There is a story, most probably apocryphal, that is told about Einstein. That his entire wardrobe consisted of five identical suits. When asked about this, he is alleged to have said, “So that I don’t waste any brainpower in the mornings deciding which set of clothes to wear.” I’m similar to Einstein in this respect, if in no other. I have three tee shirts of the same color, two others of a very similar shade and style, two pairs of blue jeans, thirteen – after the last wash – identical socks, and a single pair of shoes.

I am, or rather I was – it seems strange to use the past tense – a professor at a small Liberal Arts college in the Midwest. Students frequently commented on my teaching evaluations, “He wears the same clothes to class every day”. This wasn’t true, of course – except as regards the shoes – it just appeared that way. Apparently the students at Wakefield College didn’t know the Einstein story.

I had managed to gain a reputation for being absent minded, in a fashion more befitting a mathematics professor than the litterateur that I am. To take just one example, one day I chose to walk to school rather than drive, the weather having been exceptionally mild that morning. Later in the day I spent a good hour searching for my car in the parking lot before reporting it stolen to the Campus Police. Then they drove me home and there it was, sitting bold as brass in the driveway! Within a couple of days everybody at the college had heard about the episode.

But I digress, that is not the story I want to tell.

The story I want to tell began on a deceptively sunny, brutally cold day in January. I had just returned to my office after teaching Comparative Literature LA 425.

A group of students, five in all, were clustered outside the door anxiously awaiting my arrival. This was rather unusual as office hours at Wakefield – mine in particular – were generally not well attended except for the period immediately prior to exams, and there were no quizzes or tests scheduled in any of my classes for another three weeks. I thought perhaps I had missed an appointment but it proved not to be the case.

“Professor, we are wondering if your 2:30 class today is canceled.”

“Why would I do that?”

“You mean you haven’t heard? It’s all over campus. They’ve …”

At this point, all five of them started yammering and waving their arms and it was impossible to make out anything that was being said. It was like listening to a panel discussion on Fox News Sunday.
“Suppose you all calm down and somebody tell me what the hell is going on!”

It turned out that early that morning one of the cleaning crew had come across a little open-topped box in Physical Plant Building A, containing a mysterious white powder. Assuming the powder to be rat poison, but suspicious nonetheless, the cleaner passed the box with the powder on to her supervisor. He alerted the Campus Police, and they rushed it posthaste to the authorities in town. Meanwhile, a small amount of the powder had found its way to the air intake that feeds a gigantic heat pump housed within the building. Physical Plant A provides heating and cooling to the east side of the campus where the administrative offices and the dormitories are located. It turned out that classes were canceled that day, and every day thereafter …

Wakefield was a small Liberal Arts college nestled in the sleepy town of Cedar Hills, Indiana, a few miles from the bank of the Wabash River. The school was founded around the end of the eighteenth century by a wealthy industrialist with the grandiose mission: “To provide outstanding young men with the type of robust education to prepare them to become leaders in society and in the world”. Presumably there were no outstanding young women at that time, or if there were, then they were not expected to become either societal or world leaders.

The first students at Wakefield were the sons of farmers, businessmen, artisans, teachers, and the like. The school became coed in the mid sixties and in recent years the student body was comprised largely of the children of doctors and lawyers and similar professional types. Soft pasty-faced party kids with Porsches and trust funds, sharp in dress rather than intellect, with solid SAT’s and old family connections, neither quite impressive enough to make it into the likes of Harvard or Princeton.

Geographically isolated, expensive, and lacking in serious academic distinction, Wakefield was neither a hotbed of radicalism nor a bastion of conservative-ism, and it seemed strange that the school would be attacked in this fashion …

I arrived home around 2:30 that afternoon and immediately switched on the TV. All the local news channels were covering the story. By this time the powder had been sent to a lab for analysis and, although it was clear that some key details of what would later come to be known as “The Wakefield Incident” were being kept under wraps, the television coverage left no doubt that something very serious had happened in Cedar Hills that morning.

With FBI descending on the town like flies on a rotted carcass and experts from the Centers For Disease Control in Atlanta flying in, the town was buzzing like never before. The Police Commissioner had issued a statement earlier in the day calling for “all persons in the vicinity of the college at the time of the incident” to check themselves into Cedar Hills General for a series of medical tests.

