

LIKE UBER, BUT FOR MONSTERS

by Greg Stolze

Pete runs through the fields. He's exhausted, he has a stitch in his side, but he runs, he has to run, he will run until he can't hear them any more. As he flees, legs wooden, he thinks. Pete is a thinker, he can't stop, the logic-spigot in his brain is jammed in the on position even when feelings might be a more appropriate response to a situation. Or, like this one, when pure panicky instinct is probably best.

He hears them crashing through the crops behind him, even more clumsy than him, probably more exhausted but driven on, impelled to pursue. The fever is in them, they are no longer free. That's what the news said, before there was no more news.

His breath comes in gasps, and finally he stops. He calculates that catching his breath will, in the long term, average out to faster speeds and more distance between him and them. Assuming he can start again once he stops.

Pete hunches over, hands on knees, staring down at those thick corn roots, and he pants. They're short huffs. He'd like to take a deep breath and hold it and get some damn oxygen, but his body won't keep it in. He is hostage to his flesh and can no longer do anything but follow as it hyperventilates, trembles and sweats.

He listens, striving to hear over his wheezing exhales, over the throb of racing blood in his own ears. He listens for the crackles of husks under their feet, the swish of stalks being shoved aside, or their footsteps thudding on the dirt between rows. When he hears one of those, he decides, he'll rise and run again. If he hears their teeth, that will be too late.

###

Steve is tearing through the corn too, but unlike Pete he's not thinking logically. He was always the emotional one, which made them good for one another. Steve helped Pete be less uptight, less over-analytical—less “the assassin of your own happiness,” a phrase Steve had particularly liked. Steve worked a job in a framing shop but wrote poetry, or he did before the Unclean ruined everything.

Most people think it's another sickness, some mutated virus blitzkrieging the world courtesy of rich countries' insatiable appetite for products made in nations without labor protection. Or else something let loose from a biowarfare lab, perhaps maliciously, or due to some government's incalculable carelessness. As if some military with more money than sense said, “What we'd like is your basic nuclear apocalypse, only not *nearly* so quick. We want mass death, and horrendous physical suffering, and the disintegration of civilization into a broth of horror and desperation. Oh, and if it was contagious that would be, mm, just the cherry on top of the sundae.”

Steve thinks it's demons though, to the extent that he's thinking about anything. He's seen that owl statue in the Bohemian Grove. Pictures, anyway. Sinister as fuck.

So many people, from so many religions, called out for the smiting of the unbelievers. They wanted it so bad they were, maybe, secretly willing to suffer and die themselves as long as those infidels/rich pricks/intellectual elites/foreigners/fascists fell alongside them. Apparently some deity finally got the message and smote the Earth. Woe unto humanity!

Pete said it was an illness and that all illnesses develop into less-deadly strains because evolutionary pressures favor mutations that don't kill the host and create a longer cycle of viral spread, or something. That was no comfort when the Unclean started popping up right there in Iowa City.

At first, it just seemed like a cold, or the flu. People got runny noses. No big deal—Steve and Pete were both sniffing and hitting the Mentholatum, it was fall in the Midwest, everyone had that symptom. Then some stomach stuff—loose stools, which no sensible person wants to talk or hear about, but manageable. Frequent urination. Cold sweats. It was contagious by liquid droplet, and the infected were sweaty and drippy, so it moved pretty fast through the population, despite everyone busting out the masks they still had left over from the Covid pandemic.

It resembled a nasty flu until it hit late stage, where the symptoms were: Chattering teeth, incessant weeping, uncontrollable bowel and bladder voiding, and homicidal mania. The Unclean should have been dehydrated and weak, wiped out by days of shitting themselves empty and crying salty waterfalls, but something in their brains went into overdrive and they chased, they bit, they sucked blood and clawed the healthy. You could smell them coming from the reek of soiled pants, you could see where they'd been from the trail of black piss.

Pete and Steve shared a place outside of town, where the nice Midwestern college city gave way to farms, some soy but mostly corn, corn, corn. It was a great house! Getting several semi-feral cats had taken care of the mouse problem (mostly) and it was only a half-hour drive from the shops, bookstores and venues that served the University of Iowa's clientele, not to mention Iowa City's one and only gay bar. It was a nice compromise between a long commute to their jobs and having to hear frat boys barf and shout all night. When the Unclean started rampaging through the town—isolated incidents one day, widespread panic the next, and the failure of news media on the third—they hoped they could hole up and be safe.

Nope.

