

SuperB

Raise a glass to world domination.

Janet Wright

The SuperB virus spread like wildfire — which was funny, really, because we'd put it in the water.

Forty years I spent perfecting it, while people were laughing behind their hands. Poor drunken old Dr J, mad as a bat in her dusty old lab, doing her useless antiviral work. Or so they thought. They're not laughing at me now, are they?

Once we'd perfected SuperB, my dedicated little group scattered it around the globe. The virus was sprinkled into the headwaters of the Nile, dripped into remote springs and slipped directly into the water glass of a particularly irritating politician. Released into reservoirs, SuperB was lifted into the clouds to fall on fields and gardens. It was sipped from bottles by yuppies and from streams by goat-herders. And it was so powerful that a few drops of rain turned an entire well into a SuperB reservoir.

The effects became noticeable very suddenly and, crucially, across the whole world at the same time. Crowds in the streets; emergency government debates; a few hopeless attempts to mobilize armies. But against what?

My beautiful transgenic virus, after so much patient fine-tuning, targeted just the right few cells in the brain. It did its work invisibly, unstopably. Meanwhile, who noticed mad old Dr J doing a triumphant jig in the moonlight?

Then something started going wrong. And I realized I hadn't seen one of my group for a while, that icy young Mark who'd talked about the need for an antidote, 'just in case'.

Two of my dear little helpers visited Mark's girlfriend. Some gentle persuasion got all the information we needed, including an address.

Mark was just the sort of messianic idiot to build his secret lab on a mountaintop. Smiling passers-by took my arm to help me struggle up to the peak. Others guided me to a shady rock where I could sit while my vision cleared.

There I drank some gin from my hip-flask and rested for a while, looking down at the world I had shaped. My followers, a group of renegade Buddhists, had told their willing converts that SuperB was the cure for everything, and they had believed it.

Why shouldn't they? Most of the world's problems were caused by greed, self-pity or aggression, and what remained could soon be solved without the distractions of crime

and war. All overcome with one dose of Super Benevolence. The world's population had realized life was better if they were kind and fair to each other. Well, OK, not so much realizing as being unable to do anything else. My plan for world peace coming to fruition. And now that little creep was messing it up.

Breathing heavily, I pushed the lab door open. Mark was facing me from the other side of the high lab bench, grinning. "Glad you could drop in," he said jovially. "I'm sure you'd like to see some of the improvements I've made."

"You call those improvements, do you?" I said. "Violence, terror, crime? I'm disappointed." Even as I spoke I was aware how feeble it sounded to him.

"Disappointed?" he yelled, dropping the friendly act. "I'm disappointed! Your reputation as a tough, hard-drinking loner — what a joke! I thought you were planning to take over the world."

"We have taken it over," I pointed out. He shook it off: "You're the smuggest doggooner I ever met! You make me sick." His eyes were strangely bright. Could I really see tears sparkling at their brims? If he was losing his grip, I had a chance.

"Poor boy," I cooed. "Your so-called antidote lasts only a few days. Bank robbers are giving back what they stole, with interest. Those gunmen who broke into the Vatican have taken holy orders."

"I'm taking the antidote every day while I work on it," he said. "And what a pity you can't stop me, Dr Nicey-Nice. You can pull out that gun, but you can't shoot me, can you? Because you haven't taken my antidote."

I pulled my hand out of my pocket slowly, dangling what he'd taken for a gun between thumb and forefinger.

"You pathetic old lush," he sneered. "Couldn't even get up here without a drink to steady your nerves."

I went on smiling, looking him in the eye, the gin bottle swinging from my fingers in a hypnotic rhythm. It finally dawned on him.

"You've never drunk any water," he croaked. "You haven't got the SuperB virus." The next two thoughts — "So you can shoot me" and "Now you really have pulled out a gun" — hit him faster. He dived for the door, but you don't have to be young and quick to hit someone from that distance without a lab bench in the way.

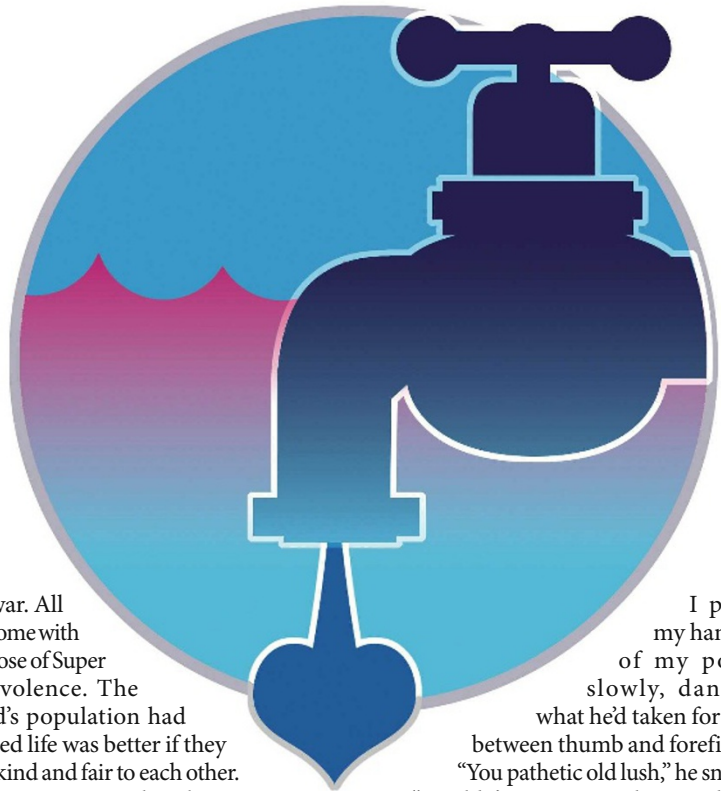
He went down dramatically, sweeping a benchful of phials with him. I emptied the bottle into his mouth before he smashed it with his last conscious movement.

I put away the tranquillizer gun and had a couple of drinks from my hip-flask before Mark got up, tears running down his face.

"May I clean this place up?" he whispered. I knew the urge was overwhelming. Of course, I lifted my feet helpfully as he ran the vacuum cleaner around. Even I couldn't survive on gin alone: I was as infected by Super Benevolence as everyone else on the planet.

But I made sure he disposed very carefully of the broken bottle, which had contained my hastily concocted virus update. It had some odd side effects, including the compulsive housework. And I was damned if I wanted to risk catching that.

Janet Wright has written nine books about health, and says science has proved that dancing is better for you than housework.



JACEY