

Surviving
by Neale Morison
neale@nealemorison.com
Phone: +61 417 661 427, 0417 661 427
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“Tessa here. Can I call you back?”

“Tessa? It's me.”

“Sorry, who?”

“It's David. Don't hang up!”

“David? Oh, God.”

“Don't hang up!”

“I'm not going to hang up. I was going to call you. Look, David, about the jug of water, I'm sorry. That was a terrible thing to do. It wasn't me. I'm not like that. But I really don't think we should see each other again.”

“Forget the water. It doesn't matter. I thought it was quite funny.”

“You thought it was funny?”

“Well. After a while. After I dried out.”

“That would have taken a while.”

“The waiter was quite helpful. He brought me some towels. I don't usually tip, but I made an exception.”

“I should hope so. You assaulted him.”

“I touched his arm. I couldn't get his attention any other way. We needed more drinks.”

“You're lucky he didn't have you arrested.”

“Something like that usually happens when I go out.”

“You get arrested?”

“No, but a jug of water or something. I don't get out much. Anyway, look. There's something I didn't tell you. Something important.”

“You talked without a break for two solid hours and you left something out? I hope this isn't anything about reproductive compatibility.”

“No. Well...no, not really.”

“Because if you say one more word about that, I'm hanging up.”

“No, it's not about that. Can I...”

“All right. But I can't talk long.”

“Your voice lacks resonance. Are your passages occluded?”

“I have a cold.”

“Sorry to hear that. You catch colds a lot, don't you?”

“Did you read that in my genome? Whatever's going around, I get it. I should probably hibernate all winter.”

“It's funny you should say that.”

“Are you going to tell me I have grizzly bear genes?”

“No, of course not. Well, we're not that different. But we're much closer to chimpanzees. The genomes are ninety six percent identical. Bears are closer to dogs.”

“So, why is it funny?”

“Because it's what I was going to suggest. Hibernation. More or less.”

“Not following you, David.”

“Have you ever wondered how the world will end?”

“Oh, global warming, I suppose. Or a meteor impact.”

“In 1918 the Spanish Influenza killed somewhere between 20 and 100 million people. More than twice the soldiers that died in the First World War. Even if you factor in the civilian war casualties, the flu killed more.”

“Yes, I've heard about it.”

“It wasn't Spanish, of course. That's a misnomer. It may have come from China originally. There were a lot of early deaths in Spain. In the end it killed more than the Black Death in the Middle Ages.”

“Are you just free associating because I have a cold? Because I'd rather not think about this.”

“We reconstructed it using tissue from the body of a dead soldier. We sequenced it.”

“Oh my God! And now it's escaped!”

“No, of course not. Every possible precaution is taken. Oh, you're joking. In any case, it will be a new mutation that causes the next flu pandemic. Probably something that bridges the gap between some animal population and humans. Birds, bats, pigs. Between pigs and humans there's an extensive conserved homology. Around 2.5 Gigabytes of DNA, same as us. It's really very dangerous to cohabit with them. The Jews are right about that one.”

“Please don't say anything anti-Semitic. Because I will hang up.”

“Wasn't that pro-Semitic?”

“I mean it.”

“It paralyzes thought. It's ridiculous. People construct cultural distinctions and fight over them. Because there really are no racial distinctions worth mentioning. That much we do know. A few medical issues. Trends. Lactose intolerance and so on. It's not a simple branching tree. We can all interbreed. One species. There are links all through the branches, more like a tree full of creepers. Race is meaningless.”

“I'm glad you think so.”

“Do you know what I'd love?”

“No.”

“The Neanderthal genome.”

“Are you sure you haven't already got it?”

“Neanderthals were still around only 30,000 years ago. There's DNA around. There were studies of mitochondrial DNA last century. We have about five percent of the Neanderthal genome. We reconstructed the whole cave bear genome finally. Which the Neanderthal apparently worshiped. You sequence a similar one first, the dog in this case, and then you can reconstruct the other one by comparison, matching them up. Why not the Neanderthal? We'll get there. I want to know how different we really are.”

