

“March the 33rd: A Quarantine Story”

by

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Part One

It was Thursday, March the 33rd.

Or something like that. Who was counting anymore? Everyone had stopped that long ago. It was crazy how quickly things had escalated after the order to stay at home had been given, how quickly the virus had spread, and how rampantly alongside it madness had set in, a special, novel blend of cabin fever and mayhem that caused society to begin to collapse so that it stood swinging in the wind on the threshold of complete and utter chaos.

It seemed like it had been March for so long now. How long had it been? Two months, two years? Five? Hard to tell, after so much had transpired, life transformed so swiftly, after society's progressive descent toward downfall. No one remembered a time that was not March anymore.

That is what it felt like, at least.

The authorities still existed. Civil government, commerce, and power structures still maintained their sovereignty. However, everyone collectively held their breath both to avoid contracting the deadly disease and as they watched their accustomed power structures continuously lose their grip on normality and control. The economy continuously spiraled, businesses boarded up for good, and it seemed an inevitable slide into complete anarchy was imminent.

A quick walk. That was all I needed that morning. That was all *she* needed. My dog, my beloved companion, wagged her tail avidly, excited. We walked into the pre-daybreak cool air outside on my back deck.

“Shhh!” I pleaded, as she whined shrilly and clacked her toenails all about on the floorboards. “They’ll hear you.” I was paranoid, so very paranoid. I could still remember times when I was not; not suspicious of the authorities, of people, when I smiled on my neighbor and waved in a friendly manner and the same was returned to me. Now, everyone was a potential spy. No one could be trusted. No one could go out.

“Stay at home. Please, stay at home.” The Governor pled this repeated mantra repeatedly on TV some days, weeks, or maybe even months ago.

We were still allowed to go outside, to walk, to run, to exercise. Yet, so seemingly and infuriatingly contradictorily, businesses, schools, churches, greenways, trails,

certain stretches of roads, were all indefinitely shut down. Fines and jail time were slapped upon those who were caught in these off-limits places that previously had been open, frequented public commons.

One was treated like a common crook if they violated the new policy and ran or walked at certain times, or in groups too large, a standard that shape shifted constantly, daily. It was okay to go outside in the light of day, to walk, to bask in the warm sun and revel in the day's blue, and yet it was not. Many people in the community looked down upon those that practiced this freedom, quietly shaming them, for fear of their actions spreading the virus to themselves and their loved ones. The number of places it was acceptable to go were slim, and for an avid runner, my sphere of available routes was shrinking fast.

I was well aware of a certain someone's eyes boring holes into the side of my head as the dog and I crossed my back yard and I swung open the back gate with a rusty squeak. Looking over my shoulder, I briefly made eye contact with Dolores, my elderly neighbor, staring at me repugnantly from her window. She hastily dropped her blinds, obscuring herself from my sight when she realized I saw her staring.

As the dog and I put our six collective feet to pavement, I glanced both ways before leaving my property, walking to the end of my street, and crossing over where it intersected with a main road, making our way to the grassy bank opposite of my house. I caught another neighbor gawking through window glass, who quickly snapped his neck around and disappeared into the dark corners of his home.

"He's at it again, the jerk!" I could just image him grumbling to his wife. I reflected for a moment upon the absurdity that an act so simple, so mundane, so commonplace in life before, could have become so contemptible now.

This was life now. People were dropping left and right in the city nearby from the deadly disease, and malaise and discontent had taken hold out here in the rural countryside. All over the globe, all over the nation, the disease had spread. Yet we were allowed outside if we kept our distance from one another. In order to do so, to run, to enjoy such, was looked down upon with general disdain and with accusing stares; my neighbors equivocated me to an axe murderer with their eyes through their windowpanes.

Someone was always watching, always listening. Everyone was suspicious of each other. And everyone, authorities included, were afraid of what lay in the shadows at night.

