

## “March the 33<sup>rd</sup>: A Quarantine Story”

by

T.D. Smith

### Part One

It was Thursday, March the 33<sup>rd</sup>.

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 imagine 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!

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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 phone line 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 Two**

The engines of all the cars lined up behind the white chalk start line in the middle of the street roared and rumbled, and their headlights all cut out into the pitch-black darkness of the new moon night. Then they abruptly cut off, one after another, the headlights blinked out, and the vehicles' occupants exited and began walking, stretching, and performing various other warm-up activities.

I had pulled up outside of Mandy's house and she had come down her front stairs, across her lawn and into my car to meet me. She had in fact put on her best dress, at least the best one for the evening's occasion. It was a black spandex running skirt with a matching black tank top. We were both suited up in running outfits, ready for the "underground" 5k we were about to partake in, in the dark of night. It was a 1.55-mile loop, around my neighborhood in Nazareth, VA twice.

We all congregated under the sodium yellow of the streetlight. Its gleam glossed off the top of Sam's shiny head, who stood tall and decked out in full police officer uniform, complete with badge, radio buttoned to his shoulder, and his holstered pistol. He was the officer overseeing the event tonight, as he had been instrumental in helping our running club get clearance to hold this race.

"Evening, Sam." I said, nodding my head to my friend.

"Hey guys, how are you doing?" responded Sam, sounding a bit congested.

"Just fine, ready to race!" Mandy said.

I wondered, worried for a moment if Sam was sick, but then reconsidered, recalling past conversations where Sam told me he has really bad allergies. He looked different tonight, a pale, positively peaked shade of green, his shaved head resembling a green olive. He snorted a few times, then wiped his neck with a tissue. In the pale light of the streetlamp, I thought I could just make out a slimy substance oozing from his neck, and a fine line running down the front of his throat I had never noticed on Sam's



person before, and it was then that I realized he had the collar of his police uniform pulled up higher on his neck than normal.

“Well, good luck you guys! Run fast!” Sam said, snorting again.

Mandy and I lined up behind the starting line, with the other 7 runners who would be competing with us at the same time. Her amber hair was tied back in a ponytail and swayed in the evening wind. Glancing over at me, the light of the streetlight gleamed against her hazel eyes. She smiled at me and I felt butterflies in my stomach that had nothing to do with the impending race.

It had been a struggle to get the race approved. The authorities had not wanted it at all. Some thought exercising outside given the pandemic was in poor taste. Others thought that banning most other activities for as long as they had been but now allowing ours would “send the wrong message” to the public. A few thought that given the state of things now, it could do no harm. In the end, after continually advocating for a race, Addie, the local running store owner and fitness guru, managed a compromise. If Sam, the avid running policeman would supervise and ensure that less than 10 people at a time completed the course in waves and stayed 6 feet apart from each other at all times, we could hold one race a month at night given that we were quiet, did not disturb the peace, and did so on the night of the new moon when it was darkest and would be least visible to a scared public.

Far from ideal but a chance to get out, connect, run competitively once more and have some fun, the race gave many of us purpose and something to look forward to. It kept us fit and healthy, both mentally and physically, and a reason to keep moving. A joke had arisen among our club that in the early 2000's illegal street racing involved tricked out automobiles and looked like a scene from one of the *Fast and Furious* films. Now, during the plague times, it looked like runners lacing up for a road race, tricked out in their highlighter-colored jerseys and modifying their apparel in nerdy runner ways.

While not illegal, our races were certainly clandestine, and I still missed the old times, when hundreds of us would come together, and on Fall evenings when the crisp cool wind blew and the sun set earlier, we would don our light-up gear when it got dark increasingly sooner so that we would be visible to drivers. The club was celebrated and heralded by the community then as a place where people of all ages, walks of life, and fitness levels could connect. Now we were rebels who wore black and convened to do our work in the night, shunned by the public and relegated to the confines of a much more restrictive corner on the darkest of nights.

Still, it was good to be together, if 6 feet apart, meeting as a club again, and racing. Tonight's race, whose location moved on a rotating schedule, was in my neighborhood, and I found myself excited, energized, and feeling a personal best in the works. I had measured out a “cross country” course that ran the circumference of my property, circling my house and finishing with a small loop in my backyard inside the fence. It measured nearly exactly a quarter of a mile. I had trained very hard for a month and mustered a decent 2-mile time trial time, which I submitted to the running store and had been able to use to place into the first wave of the road race that night, a fact I was quite proud of and eagerly awaiting.

