopic agents, and he did not want to disperse into the air anything that might impede the growth of the virus-laden solution he was making. Based on the prototype in the glass tube by the window, and built up from the molecular blocks produced by the sequencer, he needed enough of the serum for a lethal dose. A

few cubic centimetres would be sufficient – say enough to fill a hypodermic syringe. A few drops of the liquid would be deadly when applied to the victim’s skin, where it would be rapidly absorbed through the pores. The designer virus was so small that it would even pass through the membranes of a surgical mask. Damn that idiot Jayant Nagyvary and his prattle about filters! He was not, in any case, a very good director. There were filters on the doors of the fourth floor of the Institute, but they were there mainly to stop things coming in from outside. This included microscopic particles from the fifth floor, which housed the laboratories for work on known pathogenic micro-organisms. That floor was maintained at an atmospheric pressure somewhat lower than elsewhere, so anything escaping from it would not move out of that stratum of the building. Security on the fourth floor, by comparison, was lax. The researchers there were free to open their windows, though it was not encouraged. Maybe Nagyvary believed in the benevolence of one of his Indian gods; though it was hard to believe in a god of any kind, given the state of the world and its pollution-packed heavens.

Angeles walked back to the test-tube on the bench near the window. It contained a new kind of devil. One that was tiny and would destroy a man from the inside, quite unlike the massive portents of old, that blasted the non-believer from the expanses of the sky.

It was getting dark. Weak sunlight struggled through fume-laden clouds as the day drew to a close. Already, a sprinkle of lights on the opposite bank of the black river showed where a few families tried to stave off a darkness that was not entirely due to natural causes. Angeles felt the urge to hurry, before the impetus to work was replaced by the gloom of depression. He had no sympathy for the world outside, occupied as it was by a mass of morons. Even the so-called scientists were largely ignorant of the beauty and power of the viruses with which they shared the planet. He briefly regretted this, and then had a happier thought. In the future (if there *was* a future), the masses would learn to respect the power of his new virus. They might even call it *Poxviridae Angeles*. It would truly be an angel of death.

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A deity of a different kind – shining and smiling – looked down from its niche on the calm figure of Jayant Nagyvary. The head of the fourth-floor laboratories was working towards positive things in room 402 even as Antonio Angeles was working towards negative ones in room 462. In between, the work places were deserted, except for the one where Gretchen Solly

was tidying up after a long day that seemed destined to end in a storm. She did not mind that: a dowse of rain might cleanse the sulphurous clouds that hemmed in the Institute.

Nagyvary was not a man who took pleasure in punishment, but as he mulled over the file in front of him it became obvious that something would have to be done about Angeles. After the earlier meeting and its acrimonious exchanges, two other members of the fourth-floor group had approached its leader, detailing episodes of bad behaviour of which Nagyvary had been unaware.

One of these cases involved the appropriation of data, and did not seem too serious (except for the individual whose information it had been, who was outraged). The other case was more worrisome, and concerned the mutilation of a laboratory mouse that one of the researchers had adopted as a pet, a nasty act that had left a cloud of bad feeling on the fourth floor. Now, skimming through Angeles' file, Nagyvary saw a record of increasing insubordination and insolence. The matter was puzzling, because there was nothing to indicate the source of the trouble, which must be hidden in the man's psyche. He was certainly clever – some might even say brilliant – and for a while had produced very good work, and lots of it. Nagyvary's dark eyebrows climbed up his forehead towards his bald head as he noted the string of original papers, all of which were multi-authored with A.A. at the beginning. But the list became thinner with time as the number of other people involved in the research had dwindled, so that the latest meagre entries were solely under the initials A.A., an indication of the increasing isolation of the virus expert from his colleagues. A fair man, Nagyvary briefly considered an order to the delinquent to seek psychiatric help; but he knew instinctively that this would be met with a refusal. Concerned, the Indian's brown eyes sought those of the idol in the niche behind his desk. While not overtly religious, he had carried some of the beliefs of Calcutta to his new city, and in times of worry fell back on the old gods in a kind of automatic search for solace. Now, his unfocussed stare looked into the coiling smoke from the joss-stick that smoldered in the lap of the smiling idol, trying to find some problem-solving inspiration.

A casual greeting from the doorway interrupted Nagyvary's musings. "Why so serious, Jay?"