“What would that tell you?”

“They're extinct. Unless you count Big Foot, the Yeti, the Almas. Which I don't. Cryptozoology. We're not extinct. What's the difference? Luck? Brains? Did we kill them all? We couldn't have beaten them in a hand-to-hand. They were all muscle. Did we interbreed? Did they catch a virus that didn't affect us? Are we just not extinct yet?”

“David, why did you call me?”

“Well, don't worry, it wasn't just to hear the sound of your voice.”

“That's reassuring.”

“Not that there's anything wrong with it. Other than the cold. It's very nice.”

“I don't know when you get a chance to hear it. You never stop talking.”

“It's nervousness. Anxiety. I don't know what to say so I keep talking. I'm always like this if I'm attracted to someone.”

“I think I'd better go now, David. And maybe we should make this the last time.”

“Don't hang up! What I am about to tell you could save your life. You're at risk.”

“From what?”

“It's going to happen, Tessa. The epidemic. Viruses are mutating faster than we can create vaccines. People are crowding closer together and traveling further and faster than ever. Intensive farming in developing countries is exposing humans to sick animals more than ever before. It's going to happen. And when it comes it will make the Spanish influenza look tame. There'll be no defense.”

“But there are defenses. People are treated. They recover. All the epidemics flare up and fizz out.”

“The people with access to drugs are treated. The wealthy are treated. The poor die, and before they die they spread the disease. The wealthy try to keep them out, but they can't do it forever. The epidemics are getting worse. The best part of a hundred thousand in 2011, two hundred and thirty thousand in 2013.”

“Was it that many?”

“It happens in Africa and Asia, places where the authorities can suppress it or we can under-report it, ignore it. But it's real.”

“So what's your suggestion?”

“Survival. That's what we're here for. We have to survive. Whatever it takes. And sometimes the best way to fight is to run.”

“All right. Run where?”

“The strategies, the guides, the World Health Organization bulletins, it all amounts to the same thing. Avoid contact. Don't kiss. Don't touch. Stay three feet away. Avoid crowds. Face masks. Stay indoors. But preparation, long term strategy, they don't talk about that until it's too late. Have a couple of weeks of tinned food in the cupboard. It's hopeless. The Black Plague lasted four years.”

“But where could you go for four years? Wherever you went there'd be other people trying to escape. And they could have it. The plague.”

“I believe in preparation, Tessa. If you know something's going to happen, you prepare.”

“And you're prepared.”

“A few years back I bought a missile base.”

“Ebay?”

“Well, I did find it online.”

“A missile base.”

“It's an Atlas F site. Built in 1961. Eighteen million 1961 dollars. A real fixer upper.”

“You're going to nuke the flu?”

“Well, no. Of course not. There's no missile.”

“It must have cost millions!”

“No, it was a bargain. The launch tube was filled with water when I got it. It was under two hundred.”

“You are shitting me!”

“Twenty acres. And the launch control center was never flooded. The security doors were still there. They can withstand a two thousand pound blast. One ton of TNT. They used to measure the warheads in megatons. The biggest they made was fifty. Alfred Nobel's brother blew himself up trying to invent TNT.”

“The Nobel prize guy. Didn't he invent dynamite?”

“And gelignite.”

“You actually own a missile base.”

“Well, the bank owns it. You know. But I'm paying it off pretty comfortably right now. The government database research is paying well. I got the longest term mortgage I could find. When they were giving loans to anybody.”

“Even you.”

“Even me.”

“Isn't it cheaper to pay it off earlier?”

“Not if civilization ends ten years into the loan.”

“True. So is this thing livable?”

“It's got a lot going for it. Constant temperature. A little cool, just under sixty degrees. Lots of space. Thousands of square feet. And it has huge vents for air circulation. They built it to survive an attack. Nuclear or biochemical. It has a runway.”