While I much preferred the days of the past when Addie spoke into a megaphone to address the running group en masse from an elevated position, I would settle tonight for her speaking softly to us in a hushed tone, and standing tall and trim behind her running stroller, from which her two young children kicked and cooed. After playing a digital recording of the National Anthem at half-volume on her phone, Addie welcomed us and made some general announcements to the group.

“Hello and welcome to our monthly ‘Night Ninja Runner 5k,’ and Happy March the 33<sup>rd</sup>!” Addie said. “As you all know, it’s March the 33<sup>rd</sup>, or April 2<sup>nd</sup>, at least we think it is... thanks to the hackers who made tracking the days so difficult...”

And she was right. In the early days of the pandemic hackers all over the world had seized the opportunity and made a massive cyberattack on the poor working people who had moved their work online. One of the unintended consequences was that the capability of keeping calendars and specific dates and times had been all but wiped out for most computers for a little bit, before the bug was fixed. In the days, weeks, and months that had followed this event, with the escalation and aftermath of the pandemic the relevance of any given day’s date had diminished and scarcely anyone kept physical calendars anymore, only following the days of the week, living for each weekend, and having only a vague notion of what month and year it was.

“...but luckily, we still have the moon,” Addie continued, as my attention zoned back in. “Now, do we have anyone here tonight who is new to us?” she asked to the nine of us lined up and ready to race on the start line composed of white sidewalk chalk, and to the others standing spaced out or sitting in their cars with the windows rolled down.

That was when he stepped forward.

Out of the darkness and into the sodium yellow of the streetlamp stepped the tall, tattooed man clad in black whom I had seen earlier that day. I had not heard or noticed his pickup pull up, but there it was, its headlights off but engine running. He stood, tall, a nefarious smirk on his lips, and brooding, clad in his black t-shirt and jeans. He didn’t say a word, but just slid in under the streetlight, as if he had suddenly been born out of the very dark itself. Everyone there turned at once and looked at him.

“Oh. Hi.” Addie said, visibly taken aback by his sudden appearance.

The man nodded at her.

“What’s your name?”

“Dev.” the man with the tattooed scalp replied. Or at least, that’s what the grunt he let out sounded like.

“Well, welcome, Dev,” Addie responded, doing her best to maintain composure and calm in front of the group despite the creepiness of the character before us all, “why don’t you tell us something about yourself?”

The man opened his mouth then. He opened his mouth and I suppose for lack of better tools to describe what came out of it, one could say that he spoke, if one were strictly using metaphorical language. What he “said” was a collection of the most diabolical, cacophonous utterances that gave me the most ambiguous feeling as if they must have been in some ancient, long forgotten tongue belonging to a world, planet, or otherwise that long preexisted the formation of Earth itself, let alone the foundation of its fledgling civilizations built by us tiny ants.

I have no idea what it is exactly that he said.

And yet, he spoke directly to the deepest and darkest part of my very soul and I understood his message. If I had to roughly estimate a translation into a human language, I would say a very inadequate equivalent of his utterance, which defied the convention of all language, might be something like the following:

“I have come to take all of this. Your world is mine. Now that you feeble beings are weakened, distracted, and scattered, I am taking it. And I am starting tonight, right here, with this neighborhood.”

When the man closed his mouth, it was like someone hit play on reality, and life and its motions resumed after being momentarily halted in a frozen state. A shiver ran down my spine. Some people laughed at the man’s message, nervously. There was a pause that lasted a brief eternity, wherein every one of us looked around at each other, worriedly, and I caught Mandy’s eye, who looked flabbergasted.

“Um...okay, well then, thank you for that...” Addie continued. “Well, without further ado, let’s start this race!”

I glanced around. Dev had gone, vanishing again.

My worry immediately left me. The anticipation of the race took over once again, and my spirits lifted. I put in my earbuds and opened the race app on my phone, then replaced the device to its pocket on my running belt. I heard the electronic starting pistol’s shot go off in my ears when Addie tapped the start button on her phone, as did my fellow competitors, and off we went, running as fast as our feet could carry us into the dark.

