

“The Run” (Run Series, Issue #1)

Dennis and Mac had been driving for almost a week, and they hadn't seen a single soul. 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. There was the occasional abandoned car, but that was it. They drove mostly on highways, to make better time. Mac wondered if they might not have better luck on the smaller country roads, but Dennis wouldn't have it. Those roads had curves and were thick with trees. There was no way of seeing danger coming. If someone wanted to spring a surprise on you, you wouldn't know it until it was too late.

When the **plague** came, Dennis and Mac had been working as ranch hands on a cattle farm. Both had just finished their first year of college. Dennis went to school on the East Coast, Mac on the West. They found that they were very similar people. They both studied hard and read a lot of books. But they also both liked being outdoors. At the end of a good day, they came home smelling of sweat and dirt. They quickly became friends.

The ranch was a small, family-run operation, with only about 50 head of cattle. The family that ran it, the Greersons, would advertise in college newspapers in the spring. There were plenty of ranch hands in the area who needed work, but Bucky Greerson felt city kids could benefit from an **exposure** to country life. Young men would apply, and then the Greersons would hire about a half-dozen hands every spring to help them run cattle. It was tough work, but Dennis and Mac felt lucky to be picked.

The farm didn't have a TV or the Internet or a telephone. As a result, the first they heard of the **plague** was on the radio. Every night, the ranch hands liked to gather in the mess 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, Petey “The Muskrat” Coltrain, who spun old bluegrass records. Sometimes, between records, The Muskrat told stories. Dennis and Mac thought he was hilarious.

One night, though, The Muskrat's radio show was very different. It couldn't have been more than six months ago, but to Dennis and Mac, thinking back on it now, it felt like another lifetime. The Muskrat had been playing a cheery Bill Monroe song, "Footprints in the Snow," when he cut out the record halfway through the chorus. The ranch hands stopped their game of Gin Rummy. They turned and looked at the radio. The Muskrat always played a record 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 hands put down their cards. Dennis and Mac exchanged a glance.

"Now," The Muskrat said, his rich voice sounding uncharacteristically shaky, "they don't quite know what this disease is, but it's real bad. It's very contagious, and people who get it don't have a lot of luck recovering. Now, doctors are trying to figure out a cure, but there's been no luck yet. So, in the meantime, 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 hands, a big, cocky boy named T.J., laughed. "Like heck I'm not going into town," T.J. chuckled. "I got a date." The other ranch hands stared at him. T.J. stopped laughing.

"Please, folks, do what the doctors say," The Muskrat pleaded. "I'm sure it'll just be for a few days." He was quiet for a moment. Then the ranch hands heard the sound of a turntable needle hitting the record, and an old Earl Scruggs song came on.

That was the beginning of it. For the next few days, the ranch went about its business. The Greersons told the boys not to worry, that this would all be over soon. They had enough food on the ranch to last months. In the meantime, there were plenty of new calves that needed branding. At night, everyone gathered around the radio and listened to updates. The news seemed only to get worse. More and more people were getting sick. The symptoms were strange. People would become violently ill, then fall

into a long, deep sleep. The big cities — New York, Los Angeles, Chicago — had become like ghost towns. No one would go out into the street for fear of catching the disease.

The news kept getting worse until, finally, the radio station stopped **transmitting**. The Greersons called a meeting in the dining room of the main house. Everyone sat around the big dining room table where Ann Greerson served Sunday supper. After everyone was seated, Bucky Greerson stood up. He was a short, plump man with a droopy handlebar mustache. You wouldn't think it looking at him, but his voice boomed.

"Now," he said, "I know you're worried about your families, and I don't feel right chaining you here while you don't know what's become of your people. So, anyone who wants to leave is free to go. Ann 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, that it had all been a strange hallucination. Now that they had the option to venture out into the world, to see how bad things really were, they weren't sure they wanted to know.

"By a show of hands," Bucky Greerson asked, "how many of you want to leave?"

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 — corn bread and apples and cured ham and syrupy peaches in mason jars. Mac and Dennis packed up their things and loaded everything into Mac's truck, a sputtering old pickup. The Greersons and the ranch hands gathered around to see them off.

"Be safe, boys," said Ann Greerson, kissing them each on the cheeks and hugging them hard. "And remember your manners." As Mac and Dennis pulled away, they saw her husband holding her, her body shaking with sobs.

A week later, Mac and Dennis had zigzagged through dozens of small towns and a few larger cities. What they found frightened 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 a single soul home. Sometimes they'd find the dinner table set, plates piled high with molding food. Every time they entered a new room, they both winced, thinking they'd find a dead body. But they never did. It was indescribably eerie.

Sometimes, if the place still got electricity, they'd try to use the phone. Every time, no matter what number they dialed, the same recorded message came on: "The number is not in service. Please check the number and try again."

Finally, the young men decided to make tracks 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.

Dusk had come, and Mac was at the wheel. Dennis had been driving for the last eight hours and was taking a nap in the passenger seat. They were passing through a long, flat piece of pastureland when Mac saw a flicker of 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 flicker of 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 rustled in his backpack and pulled out his pair. Dennis put them 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 grew closer, Dennis could just make out the people's faces. Their eyes were wild.

"Start the car," said Dennis.

Ed. : *The tale continues in Part 2, "Refueling."*