“Do you have a plane?”

“No. But if I did have a plane, I'd have somewhere to land it. But a plane is pretty low on the list. I need some floors first.”

“No floors?”

“Not in the silo. You could fit nine floors in there, but it was empty. I got the water pumped out finally. It's amazing. It all hangs off giant springs. Shock absorbers. So when they nuke it it won't break. People have stopped worrying about nuclear attack but they shouldn't. People are anxious about the fashionable thing. What someone is selling them. Terrorism. Global warming. If you're going to be afraid of something, it might as well be something real.”

“You don't believe in global warming?”

“I don't believe we can do anything about it. Well, we can make ourselves feel good. But there are vast methane deposits under the arctic ice. When it melts, nothing we do to limit a little industrial carbon will make any difference. It's going to melt and then forget greenhouse, we have hothouse. But I can stay a little under sixty degrees.”

“In your holiday home.”

“Every month I take a few days off and go down there. And I always take some more supplies. When I see a bargain in bulk tinned goods. Anything that doesn't deteriorate. Although I probably have too much asparagus. I don't even like asparagus. I've got enough supplies down there now to last for ten years.”

“Only ten?”

“You're right, it would be better to have much longer. But every year the world lasts I can add a few more years of supplies. I've got air filtration. I'm trying out some ultraviolet air purifiers. They were a good idea but the market swung the other way. Betamax all over again. Now there's lots of them going cheap.”

“Have you got cable?”

“I've got a lot of bandwidth. Satellite, wireless, cable. Radio. A lot of storage, too. About a petabyte now. At first I thought I'd back up the Internet, but that's just not practical. I'm just hoping key archives survive. I'm experimenting with recycling fluids.”

“Fluids?”

“It's going pretty well. It's not perfect. The water's safe to drink, it's sterile. Helps if you add flavoring.”

“It's a shame you've put so much work into it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, come on, David, it's a target. You'll be the first to go.”

“A target?”

“Think about it. Back in the 60s, the height of the Cold War, how many missiles in the Soviet Union were programmed for your missile silo? And in all the chaos over there, can you be sure there are none left, still pointing at you, after all these years?”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

“Over here, they decommission the base, put it on the market, years later you buy it. But over there, who knows what's happening? Along with the organized crime, the old KGB still has a lot of power. The military is still strong. Who knows what they're hiding up their sleeve?”

“That doesn't make any sense, Tessa. It costs money to maintain missiles. If there was any excuse to pull them apart and sell them for scrap they will have done it. And everybody knows these bases were shut down.”

“But put yourself in their place, David. They're told bases are being shut down. But they know that is exactly what we'd tell them if we were trying to fool them. In their dark, vodka sodden, paranoid Russian hearts they suspect everyone and everything. This is the KGB we're talking about. A culture of lies and terror. Misinformation is their milieu. If we publish the news that the base is gone, they're even more likely to target it. And they miss the old days. They want it to be like it was. It's nostalgia as much as anything else. When push comes to shove, when the epidemic or the flood or the meteor hits, in the great final panic they'll push that button for sure.”

“But Tessa, it was an Atlas F silo. The last Atlas F launched in 1995. Back in the last century. Vodka or not, they have engineers who can tell them it's impossible.”

“We're still flying B52s.”

“You're joking. Why is it so hard to tell with you?”

“I've never been more serious in my life. You'd better start eating that asparagus now, or it will all go to waste.”

“You should be taking this seriously, Tessa. This could be your one chance to survive. To be one of the few who make it through, to found a new society. Your children could be the future.”

“My children.”

“Well, our children.”

“The IVF babies you were talking about just before I tipped the water over you.”

“Well, I don't know if we could manage IVF if we were alone in a missile silo.”

“Goodbye, David.”

“Don't hang up! Tessa? Tessa!”