I don't remember when the house at the end of my street changed. It was always dilapidated and old, standing with a tired looking, slanted lean on its foundation, which consisted of a concrete slab topped with plain, gray cinder blocks upon which its brick and plywood façade was mounted. It was old, and always had been, and the wood

paneling on its top story creaked in the wind, seemingly swaying with the vines, weeds, and tree branches that had overgrown around it.

I don't know what happened to Ralph. It was some months before the plague hit that he had moved out. But I don't know what day, or when, or why, or to where he moved. Ralph was like that. Transient, in his late 30's and single, he worked a part-time job and rented the bottom floor of the old house at the end of the lane on the cheap, and totally alone. In one of our two conversations (the first had been asking if he could borrow my lawn mower to cut the small lawn in front of the old house) he had told me a few details about the property. The house was allegedly built around 1900, owned by a local wealthy man who had fallen ill and become afflicted with Alzheimer's, and his not-so-present daughter managed his properties now, sparsely.

Ralph's residence at "the Manor," as the locals called it, jokingly, was the only thing that kept some semblance of normality about the property. After he left there was no one there, no more soft sounds of lo-fi television and its dancing, glimmering lights pouring out from the house's shadows at night. Some unknown assailants had broken several of the house's windows with what I assume were rocks at some point. The weeds and undergrowth grew out of control. The building seemed to sway more in the breeze by day. By night, once Ralph had gone, it was downright spooky in appearance.

Little by little, or maybe all at once in an event I missed somehow, the house changed. It was no longer a negligible, ignorable eyesore of an abandoned old building. It looked different. It looked sinister. Particularly at night.

After the sun set each evening, my dog would sit on her haunches and stare at the house, as if she smelled, saw, or otherwise sensed something wicked emanating from it. I would have to physically come out on the back porch and shoo her off into the yard to do her business, so evidently perplexed by the eerie house at the end of the street was she. There were no longer any visible signs of life as we humans know it coming from that house.

Which is why I was taken completely by surprise and frightened when on my walk that morning I ran into someone on that property.

As we left my house that morning, and I heard the hiss of the electrifying current fortify my fence (standard practice against looters in this viral environment) after I'd pressed the virtual button on my phone's screen in the app, my dog and I walked to the end of the street, crossed the main road, and moved onto the green bank. The first light of morning reflected off the old abandoned house's window and I turned my head to look at it, briefly. I took in the house for a moment, then directed my attention to the giant, green metal dumpster on the property, from which a scampering sound had arisen.

Some men had come and begun working on the house prior to the world-changing outbreak, whether to tear it down or repair it, I do not know. All I know is that the dumpster was left on the property after whatever work was halted when the virus hit.

The scuffling sound grew louder as the dog and I came closer while we passed by. Reaching the other side of the dumpster, we saw a black pickup truck, new, sleek, its engine running, and nobody inside. The rustle in the dumpster grew to a crescendo. My dog, oddly enough, sat on her haunches, ears perked up in the air, watching intently. This is odd behavior for her, because she otherwise would have pulled at her leash, huffing and sniffing the ground, tugging me along for the hunt, had it been a critter of interest in the dumpster.

No, it could not possibly have been more the opposite.

All at once, without warning, two tied, white trash bags flew up and out of the dumpster and landed in the back of the black pickup with a heavy thud. My dog remained perfectly still. Then, an enormous man hoisted himself up and out of the dumpster, climbed gingerly down its side, and stood at his full height staring at me.

He stood easily six-foot-four, wore a tight-fitting black t-shirt and jeans, and black boots. His arms were massive and his biceps toned and powerful looking. The glare of the morning sun peered over the treetops just then, obscuring my vision somewhat. Squinting, I realized with shock that what I initially thought was oddly cut red hair was not such at all, but rather a bright, vivid red tattoo of a dragon, with a black snake entwined around it, that covered nearly the entirety of the tall man's scalp. He stood there, tall and menacing, looking at me with a scowl. There was something indescribably maleficent about his presence.

Nodding at him, I sputtered a greeting.

"Hi, h-how are you?" I asked, amicably.

The man merely snarled and growled at me. He stood there and growled at me like some sort of wild animal. My heart began to pound. I felt my blood pressure rising, my flight-or-fight response beginning to surge.

