

My alarm blared in my ears like a blaring klaxon. I reflexively tapped my phone, forgetting that I no longer possessed the ability to operate the touch screen. "Alexa, turn it off," I mumbled as the phone fell to the floor in my sleep-induced stupor. I groaned, the clattering echoing around the room as I embarrassingly checked it for any cracks and breaks. It was fine, thankfully. Not that I could do anything about it, mind you. None of the repair shops were open, and even if they were, they wouldn't want me within several yards of them. I'd end up having to call Theo, and he was sick enough dealing with my broken shit as I was of breaking the damn stuff.

I got out of bed, groggily staring out the window for a few minutes to orientate myself. I don't know why I bothered with the routine of set wake-up times. I had nowhere to go and no job or other important tasks to occupy my day. Fuck, I could barely even do half the things I enjoyed anymore! I guess it maintained some semblance of normalcy, even in my current condition. It was good for mental health, my therapist had told me. Not that it mattered to me, not for the long haul. There was every chance that my "condition" would accelerate, and whatever self-improvement bullshit I practiced wouldn't mean a fuck.

Another fire alarm-like blast hit my ears just then, and I winced. "Alexa, turn off the alarm!" I bellowed, realizing I had somehow put it on snooze. I sighed again. At least the voice recognition system was working at all. I'd be fucked without it. It wasn't perfect, especially if I was particularly groggy or my voice was hoarse. But it was all I had, and I was thankful for the ability to use it while I still could.

I went about my morning routine as best as I could. As my therapist reminded me, there were still things I could do, some level of autonomy I retained. Since I couldn't brush my teeth, the mouthwash next to the sink was the next best thing. The cap was off, allowing me to lift, gargle, and rinse with little effort. Theo had been by last week to install bigger knobs on my shower so I could work it with my wrists. There wasn't much point to shower daily, but it was another one of those tasks that helped me keep my sanity. I could manage a shower on my own, but it was a chore to soap myself up and really scrub. I had a kind of thick-handled scrub brush thing that I could grasp with my wrists, and that did most of the work. Towel drying myself was possible but challenging, and I mostly had to stand in the shower and let the water drip off me till I was sure I wouldn't track it all over the floor.

I think the most embarrassing part of the morning ritual was contending with my bodily functions. Taking a piss was alright but using the toilet the other way? Let's just say I was thankful Theo had installed a bidet. There wasn't another way around things in my current state, and I couldn't exactly have a full-time nurse given I was still infectious. I doubted I had

the patience for someone real. Someone to remind me of life before. The life I was now having slowly stolen from me.

“Alexa, turn on the lights and the TV,” I said as I entered the living room. It took a few moments for the light to click and the national news to appear on the screen. It was one advantage of the situation, I supposed, filling so much of my house with smart technology. It had been relatively affordable due to government mandates prohibiting companies from gouging consumers on what was considered a necessity. I’d never really imagined having anything so sophisticated in my home, but now that it was installed, I couldn’t imagine living without it, especially in my current state.

The news was the same as it always was. Ongoing coverage of the zoomorphic virus that had spread all over the world. How many more confirmed cases, how many had changed, and the ongoing government response to the pandemic? More political than fact-based, of course. Had to get ratings somehow. But I was one of those hooked fools still watching. It became one of the limited forms of entertainment I was granted being housebound. I thought it was pathetic how much the news seemed to focus on political backbiting more than science when discussing the pandemic. Maybe once a month, they announced a new stimulus package for those infected or most vulnerable, but I think it was more a move to help raise party poll numbers. Did it go to everyone who needed it, or mostly into the pockets of the rich? I had no fucking clue.

Eight months ago, the existence of a new, highly infectious viral strain was announced. No one was sure of the initial source of infection, but studies suggest an artificial origin due to its lack of similarity with anything in nature. It had a rapid rate of mutation, its versatility making finding a vaccine nearly impossible. Even so, despite everything, no one really paid it much mind at first. There were only a few reported cases, and the symptoms were mild and flu-like. And let’s be honest: No one cares about problems in countries that don’t affect them. I mean, shit is going down all over the world, right? No one has the energy to feel more than a passing bit of sympathy for every tragedy, even those in our own country. At least that’s how I feel. I’m no missionary.

The symptoms started with a fever that was rarely fatal. It passed after about a week or so, some of the worst days, as I can attest to. Worst of all, a significant number of infected were asymptomatic carriers, which made tracking its process all the more difficult. Why would you report if you weren’t sick? And how much effort did it take to test everyone at all hours of the day?

Yet the existence of the virus was of little concern in those early days. After all, a mild flu that rarely proved fatal was hardly more influential than the seasonal variant we all dealt with. But no one was prepared for the symptoms that showed up just days after recovering in a small subset of victims. It always started with skin irritation, itching, aching, dry skin, or general discomfort. Soon, it became much more bizarre. Hair growth. Fur. Feathers. Scales. In the *lucky* victims, anyways. There were even worse creature skin types to develop. Like *frogs*. I always shudder thinking about those. As bad as I had it, it could always be worse.