I was not particularly concerned by this turn of events. I am blessed with a singularly laid back, sunny disposition and tend not to worry too much about things beyond my control.
I was, in fact, happy to have the afternoon off. I went to the local supermarket and bought a case of my favorite beer. I made a call from the pay phone opposite the store then spent a couple of hours in the neighborhood bookstore reading extracts from a new novel in the medical thriller genre that I enjoy. I called Sue, a girl I’ve been dating on and off for the past couple of months, this time from my cell phone, and arranged to meet her for dinner.

We ate at Chan’s. Needless to say, she had heard about the incident by that time, and was beside herself.

“Were you there when it happened?”

“Of course I was there. You know I teach on Tuesdays.”

“Aren’t you worried? I heard Dr. Sanjay Gupta on the six o’clock news talking about the stuff they found. It’s some type of biological virus and they don’t even know what it does.”

As opposed to a virus of the non-biological variety, no doubt.

“Actually no, I’m not. The buildings that were affected were on the east side of campus and the wind was from the west this morning. And I’m feeling fine. Hungry too. I think I’ll order the Emperor’s Special.”

“But you could be infected. Dr. Sanjay Gupta –”

“Forget about Dr. Sanjay fucking Gupta, will you? I told you, I’m fine! In fact, more than fine. Truth is, I’m feeling better tonight than I’ve felt for quite some time!”

She gave me a strange look - thinking, perhaps, that “the stuff” had found its way to my brain, and leaned back from the table.

“What say after the fortune cookies, we adjourn to your place and you and I do the Monster Mash?”

“Are you crazy? You need to go get tested!”

The things we do for love! Of course, it had to be done anyway. I checked into CHG that night. The place was overflowing with forlorn looking new inmates, the newly arrived medical experts and FBI agents, TV news crews, and local cops. They were admitting, or more accurately, confining, everybody who was anywhere near the campus that day. We were assured that we would be quite comfortable and would in all likelihood not have to stay longer than a few days. “In all likelihood” should have struck an ominous chord but nobody else seemed to notice.

Then the probing and the scanning started up. Quite comfortable, my ass! – No pun intended. Pricked and poked, injected with radiographic chemicals and placed inside machines, tubes stuck into orifices, bodily substances of all manner extracted... The doctors told us that since they didn’t know what exactly they were testing for, they would have to test for pretty much everything. That’s a lot of testing! Painful and disgusting though it all was, the worst torment was psychological rather than physical – the thought of being shut up with a bunch of about-to-be very sick people.

In any event, within a few days I was pronounced in the pink and allowed to leave. Many of my fellow inmates did not fare as well. It was later revealed that some never got out of there. But that’s life – so to speak!

After the hospital Sue and I continued to see each other for a while, always at my apartment. I seldom ventured outside now. Since Wakefield remained closed, I no longer had teaching duties and that suited me just fine. I used the time wisely to finish up my article on Dostoevsky’s Crime And Punishment and continue the research for my book on Poe, both of which had fallen by the wayside of late. But that wasn’t all I researched. From dawn to dusk, I scoured the TV channels, radio stations, and news sites, looking for a new development in the saga. Call it morbid curiosity if you are so inclined.

The weeks rolled by. Nothing had happened by the end of January. Presidents Day came and went. It was looking as though as though that was the end of the matter. Then one Friday in the middle of February, I switched on the TV and there it was!

Several senior administrators at Wakefield College in Cedar Hills, Indiana were stricken today with an as yet undiagnosed respiratory illness. College President Mark Levine, Provost Kenneth Gilbert, and Assistant Dean Jose Gomez, are in critical condition and have been airlifted to Indianapolis for medical treatment. Levine’s wife told reporters that her husband was due to play golf later in the day with Gilbert but woke with a high fever and coughing up blood. He lapsed into unconsciousness while being transported to the emergency room. Authorities strongly suspect a link between these events and the biological agent found on the Wakefield campus on January 18. A spokesman for the...

Within a week all three men were dead. Soon after, other cases were reported. The first wave of casualties were mainly administrators but also included faculty, students, and support staff. They were going down in droves.