My dog raised from her haunches then. She returned the man's greeting with her own growl. The hair on the back of her neck was standing on end and she bared her sharp teeth. This was also very uncharacteristic of her. She usually loves people, regardless of who they are.

"Come on, girl," I said, tugging at her lead. We continued our walk, leaving the mysterious man behind us, who, still standing watching us, disappeared from our sight as we rounded a corner.

Down a grassy hill, onto a patch of gravel, and we stood in front of the head of a paved trail, the "last trail" local runners and walkers had recently dubbed it, as it was the final one in the area open to the public. Our town government had refused to close it,

keeping at least one public green space open for its people, although it was used scantily these days, only by the occasional walker or runner.

My dog and I walked past the painted wooden sign that read “Nazareth City, VA Greenway” and into the woods we went. As we walked the trail, the gushing waters of the Croatan River babbling as it poured over stones beside us, I thought about what I had just seen.

It occurred to me then that I had just met a monster outside the Manor.

The human brain is an incredible organ. It is amazing what it filters out, what it refuses to let us see, especially if it is something outside of our normal experience, something that refuses to conform to the patterns our brains continuously search for in nature, something that does not add up, or is entirely otherworldly. Thinking back to my remarkably short encounter with this figure, images came to me from the deep recesses of my brain and I let out a gasp. Had the whites of this man’s eyes also been tattooed black, and had he indeed had red irises matching the color of his dragon tattoo?

Half a mile out and half a mile back we walked, and on the way home, the man and his black pickup truck whom I had done my best to shove out of mind had gone. I de-electrified my fence, went inside, and began my online work for the job I was lucky enough to be able to still do for a little bit of money, my small piece of a pie that was crumbling and becoming ever tinier and with growing internet outages, less accessible in this strange new world.

While I jiggled my ethernet cable and reset my router to try my utmost to reset my feeble Wi-Fi connection, a practice that had become increasingly more regular as of late, my dog curled up on the couch and slept. She’s an energetic thing and needs her walks daily to get out her anxious energy; walking is medicine for her. It is for me, too.

Besides, I would need her to be relatively docile for later on, already having her daily walk done. I had plans that night of a clandestine nature. Tonight was our night, a new moon, the darkest night in the lunar cycle: tonight was the night some friends and I were getting together for a street race!

At noon, I stopped work for lunch. I made myself a small meal, taking care to ration my portions; the Guard would not be making its rounds with a fresh pack of 6 weeks’ rations like it did for each household til Monday. Mandy, my neighbor who lived two doors down from me, called me on my cell and we talked.

“Are we still on for tonight’s event?” she asked.

“You bet!”

“Great. I’ll wear my best dress.” said Mandy, eagerness in her tone.

I smiled. “Can’t wait.”

I then told her about my encounter with the tattooed man.

“Wow. That’s the second sketchy thing that’s happened at that house this week!” she remarked.

Mandy was right. I thought back to that Saturday night. Mandy had called me just shy of midnight. She was trying to get her cat, Gary, to come back inside. That was when she noticed that the front door to the Manor (which was directly across the street from her house) was standing wide open, revealing the pitch-blackness inside. At her behest, I walked to the end of the street, still on the line with her, to check it out.

Silently, three young men dressed head to toe in black, each of them with long, black hair and beards, one of whom smoked a lit cigarette, emerged together from the house. I had backed up and hid myself in the shadows under the shelter of a tree at the edge of Mandy’s lawn. The three of them stepped forward and slunk around, looking all about as if playing lookout for some nefarious activity going on. They stepped into the pale light of the sliver of a moon, and I shivered.

I don’t know if they could see me, but it sure felt like it. They stared directly in my direction, the three of them, illuminated and looking like some sort of unholy Trinity visiting in the night, vaguely threatening in their posture, and looking right at me. Even as I recalled them, a shiver ran down my spine.