###

Pete gets his breathing under control and wonders if there's a way to run silently. Probably not, not on dried leaves. The crops are unharvested and the ground is thick with crackling debris. Running too close to any of the many plants is a noise hazard, it sounds like shaking a vegetable rattle. He could creep along slowly, perhaps, but would that get him away?

Slowly, cautiously, Pete rises up on his tiptoes and peers into the night, like a prairie dog peeking out of its hole. He sees disturbances, plants swaying without the wind as the stinking pursuers make their way, slower, aimlessly. That has to be good, right? Clearly, they lost track of him.

They'd smashed their way straight into the house in the back of a minivan. Pete watched some zombie movies, he saw the running ones and the stumbling ones but he never saw any that could drive a Ford Windstar. Was someone dropping them off? Delivering bloodthirsty freaks to outlying residences? "Like Uber, but for monsters"? Who the hell would do that? Why? Had Steve maybe been right? Was this the culmination of some cultish plot to destroy the world during sweeps week?

Pete and Steve had been on the sofa, watching an early 2000s sitcom on the big screen. It wasn't a good one—they honestly didn't want anything that would demand even the slightest effort from them. They held hands, and Steven started to cry a little, and then they heard the engine roar. They'd barely had time to turn towards their beautiful bay window and see tail lights flaring like demon eyes in the dark, and then the van smashed ass-first through the glass, the doors opened, and the Unclean poured out.

They both jumped up to run, but Steve paused to grab a bowling trophy off the sideboard. He'd won it in college and kept it on display half ironically but half out of real pride. Steven snatched it up by the top and in one smooth, graceful movement, hurled it at the leading Unclean—a little woman with chattering teeth and wild eyes and expression of absolute hungry madness. The statuette's marble base smacked into her forehead, and she dropped in a spurt of blood.

"Come on!" Pete pulled Steve's hand but there were more of them, they must have been packed in, the Unclean chased them right out the back door, chattering and groaning, squirting, reeking of pee like a bus station men's room.

Pete didn't know if he'd dropped Steve's hand, or vice versa. They'd been touched, grabbed, clutched. The hot, moist Unclean were right on them and they had to let go to get down the staircase on the back deck, it wasn't wide enough for them to run side-by-side and maybe Pete unconsciously decided it was every man for himself.

He hopes he didn't. He hopes Steven didn't either. No. It was inconceivable. The separation isn't their fault, it's the fault of the bloodthirsty, shit-leaking murder freaks chasing them.

Separated they were, however, and he has to find Steve and get them out. (He considers fighting only oh so briefly. But no way. Steve's fit but Peter is doughy, there are a lot of Unclean, and you get infected if they bleed on you. Uh uh. Pete plays enough strategy games to see no percentage in that battle.)

What about the van? The way Pete fled, the road and the front of the house are closer than the garage, and anyhow, opening the garage door would be like ringing a dinner bell for flesh-

biting creeps. Slapping his pockets, he realizes he doesn't have his keys. So screw that plan. That zombie-hauling Windstar though... that might do. With his breath under control as he scuttles slowly down the corn rows, he thinks he can make out the sound of its engine. The Unclean seem pretty mindless, they spread out from it and probably won't go back to it unsatisfied. Probably? Does he really mean "hopefully"? Either way, better than trying his own car.

He gets to the edge of the row and sees it, still idling, sticking out of the front of his house like a knife-handle from a murder victim, damn. Was there a driver? Who would be driving? He can't see if the door is open, if the wheelman got out or is waiting patiently.

Then, on the far side of the garage, he sees commotion in the corn and Steven bursts out onto the blacktop.

###

They run at him and Steven has lost himself. His mind is gone inside his body, helpless, impelled only to run, trembling, exhausted but driven on, cornstalks flashing and blurring past as he runs, runs, runs, and then it isn't dirt and leaves and roots under his feet, it's a dip and a slope, a ditch and gravel. Some tiny locked-in part of him recognizes this as the edge of the road.

He scrambles up on the blacktop and sees Peter. Peter! Peter is running at him too, they can be together! He puts on a final burst of speed, ignoring the pain and the exhaustion and the reek of the Unclean all around him, he runs toward Peter, toward Pete.

"Steve!"

Steven hears him call out, sees him stop, sees his eyes and Pete is all Steve wants in the world right now, there is no coherent thought in his head as he charges on, past his body's natural limits, past reason, to the desire almost within reach.

Steve runs forward as fast as he can, flings his arms around Peter, and sinks his chattering teeth into Peter's warm, delicious neck.