Gretchen Solly was the closest thing to a friend that the director possessed among the staff of the Institute. Though the slight Indian and the overweight woman might look to be an unlikely pair, the man's polite nature and the woman's bluff good humour formed a comfortable

counterpoint, based on mutual respect. A few of the researchers even thought that their friendship was headed towards romance.

“I was trying to decide what to do about Angeles,” Nagyvary said, his frown disappearing to leave his head as smooth as a nut.

Gretchen Solly’s snub nose turned up in disgust, partly in response to the mention of the name of the rogue researcher and partly in objection to the acrid smoke that drifted from the burning joss-stick.

“Fire him!”

Nagyvary’s patient smile showed that he approved of the suggestion but foresaw difficulties with it. “He might jump out the window or run amok. His file shows that his troubles, whatever they are, have been building for a long time.”

The woman sniffed, waving away the wreath of perfumed smoke that drifted around her chubby cheeks. “I won’t cry if he jumps.”

The frown reformed on the director’s forehead, for he did not believe in violence of any kind as a way to settle disputes.

“Don’t look so serious,” repeated Gretchen. “Let’s get some fresh air and talk it over. And,” she added with an artificial cough, “get out of these damned fumes.”

They headed to the roof of the Institute. They had frequently gone there to get a break from the claustrophobia of the laboratories, and it had become a kind of trysting place when they wished to avoid the babble of their coworkers.

“I’ll have to come back later,” said Nagyvary, closing the door of his office but not locking it.

“You work too much,” panted Solly as she waddled up the stairs after the sprightly figure of Nagyvary. It was only a short distance, not worth the elevator in this era of scant energy. They passed the door to the fifth-floor laboratories, a skull’s head warning of the deadly microbes to be found there. A few more steps, and the man pushed open the swing door at the top, holding it politely as the woman passed. They emerged on the roof, a cool breeze blowing in their faces, and wandered towards its edge. The flat expanse was littered with bits of refuse, blown there by some earlier storm. A new one was brewing, dirty clouds scudding across the darkening sky. Solly kicked at the corpse of an emaciated crow. There were few birds in the sky these days, and she had no idea what the few survivors of rampant industrialization could find to

eat. She peered carefully over the roof's edge, watching the dead animal pinwheel towards the black river below. But she did not see it join the other garbage that jammed the waterway, because the dark valley was full of dense fog. Her companion took a peak into the dark depths, then moved nervously back, his thoughts returning to the equally dark problem of Antonio Angeles.

“Well,” said Gretchen Solly, peering over the chasm, “he may be a jerk, but at least he’s a hard-working one.”

On the side of the building, at the other end where another doorway stuck up from the flat roof, there was a patch of light. It was reflected back by the fog, which promised soon to engulf it. The denizen of room 462 was at his labours. What he was doing, neither the man nor the woman could guess.

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The creator of *Poxviridae Angeles* leaned back from his work with a sigh. In front of him lay two syringes, one with a black band around its middle and one with a white. He was close to exhaustion, and he had to be careful. One tube contained concentrated poison, the other a diluted version which would cause debilitation but not death. With shaking hands he took a new pair of surgical gloves from the box on the bench, and proceeded to inflate one into a large balloon. Expertly, he moved the glove across the sensitive flesh of his wan cheek. There was no leak. He repeated the exercise with the other glove, and then pulled both of them over his hands. Gingerly, he put the syringes into the pockets of his laboratory gown, the black one into the left and the white one into the right. When he straightened his aching back, it creaked audibly in the stillness of the room. He was ready.

The corridor outside the door of room 462 was silent. The faint light marking the exit at this end of the corridor fell obliquely across his features, etching the deep lines of fatigue. There was another, identical light at the other end of the corridor; but between them was a passage of gloom, relieved only by the reflections of the door knobs at each laboratory. Removing the syringe from the right pocket of his smock, he squirted part of its contents onto the knob of his own laboratory. The droplets twinkled in the faint light, but dried as he watched. Satisfied, he stalked down the corridor, stopping to apply a little of the serum to a half-dozen other doorknobs. When he got to room 402, he replaced the syringe. Taking its partner from his left pocket, he held it aloft against the light. The fluid cast a small rainbow in the gloom.

“Do your work well, my little friends.”

He applied a good dose from the black-banded tube to the knob of the director’s door. His glittering eyes were looking to replace the syringe in his pocket, when his gaze went to the floor and he suddenly froze.

There was a weak light coming from under the door. He hardly believed his weary eyes, but then a whiff of incense tickled his nostrils.

Jayant Nagyvary was still in his office!

Antonio Angeles strained his ears. But there was no sound from inside the office.

What could this mean? A momentary panic seized him, his brain struggling with the contending threats of failure and discovery. The whisp of smoke coming under the door wandered around his feet, and drifted off behind him. Turning, he saw that the door at this end of the corridor was slightly ajar, admitting a faint breeze which carried the stench of outside.

Nagyvary must be on the roof!

Angeles’ mind raced, and then his mental gears clicked into a new plan. Hurriedly, he took out the black syringe and squirted half its contents into the palm of his right hand, where it dried into a milky patch on the material of the glove.

The would-be assassin bounded up the stairs, driven by a new surge of hatred. So the Indian boss wanted him off the team? Very well. He would oblige, and even give a handshake to show that there were no bad feelings. He burst onto the roof, and stopped dead in the doorway. There were *two* people there!

Gretchen Solly turned, and her eyes fixed on the newcomer. Jayant Nagyvary was talking to her, but he stopped in the middle of a sentence at the sight of the white-coated figure in the doorway.

The apparition came to life, and began walking like an automaton across the roof, its arm outstretched. Fog swirled around its feet, litter scurrying out of its way.

“Doctor Nagyvary,” croaked the white ghost as it closed with the dark-brown man, “I have come to offer you my resig...”

Bam! The woman struck down the brown hand as it automatically rose in polite response to the plastic-gloved one. “Something funny here,” she grated.

Smack! The flat hand of Gretchen Solly wiped the ghastly smile from the mouth of Antonio Angeles, and the man went reeling to the floor. A syringe with a black band rolled from the flailing figure and disappeared into the fog.

But not before the woman had seen it, and half guessed its import.

Bedlam. Nagyvary gabbled in some Indian dialect, not understanding what was going on. Solly yelled at him to get away from the edge of the roof. Angeles shrieked in rage and fear. He dragged off the incriminating glove and threw it into the abyss, then started to run. The woman took off after the fleeing man, and for a while her fat figure and his thin one darted in and out of the churning fog. Finally there was the slam of a door and the sound of clattering footsteps inside the building.

Angeles half ran and half fell down the stairway, desperately seeking the refuge of his own laboratory. If he had been thinking more clearly, he would have continued down the stairs and into the anonymous streets of the city. But he was not thinking clearly. His cheek was screaming with pain from the blow it had received, his eyes were full of the dark shapes of exhaustion, and his brain was exploding with thoughts of arrest and prison.

His frenzied stare made out the number on the door and his groping hand closed on the knob. In the gloom of his office, he tripped on something and sprawled. He started to rise, but froze. Was he insane?

Grinning down at him was a golden, many-armed figure, floating on a smoldering pile of ash.

He staggered, and tore open the door again. But the number 402 is easy to mistake for 462, and his thumping heart stopped in his chest.

The villain's end might have come prosaically at that moment, in a heart attack. Life is banal, however, and his heart suddenly surged back to life.

He stared at his right hand, fascinated and appalled. He could almost see the particles of the virus soaking into his skin on their way to his blood.

Suddenly there was the bang of a door, and footsteps running down the stairs from the roof. A puffing Gretchen Solly appeared, her eyes blazing. She made a grab at Angeles, but her fist clamped only on the end of his gown. There was a ripping noise, and the man darted down the corridor, the woman in pursuit.

Angeles streaked past his real office, jerked open the door at that end of the corridor, and headed up the stairs. But the poison was in his blood, and by the time he got to the top he was a walking dead man. A curtain was falling in his eyes, a tide of disease was rising in his body, and on gaining the roof he fell and lay flat.

The man's end might have come, again prosaically, at that moment. The infection coursed through him, intent on killing its creator in a microscopic rerun of the Frankenstein legend. But the trickiness of life intervened a second time, and he staggered to his feet.

Fate was tiring of playing with its victim, however. His body sank lower with each step forward. Finally, he was crawling, nearly blind. His rounded back rose spasmodically above the clouds of fog, like a mortally wounded fish in an ocean of mist.

A thin figure loomed ahead – the gentlemanly Jayant Nagyvary, extending a helping hand.

A fat figure loomed behind – the raging Gretchen Solly, waving a threatening fist.

The crawling man's hand came down on air, and he disappeared. His third prosaic end became fact.

*Crump!* The muffled sound of a body crashing onto garbage drifted up to the witnesses above.

They could not see the billions of viruses multiplying with gleeful selfishness as they spread into the water.