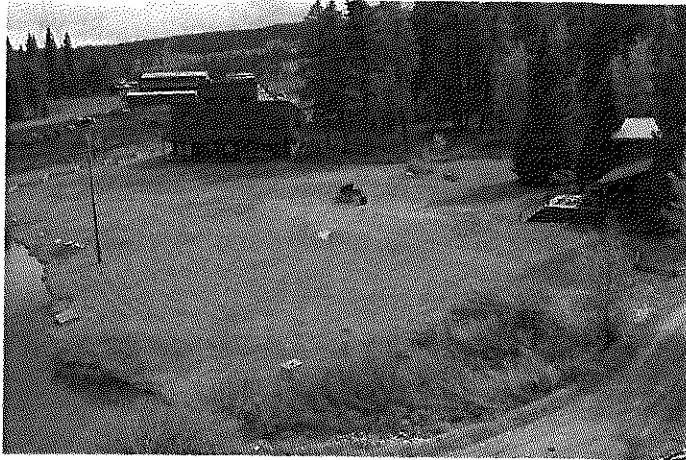


The Run



Dennis and Mac had been driving for almost a week, and they hadn't seen anyone. They were worried. When they'd left the ranch, they'd thought maybe they'd run into someone, another survivor. But there was no one. The roads were almost empty. Once in a while they would see an empty car, but that was it. They drove mostly on highways so that they could go fast. Mac wondered if they would have better luck on the smaller country roads. But Dennis didn't want to try. Those roads had curves and lots of trees. There was no way of seeing danger coming. If someone wanted to surprise you, you wouldn't know it until it was too late.

When the plague came, Dennis and Mac had been working on a ranch where cows were raised. Both had just finished their first year of college. They went to college in different parts of the country, but they were very similar people. They both studied a lot and read many books. They also both liked being outdoors. At the end of a good day, they smelled like sweat and dirt when they came home. They quickly became friends.

The ranch was small, with only about 50 cows. It was run by a family called the Greersons. In the spring, the family would put ads in college newspapers asking for help on the ranch. There were lots of people near the ranch who needed work, but Mr. Greerson wanted young men from cities. He thought they could benefit from an exposure to country life. Students would apply, and then the Greersons would choose about six of them every spring to help take care of the cows. It was tough work, but Dennis and Mac felt lucky to be picked.

The ranch didn't have a TV or the Internet or a phone. As a result, the first they heard of the plague was on the radio. Every night, the ranch workers liked to gather in the dining hall and play cards. While they played, they listened to the radio. The ranch was so far up in the hills that the radio only got one station. At night they listened to the station's best DJ, who called himself "The Muskrat." "The Muskrat" played country music and sometimes told stories in between songs. Dennis and Mac thought he was really funny.

One night, though, The Muskrat's radio show was different. It couldn't have been more than six months ago, but to Dennis and Mac, thinking back on it now, it seemed like another lifetime. The Muskrat had been playing a happy song, but all of a sudden the music stopped. The ranch workers stopped their card game, too. They turned and looked at the radio. The Muskrat always played a song all the way through. What could be wrong?

"Folks," said The Muskrat. "I don't know how to tell you this, but I'm going to ask you to stay very calm. The manager of my station has just passed me a note. It seems that the local health authorities are asking us radio folks to tell you, our listeners, that... well, a disease is spreading."

The ranch workers put down their cards. Dennis and Mac gave each other a look.

"Now, they don't quite know what this disease is, but it's real bad," The Muskrat said. His voice sounded shaky. "It's very easy to catch, and people who get it don't have a lot of luck recovering. Doctors are trying to figure out a cure, but they haven't yet. So, for now, we're asking that you stay in your homes as much as possible and avoid public places until the disease dies down."

One of the ranch workers, a young man named T.J., laughed. "Like heck I'm not going into town," T.J. said. "I got a date." The other ranch workers stared at him. T.J. stopped laughing.

"Please, folks, do what the doctors say," The Muskrat said. "I'm sure it'll just be for a few days." He was quiet for a moment. Then a new song came on.

That was the beginning of it. For the next few days, people on the ranch went about their business. The Greersons told the boys not to worry. They said that this would all be over soon. There was enough food on the ranch to last for months. In the meantime, there were plenty of new calves that needed to be taken care of. At night, everyone gathered around the radio to listen for more information. The news was bad. More and more people were getting sick. The symptoms of the plague were strange. People would become very ill and then fall into a deep sleep. Big cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago had become like ghost towns. No one would go out into the street because they were afraid of getting the disease.

The news kept getting worse. Finally, the radio station stopped transmitting. It announced no more news, and it played no more music. The Greersons called a meeting in the main house. Everyone sat around the big table where Mrs. Greerson served dinner on Sundays. Then Mr. Greerson stood up. He was a short, fat man with a mustache. You wouldn't think he had a loud voice from the way he looked, but he did.

"Now," he said, "I know you're worried about your families. I don't feel right making you stay here while you don't know what's become of them. So, anyone who wants to leave is free to go. Mrs. Greerson and I will make do."

Dennis and Mac looked at each other. They'd talked about leaving but had tried to pretend they wouldn't need to. They had hoped the plague would be over soon, that the world would return to the way it was. They had hoped that what was happening would turn out to be a bad dream. Now that they had been given the choice of going back to the rest of the world and seeing how bad things really were, they weren't sure they wanted to know.

"How many of you want to leave?" Mr. Greerson asked. "Raise your hand if you want to go."

Mac and Dennis looked around. They were the only two with their hands up.

The Greersons gave them enough food to last a couple weeks. Mac and Dennis packed up

their things and put them into Mac's truck. The Greersons and the ranch workers gathered around to say goodbye.

"Be safe, boys," said Mrs. Greerson. She kissed them each on the cheeks and hugged them hard. "And remember your manners." As Mac and Dennis drove away, they saw her husband holding her. She was crying so hard that her body shook.

A week later, Mac and Dennis had driven through many small towns and a few larger ones. What they found scared them. Every place was empty. Not a person was out. Sometimes, they would stop and knock on doors. No one would answer. If they went inside, they wouldn't find anybody home. Sometimes they'd find the dinner table set, plates piled high with moldy food. Every time they entered a new room, they were afraid of finding a dead body there. But they never did. It was strange and frightening.

Sometimes, if the place they went into still had electricity, they'd try to use the phone. Every time, no matter what number they called, the same thing happened. A recorded message came on and said, "The number is not in service. Please check the number and try again."

Finally, the young men decided to go to the nearest big city. It would be a full day of driving, but there had to be someone there. You can't abandon a whole city.

Evening had come, and Mac was driving. Dennis was taking a nap in the seat next to him. They were passing by a long, flat field when Mac saw movement in the distance. He stopped the car, turned off the engine, and shook Dennis awake.

"Look," Mac said excitedly. "I think someone's coming."

Dennis squinted his eyes. The movement was becoming larger. What had been a dot of motion became a long line, stretching across the horizon. Mac and Dennis strained to see.

“I think it’s some people,” said Dennis. “Let me get my binoculars.”

He searched through his backpack and pulled them out. Dennis put the binoculars to his eyes and looked through them. Mac heard him gasp.

“My gosh,” whispered Dennis.

What he saw was people. Thousands of people. Hundreds of thousands, maybe a million. A swarm of people like the world had never seen. And the people were all running. They were running as fast as they could go, like something was chasing them, or like they were chasing something. As they came closer, Dennis could see the people’s faces. Their eyes were wild.

“Start the car,” said Dennis.