It was at that point when Mandy had announced she was calling the police and she hung up on me. When my phoneline went dead I turned and shuffled away walking as quickly yet carefully as I could to get back inside my house and safely away from the three strangers. The police arrived in two cars not ten minutes later.

I remember the beams of their flashlights cutting through the dust-filled inside of the house and how they glowed outward when they hit the glass panes, an odd, sweeping technicolor grayish-blue filtered through the glass frosted with cobwebs and neglect and dust particles dancing in the air. I remember my heart racing and wincing each time I saw the shadow of an officer pass by the window, just knowing that soon I would hear gunshots erupt from the old house. I don’t remember seeing anyone come out of the house, except the officers. I did not see anyone flee.

Apparently, the youths had simply vanished. The police searched the entire premises inside and out, bottom to top and over again, finding nothing and nobody there. So Sam, a friend of Mandy’s and mine on the force, had notified us later that night via webcam chat. He assured us they were just three local ne’er-do-wells, probably teenagers, and they had vacated the premises when they saw the police cars, most likely.

“You still there?” Mandy’s voice came to me through the phone, and my mind snapped back to the present.

“Yeah.” I said, continuing our conversation.

I had not seen Mandy since that Sunday, because as a nurse she had been called away to the hospital for duty for several long days, as many a young, single medical worker had been every so often, having been put on a rotating list, to aid in the ongoing fight to contain the outbreak. She told me horror stories of patients, doctors, and management struggling to maintain control of all their sick cases with depleted resources, all in a society whose grip on law and order was slipping a bit more each moment, and looting, gangs, robbery, and the virus were rampant.

Still, it was nice to talk to another human being, especially her, even if she did have mainly horrifying tales to talk about. It was good to have someone to talk to even if it was about the awful things going on. So many times I struggled with bad memories of the casualties the plague had caused in my life. First my mom, in her late fifties. Then unexpectedly a former high school teacher of mine with whom I was still friends, who was far too young to go. Finally, my niece, who had only been one-and-a-half years old, which utterly shocked and devastated my family. Their ghosts would come and haunt me in my weakest hours. When they had passed, we were still allowed to hold funerals, still allowed to come together as a family. Now, we no longer had that luxury. I was left to deal with their ghosts alone. The dark thoughts would often creep their way in and clutter my mind during this time of social isolation. It was good to hear Mandy's voice.

At length I bid her goodbye and hung up, then went back to work for a while. I watched the governor's last recorded live stream online, which played on the local news station daily at 2 o'clock as a somber memorial.

"Stay home. Please." he pled, feebly and pitifully, shaking in his tattered suit, his eyes darting all about and to the armed guards flanking him on both sides, as if he half expected the personification of anarchy itself to burst in at any time and take him. Someone off camera asked him where the usual suspects, the two State Doctors, were.

"It is with great grief and a heavy heart that I must announce Dr. Patel has succumbed to the virus and passed. Dr. Curio is being treated as we speak." the impotent politician stammered.

My screen went sideways, colored bars appeared, followed by some static, then a message of "buffering" accompanied by a spinning wheel, before the image of the governor returned.

"Please, please. Stay. Home."

I clicked the "x" in the top right-hand corner of the tab. I put on some music. The streaming services, if spotty, worked still at least. I patted my dog's warm, fuzzy head. She licked me. She was a constant and a comfort, even when music streaming was not.

After doing some more work, I went out on my back porch to watch the sunset. The dog sat beside me. The sun's waning light glanced off the windows of the abandoned Manor house at the end of the lane in shades of amber and red and orange. I saw no signs of a black pickup, tattooed man, three youths, or otherwise. Just the

silent deserted house, standing crookedly on its crumbling foundation, old, dark, and foreboding, like an ominous omen.

At sundown I returned inside and changed clothes, preparing for the street race that night.

I left my dog outside behind the electrified fence. The race route would bring me by the house, and she could see me and others of my friends she knew. She could frolic in the backyard in the meantime. When I passed by, I would wave, and she would wag. I got into my car and drove down the street to pick up Mandy, then on down the road to the rendezvous point for the race start on the other side of the neighborhood.

Part II: