

# Contagion Story #2

*A Short Story by Kim Kelln*

I knocked on Dr. Hoffsteder's office. He claims to have an open door policy but no one is sure why. You have to knock and wait regardless of time or day. Patience is a must because there's no way of knowing when or if he'll open the door. We suspect that he's hoping what you had to talk about wasn't really that important and that you'll tire and leave. If we were honest with ourselves more often we'd agree that it probably wasn't that important. Another conjecture is that he's frantically rearranging his books and papers so you have no place to sit when you get in. A surefire way to make any meetings short and on point.

Today was different. What I uncovered was unnerving, to say the least, and it was an absolute must that I consult with him. I didn't wait for his invite. I marched right in, cleared a chair without ceremony and sat down. Hoffsteder was in his usual position, hunched over his desk. His half frames on the end of his nose. His long, grey hair wild over his ears. His lab coat pocket streaked with blue, red, and green ink. Hoffsteder was engrossed in checking out some protein folding results.

"I've uncovered some disturbing results that I think you should look at. I sent the analysis to you this morning." I then added, without trying to sound overly acerbic, "I'm assuming you didn't look at it yet."

"Un-huh." He didn't look up. Was he agreeing that I sent the analysis or that he didn't look at it, or was it a noncommittal comment on the "disturbing results." Hard to tell with Hoffsteder. I pressed on.

"Dr. Hoffsteder. I really think you need to look at this analysis. We've isolated many of the variables, cross-correlating with results from all other available studies, a full-on multi-disciplinary assessment. Everything points to one, unbelievable conclusion."

"Un-huh. Later. This is most fascinating." He looked up and lifted a sheaf of papers off of his desk, then bent to the task again.

"Forget that." I said. "This can't wait." I walked around his desk to his laptop, opened the report and swung his chair around sharply. "Here. Read this."

He sighed, then started to read. Every line, every graph, every minute mark on the page. He might be slow, but he was meticulous and he was brilliant with numbers. You could be convinced of a "fact" but he could point out the fallacies and send you back to your workbench, suitably humbled, with your pride between your legs. No one went to old Hoffsteder with anything unless we had ground the numbers into a fine dust first.

I was sure about this one though, even if I didn't completely understand it. The numbers were ludicrous but sound. Statistically, the analysis showed that people of higher intelligence are dying at alarming rates compared to the control. At its simplest, the smart die and the stupid appear immune.

Hoffsteder read on, scribbling notes from time to time. I left and got a coffee before the cafeteria closed for the day, dawdling over the remains of the dried out pastries. He was still at it when I got back. Finally he turned around, took off his glasses and began wiping them on his tie. He made quite an affair of it, lifting them up to the light, more

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wiping, more checking, delaying while he thought of a response. That was his way. You never knew what was coming either - a collegial attaboy, or utter damnation.

He cleared his throat and looked out the window at the diminishing light, seemingly lost for words for once. "Your analysis is sound." He said, then he lapsed into melancholy. He folded his glasses and put them into his pen stained pocket. I waited. "Alfred, my partner of many years, bless his soul. You remember him, maybe? No, maybe not. I guess that would be before your time." He said. I agreed.

He shifted uneasily and returned to looking out the window. "Well, we, Alfred and I knew this day was going to come. The virus has been around for some time, mutating from one pathology to another, sometimes benign and sometimes not. Mostly not, thank goodness. It became especially bad in the 70's. We called it 'only the good die young' for obvious reasons. Officially it went by many different names. We never published our analysis nor did we ever mention the name because even we didn't really believe it. No matter how you spin your 'only the smart die' virus, no one will believe it this time either. I would suggest that you, we, forget about it because it will pass, just like it did the last time around. No one will be the wiser."

He put his glasses on and, unperturbed, resumed whatever he'd been checking out when I interrupted him.