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Down a long stretch of street, the shades drawn but dancing TV or living room lights glowing gently in the houses lining both sides of the road, around a corner and up a short hill and I was half a mile into the race. It was a cool and clear night. The wind blew softly, and the humidity was low. Perfect racing weather! The stars shown overhead brilliantly and seemed to loom as if at any second they may plunge out of the sky.

I was shocked to find myself in third place overall. I passed the mile point in 6:14, pleasantly surprising myself. I had just ventured back into the realm of competitive running and working out each day for the first time since my collegiate track career right

before the pandemic started and had done my best to continue on, improving and maintaining my fitness. I knew I was not ready to win this race, but seeing the back of the man in second, I knew that if I saved enough energy, paced myself, and made the right move at the right time in the race, I'd be able to get him. That would place me second and score a slew of points for me in the series.

Rounding another corner onto my street, I passed by my dog, sitting peacefully in the backyard, inside the hissing electric fence. She whined then gave a bark, jumping and wagging her tail furiously as I ran past my property. I blew her a kiss and smiled.

Down to the end of my street, across the main road, and running next to the green bank which was now a shade of dark gray in the night and I passed by the Manor. Out of the corner of my eye I caught an eerie green light shining out of its windows into the night, out of its very open front door. Anxiety with wings of fluttering moths churned in my stomach, and I sped up my pace. Sam would need to know about this.

I continued down the main road for another quarter mile then crossed and turned back into the neighborhood, the place where all our cars were parked by the start line already visible. I saw far ahead of me the leader's silhouette cross under the streetlamp, already entering his second and final loop of the racecourse. I drove myself forward faster, feeling strain in my muscles and my heart rate increasing, narrowing the gap between myself and second place as I grew nearer and nearer to the start line, where I would go into the final circuit of this 5k.

When I finally reached the start line, crossing it for the second time that night, I found something quite odd indeed: nobody was there. Usually Addie would be there swinging her large checkered flag and cheering us. She was nowhere to be found. Neither was Sam.

I crossed the start and went on into the second loop, and further picked up the pace to gain on the second-place guy ahead of me as I traversed the long stretch of residential road. I was nearly upon him, ready to make my move, when it happened: sirens blared, red and blue lights blazed, as two police cars pulled up ahead of me, right in the path of the runner in front of me, abruptly stopping his progress. I saw his arms flail as he stopped suddenly.

"Oh no," I thought, "what's happening? Has something changed? Are we getting shut down?"

I continued running toward the scene, my heart pounding and adrenaline rushing even more than it normally would during a race. Once I arrived, some few strides from the second-place runner, I froze in my tracks.

The police officers were out of their cars, standing facing us. They all had the same peaked, unnatural-green tone on their skin evident in the flickering light of a streetlamp that had just lit for the night.

“Sam?” I asked my friend the police officer.

He merely stood and grinned. It was not a friendly grin. Nor, I knew somehow, was it *him* grinning. He threw his head back without a warning, and the other two officers with him followed suit. I saw that each of them had the same odd line running down the length of their throats, that oozed with a sticky looking, sappy substance. A moment later, and those lines split wide open like slits. Slimy, slithering protuberances protruded from the men’s necks, at the end of which were something resembling the heads of Venus flytraps, but at least a yard long.

These otherworldly creatures, these body-snatchers, stood menacingly, and their plantlike tentacles wound up and around and all about their host bodies in police uniform, illuminated by the streetlamp during that darkest night.

Suddenly, one of them whipped a writhing green arm downward upon the second-place runner, the teeth of its Venus flytrap head sinking into his stomach. It lifted him up high into the air and shook him all around as he shrieked. I ran for my life then, hopping onto the hood of one of the police cars and sliding across its width on my bum before my feet hit pavement again and off I took, sprinting down the road.

As I ran, I heard screeches and screams all about. It seemed other runners were being attacked. Neighbors opened their curtains and looked out into the night or opened their doors and came out into their front lawns to see what was happening. Many of them were on their cellphones, doubtlessly chattering about the sudden commotion.

I had to get home. I had to get to my dog. I had to get inside. I would be safe behind the electrified fence. I kept running as fast as my feet could carry me. My chest was burning in protest and I huffed heavily. Sweat poured down my brow.

I saw Addie in the road up ahead with her stroller. She sucker-punched a green man in the throat when his spindly, vine-like arms wriggled their way towards her children, and he went down to the ground, twitching and gurgling, and spewing a sticky green fluid.

“Get to safety!” Addie cried when she saw me. “Race is off!”

I nodded in affirmation and continued running. I saw her run up the sidewalk leading to a neighbor’s house, and hoist her stroller inside taking shelter with the Good Samaritan who ushered her in.

I was about to turn the corner onto my house’s road, when I saw it: the first-place man, encircled by false police officers, being devoured, absolutely appallingly and carnivorously, by the Venus flytrap mouthed creatures. Fear beyond comprehension arose in me, wiping my mind of everything temporarily, including self-preservation, and the desire to run away.

I stood motionless, frozen in fear.

Then, a thought came to be from out of the void.

Mandy.

Where was Mandy? I hoped to God she had not been eaten by these strange, vile creatures, too. I pulled my phone out of my running belt and dialed her.

Nothing.

Just a busy signal. I hung up and tried again, tapping the little green phone icon beneath her saved contact info.

“We’re sorry, all circuits are busy. Please try your call again later.”

Blast it all! The neighbors were taking up what little signal there was gossiping, and I couldn’t reach her. I had nothing to do but to keep running home, keep moving forward, and hope and pray Mandy was okay.

Rounding the final corner to my street and from the opposite direction the two police vehicles screeched up and blocked my way some distance down the street yet from me. Sam, or whatever vile thing had taken over Sam, stepped out of the car and addressed me by name, then said,

“It’s time to drop out of this race.”

I turned and fled, going back around the corner, down the side of a neighbor’s house, through their backyard and across the main road, so that I was face to face with the Manor. What I saw horrified me, and I unconsciously stepped several paces back, until I stood just a few steps into the main road, with my back to my own house.

There, in the front lawn of the old, abandoned house whose windows now all shone brightly with green radiance, stood Dev, tall and mighty, wearing a crown of what looked to be poison Ivy on his head, a newly christened, grotesque dark King, a perverse Messiah, his hands outstretched toward me, beckoning to me welcomingly. Behind him stood the three young men I had seen the other night, clad in black, with long, dark hair and beards. The same vine-like appendages stretched and swirled about in the eerie green light, protruding from the men’s shoulder blades.

They had set up two Tiki torches, some ten feet apart, which burned and flickered, painting a hellish scene, as well as painted the word “FINISH” and a line with some sort of fluorescent substance that glowed with the same spectral green that emanated from within the Manor. Dev opened his mouth for the second time that night and made a vile, malevolent utterance that was addressed directly to me.

“Give up. It’s over. Come to me.” He seemed to say directly into my mind.

I looked at him and scowled defiantly. His eyes pierced into my heart of hearts from across the short distance between us. He saw down deep into my innermost, truest part of myself. And I think he saw that I would oppose him, resist him, fight him

with whatever energy, whatever resources I had, in whatever capacity I could, for the rest of however long a life I had. He gritted his teeth and growled, and I knew then that he knew he had to make sure I lived a short one.

“Never.” I said.

And I turned and ran.

150 yards. That is roughly the distance between the foot of the Manor’s front lawn and my backyard fence. 150 yards. As a competitive distance runner I have run the 400, the 800, the 1000, the mile, the 3200, the 2-mile, 3,000, 3,000 Steeplechase, the 5,000, the 10,000, multiple half marathons, and two marathons. 150 yards. That was it. I was only racing 150 yards from the Manor to my backyard now, and it was the longest 150 yards I had ever run, the hardest and fastest effort I had ever given or would ever give, and the most important race I had ever run, because now, tonight, I was running for my very life.

Behind me Dev and his three associates pursued me, hatred and bloodlust flaring in their eyes. Ahead of me the possessed Sam and his minions, running forward to intercept me from the opposite direction.

I kept my eyes on my finish line and nothing else. Nothing in the universe mattered more right now than my backyard behind its fortified fence, where my dog now stood wagging her precious tail and whining a concerned whimper, rooting for me to win.

WUMP!

“Ouch!”

Mandy landed on both feet with a thud in my backyard, Gary the cat in her arms. She was alive! My heart leapt for joy and it put more confidence in my stride. I heard Dev let out an annoyed grunt behind me as I quickened my pace. Evidently when things had gone South Mandy had run directly to her house, retrieved the cat, and made her way to my yard, having climbed a tree in the front yard that was quasi-near the fence, and leaping a considerable ways from a bough over the fence, making it my centimeters. She stood watching me approach, hopeful and worried.