Naturally, I stayed within the confines of my sealed apartment, studiously avoiding all contact with the outside world. Superman in his fortress of solitude.

The Wakefield virus proved to be both deadly and, after the incubation period, highly contagious. The CDC identified the virus as a virulent new strain of Anthrax and declared that if it were allowed to escape into the general population, the United States could suffer the worst pandemic since the appearance of Legionnaires’ disease. Thereafter, the town of Cedar Hills was placed under a strict quarantine. Military checkpoints were set up restricting travel in and out of town to those deemed essential personnel – purveyors
of vital goods and services, doctors and paramedics, the deliciously euphemistically named “disposal teams”, etc.

According to the latest news reports, most of the downtown stores and businesses are now closed and boarded up. The busses stopped running over a month ago and there are almost no cars on the roads. The few restaurants and bars that remain open are empty and silent. The streets are given over to the stricken and the demented. A sense of doom has descended on Cedar Hills. The town, like the people, is dying.

I’ve remained untouched by all the turmoil and devastation, ensconced here with my supplies and my work, and, of course, the TV and Internet. There’s been a huge amount of media coverage in the last couple of months and I’ve kept track of every last bit of it.

Earlier this week, I was awakened shortly after noon by the ringing of my house phone. I’d been up most of the night working on the book and woke dazed and disoriented, and it took me a little while to get to the phone.

“I thought you weren’t going to answer. Are you alright? This is Linda.”

“Linda?” I was very groggy.

“Linda Bloom.”

“Oh, hi. I was taking a nap. Had a late night yesterday. What’s up?” Apart from me.

“Sorry to wake you. I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news, Bill’s wife passed away last night.”

She was talking about Bill Sutcliffe, the Chair of Language Arts. I’d heard via emails from a couple of colleagues that his wife had recently come down with the virus, so it wasn’t a huge surprise.

“God, no! That’s awful!”

“I’m taking up a collection on behalf of the department. There’s a memorial service set for tomorrow at First Baptist on Seventh Street at 2:00 pm. Will you be able to make it?”

When hell freezes over. “Of course I’ll come. And put me down for twenty bucks.”

What really jolted me was what she said just before she hung up.

“Have you seen today’s Sentinel? Looks like we’re all going to be on the job market soon!”

I’d stopped taking the local newspaper a while back in keeping with my policy of splendid isolation but as it turned out there was an article on the Yahoo News front page.
Demise of a college

May 15, 11:15 am (ET)

CEDAR HILLS, In. (AP) - The Wakefield campus has been officially declared a Disaster Area. The now completed inspection of the campus shows that the virus has worked its way into the ducts in many of the buildings and it is expected that it will prove impossible to eradicate. Several of the buildings will require gutting and refurbishing and others will need to be demolished entirely. The College Board of Regents issued a statement earlier today indicating that there are no plans to reclaim the campus. It seems that, after almost two hundred years, Wakefield College, one of the nation’s most distinguished seats of learning, will cease to exist as an academic institution …

There isn’t much more to tell. Cedar Hills, Indiana, hitherto little more than a jumped-up college town in the middle of nowhere, a stopover for motorists on Highway 33, has now made it onto the world stage. In death lies immortality. Both town and college are destined for a place in history alongside the Titanic, the Hindenburg, the Chernobyl nuclear plant, and the World Trade Centers.

All because of 3.5 ounces of white powder!

As soon as the quarantine is lifted, I’ll be moving on. I’m in the process of packing up my belongings – books and papers, folders of news clippings, lab equipment, collections of war memorabilia, weapons and posters…

As it happens, I had made my plans to leave Cedar Hills a while back. The sad fact is, in the Fall Semester, I was denied tenure at Wakefield! Thrown out onto the academic scrapheap after eight years like a rusty Oldsmobile! By a bunch of washed up old stiffs – stiffs in spirit and now in body too, many of them – unfit to lace my intellectual boots. As they say, what goes around comes around!

The Feds are conducting an intensive investigation into the origin of the Wakefield Incident but it seems they have thus far failed to come up with any useful leads. Anyhow, I’m not worried. Why would I be? No one will believe that a man with Einstein’s wardrobe, somebody who loses his car in his own driveway, is capable of anything.