“Are you okay?” I yelled.

“Yeah, but I might have sprained my ankle!” Mandy replied. “You?”

“We’ll see!”

I was nearly there. The energy and resolve I would have reserved to take 2<sup>nd</sup> in the race I now reallocated to getting to my property. I was well ahead of the police and other foes, who had converged into one group when I reached my driveway before they could. A couple of more strides and I would arrive at the fence.

But it was still electrified. Mandy could hit the switch, but then my adversaries would pursue me in. We wouldn't have enough time to gather the dog and get inside the locked back door.

The men's barrier in the collegiate Steeplechase stands 36 inches tall. In my college days, between drills, intervals on the track, and races, I had cleared a barrier of that height hundreds of times. My backyard fence stands approximately 50 inches tall, a good 14 inches higher. I was confident that I could jump the fence with the momentum I now had. I had no alternative but to. With my final three strides I bounded, then left the ground, making my final leap of faith to hurdle my fence.

I didn't make it.

My leading leg slid over the fence cleanly. Then my trailing knee collided with the fence's top bar, immediately electrifying my body. I toppled backward and onto the ground, doing a sort of somersault and flipping completely head over heels. I landed gracelessly with a thud on my driveway pavement so that my back was plastered against the metal fence.

I shook and convulsed as the current flowed through my body, and my mind elevated to an altogether different plane. Whether the things I experienced were while I was in the body or outside of it, I do not know. But I saw Dev and the three men coming for me still, with quickening steps.

Dev was no longer a man but a thing of fire, with enormous, spiraling goat-like horns and brightly burning red eyes. The dragon that had previously sat still and tattooed on his skin was alive, and squirmed and curled all around him, resting its snout atop of Dev's head. The black snake entwined itself around them both and hissed, coming through the back of Dev's head and out his mouth like his tongue. The green, vine-like appendages seemed to be everywhere and swayed and writhed, with Venus flytrap mouths everywhere and dripping slimy drool.

The three young men were tall, hooded and cloaked figures now, illumined only by the light of three spherical haloes that encompassed their heads, that glowed the ghostly green shade with a mixture of grayish blue, and had tube-like features jutting out from them at equal intervals.

As he reached me, Dev smiled triumphantly. His teeth were inexplicably both sharp and troubling, and simultaneously black and dark as that darkest of nights itself. He bent down and reached his arms out to grab me, and the dragon and snake both bore their fangs, ready to strike, to feast.

A sudden scream from somewhere, and then a ground-shaking howl. I heard the pattering of what could have been paws, bear claws, or even horse hooves beating the ground behind me. I glanced above me and I saw her: my beloved dog fell down from the stars upon my assailants, raining doom from above. She had leapt the fence to defend me, and *her* leap of faith had been successful.



She no longer looked her usual shades of amber and orange, nor was she her normal size. In my electrocuted state, she looked larger than life, and was a being of pure, white light. She fell on Dev first, who let out a genuinely dismayed scream, toppled backward, and sprawled on his back. My dog then shifted and moved to one of the young men. She grasped his long, cloaked arm in her jaws, and flung him into the fence. He exploded.

The dog's form twisted then and appeared to hover in the air. She was no longer a dog at all, and no longer made of white light but was now a shining orb of pure gold, from whom six enormous, strong wings jutted, and many eyes swirled about like a peacock's feathers. She took hold of another one of the youths, without any sort of perceptible limbs or mouth, she took hold of him, and she shook him. The youth cried out in pain and fear, struggling to release himself from her grip but was unable to. Finally, she let him go and he staggered back, gripping his wounded arm.

My dog's form changed one final time. Now she was a great lion, gleaming and golden. She opened her mouth and let out a luminous streak of white light that erupted out and hit the final of the three youths, who stumbled backward, putting a hand to his solar plexus like he had just had the wind punched out of him.

Dev rose then. The lion-dog raised her head and roared furiously, releasing a spray of light. The dragon turned its head. The snake closed its beady eyes. Dev held up a hand and scampered backward, finding it hard to get his balance as the earth shuddered. He looked down at the smoldering ashes of his fallen comrade, then over at his remaining companions. Then, together, the three evil ones turned and fled. I watched them as they ran back down the 150-yard race stretch, entered the Manor, and slammed the door.

After that, my vision began to return to normal. My dog was a dog again. I was vaguely aware of a burning scent but was not yet aware that it was my own flesh. Mandy had shut off the electric current and was bending to stoop over me now. I heard a loud, shrill drone accompanied by red and blue lights, and when I realized what it was, wondered who the ambulance was for. My dog stood concernedly and protectively by me, her eyes remaining on the Manor.

I glanced over and saw Sam puke a copious amount of green, vile-looking, slimy fluid onto the pavement, and the vines protruding from him and his colleagues withered. Then I closed my eyes, and everything was darkness, as if the night had swallowed me and I was part of it, or maybe even had become it.

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I sat up screaming, gasping for air and clutching my chest, which hurt.

Mandy jumped to her feet, narrowly avoiding having her nose broken by my skull. She had been kneeling over me doing chest compressions. CPR had worked. The ambulance was still there, its flashing lights reflecting off the windows and walls of my

neighbors' homes, who were all outside and had convened around me, having witnessed the entire thing. They were holding shovels and rakes and hoes, and evidently had been intent upon aiding my dog in her fight against Dev and company. They had seen a different spectacle than I had: a dog making an impressive leap over an electric fence and sinking her fangs into various foes at the very moment they set upon me. The men had retreated into the Manor, but one was put into the ambulance. The others had somehow managed to lock the door to the house.

After recovering his wits, and remarking he had no recall of anything after Saturday night until now, Sam, who was now free from whatever otherworldly possession had beset he and his fellow police officers, and whose skin was no longer green, and neck had returned to normal, investigated the Manor. Upon his return, he announced they could not see through the darkness within and did not see anyone inside upon shining flashlights through the windows. The door was locked with what seemed to be an unearthly power, and no amount of twisting or turning the knob, or ramming the door would open it.

After a while and many mandatory medical checks and treatment for burns performed by the medical crew, Mandy and I both limped inside my house with my dog and the cat. My concerned neighbors went back to following the rules of the quarantine and spaced out, then returned inside their homes. I took one more look at the scene before I closed my back door. Elderly Dolores was the only neighbor who remained. She smiled at me, the first I'd ever received from her, and nodded her head, before casually trodding back over to her house.

Several weeks have passed since the incident. Everything has returned to "quarantine as usual." The plague is still going on, and has not yet hit its peak, though it is projected to in the coming weeks. We are still under mandatory domestic isolation. Yet, my once suspicious and separated neighborhood is now united and friendly. We keep watch together on the old Manor, looking for signs of the evil that lies within, and notify each other via a group chat and video call group.

I have not seen Dev outside again, yet, though his black pickup shows up all over town now and then, always running, then inexplicably vanishing, without its driver ever showing himself. I wonder what he is up to in that old house. What plan he is in there scheming up. We are making our own plan. In a couple months, once the quarantine lifts, we the people of my neighborhood in Nazareth, VA, have a collective plan to publicly doze the Manor and put its nonsense to rest for good. We will see then what manner of evil we are greeted with. Whatever it is, we will face it together and make our final stand.

And that is how we will make it through the quarantine, together, if separated, distanced. Videoing one another, texting, calling, emailing via electronics, gathering in small groups, and taking care of one another. We still run. I run the races with the

underground club, which has grown in popularity since the event. I *always* bring the dog along now.

Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of Dev in a window or glancing out the front door of the old abandoned house at the end of the street. Sometimes he is a man with a shaved head and tattoos of a dragon and snake running down his scalp and face standing in an old house. Other times I see a flash of fire, fang, horn and green, if in the corner of my eye, for a fleeting moment. The first couple of times I had a sighting he would duck and hide when he saw me and the dog. Now he does not, but stares us down, grimacing for a moment before he disappears and we pass by, either walking or running.

He grows bolder by the day and bides his time.

For my part, I will stay here. I will stay in, only leaving when I need to, and to exercise. Mandy, the cat, the dog, and I are doing well together. We work from home either at my house or hers. We are doing our part to stop the virus spreading, and to prepare, together with the community, if apart, for our eventual stand against Dev. I hope you will join us in the fight, staying at home, yet being united as one against him, and against the plague.

We can defeat him and whatever else he may concoct, whatever else he may throw our way next. And we will survive this outbreak and live to fight for those who have succumbed to it.

We can do this. It is not his neighborhood, not his town, his country. It is not his world, yet.

**THE END.**