Then came the more drastic changes. The change mimicked the subtle skin alterations, consistent with the species that the individual was destined for, but this secondary spike was far more extreme. Some grew tails, others a coat of fur, ears, or noses of a particular animal species. Sometimes even paws. Or hooves.

It seemed as though within the host cells infected, the virus retroactively triggered substitution mutations that added and modified DNA into another animal form. The major changes would occur in the span of maybe a few hours up to a day and could be quite painful, though not as life-threatening as one might think given the drastic nature of the metamorphosis. And as far as we knew, there were no actual mutations that caused fatalities. But the stories where an unfortunate soul grew gills and suffocated ran rampant.

We thought the virus would never make it to our soil, of course. Or at least that's what we all told ourselves. That's what I always told *myself*. Naturally, after the true extent of the virus's manifestations became apparent, border screenings started becoming a mandatory part of everyday life. But all they could do in the early days was to check for flu-like symptoms. It was only inevitable that the virus spread. International borders were eventually restricted and then closed, but by then, it was too little too late.

A few of those with animalistic features stopped mutating soon after the initial burst, and they were found to test negative for the virus. But most continued changing. Another round of mutation, giving them another animalistic feature, making it hard for them to live their human lives. More than 95% percent of those who underwent the second major change continued to metamorphose, developing even more traits of the animal they were becoming. Eventually, the infected at that stage continued down the evolutionary ladder until nothing of their physical human body remained. The time this took varied wildly between individuals.

Some transformations took as long as many months, some within just a few weeks. The physical body always changed completely to an animal, but the mental state varied in many cases. It was difficult for the infected to communicate, even with human intellect. It was apparent that some changed people either lost their minds or chose to act like the animals

they'd become, while others seemed to retain their intelligence. In some ways, the latter seemed more frustrating, knowing that the human mind existed in an animal, especially when that animal had perhaps a lifestyle or morphology that was revolting by human standards. Unable to speak, to hold or kiss their loved ones, to convey emotion in their faces, scarcely able to interact with the world. It was maddening. It was hell. Some found suitable places to live where they were kept safe, but others... Well. There were rumors of a black market for "the meat of the change," but it was impossible to know whether such places existed. The idea of ending up there frightened me.

Naturally, the world changed in rapid order. Every business that was deemed non-essential was closed, with no reopening date in sight. People were ordered to stay home as much as possible and report their symptoms if any arose. Borders began to close one by one to try to mediate the spread of the infection. Anyone who had returned to the country was ordered to stay at home and self-isolate. Large public gatherings were canceled. People were not allowed to see their loved ones for the risk of unknowingly spreading it to them. Most were fearful to step outside lest they find themselves with tails or wings. Suspicions of neighbors ran rampant, and local law enforcement was overtaxed with handling domestic disputes. I hated it. The world was so damn *quiet*. So lonely.

I don't know where I contracted it from. I did my best to follow all the government's guidelines. I went out with a mask on. I kept my distance from others. I went to see my brother a few times a week, who lived alone as I did. I mean, I didn't have anyone else in my bubble, right? But there were so many people in the population that were asymptomatic carriers.

Both my brother and I seemed to contract it in a relatively short period. I wasn't sure who gave it to whom. But either way, within a few days of each other, my brother and I both developed light flu-like traits. I didn't bother to report to the hospital as I figured they were overloaded with cases, and our symptoms were really mild. Still, I stayed home in case I did have it so that I wouldn't pass the virus on to others.

I woke up one morning a week after the flu had passed to fingers that seemed stiff and numb. The tips were really swollen, and I found it really difficult to flex the joints. I tried to convince myself that it was nothing, but the next day, the discomfort was much worse. My middle fingers had extended a noticeable inch, and my other extremities were reduced compared to my middle digits. The sight looked disturbingly like the beginnings of hooves.

My brother Theo had evidently been experiencing pain in his backside, and one morning he'd woken up to agony from the start of tail growth. Sometime later that night, it

began growing to its full length, and by the morning, he sported a black horse's tail hanging from his backside. He'd called the hospital at once and had someone sent over to test him regularly. Yet only a full day after the growth he'd been reported negative. Since then, he'd displayed no further symptoms, and after three full days of negative tests, it was determined that it was safe for him to be out in public with no threat of spreading his condition to others.

I was not to be so lucky. The pain I woke to one morning was excruciating, and I stared down in horror as an audible crack of bone and muscle surged from my diminishing digits. The most frightening part was that I couldn't feel my hands at all, save for the pins and needles of numbness. I was forced to watch as my middle finger became long and girthy while the rest of my digits slowly receded into my palms. I could still flex those ones, but their range was far more restricted than I was used to. Not fully prepared for the reality of the situation, I couldn't even call anyone for help without functional hands. I spent much of that day in bed, crying and lamenting my eventual fate.

The next night was even worse. The nails on my middle fingers turned black, even as they spread all the way around the fingertip. The thickening keratin took root over the entire numb end as it ballooned over my middle fingers to match the circumference of my arm. At least that time, it wasn't as painful.

It didn't take long for Theo to come over and discover my condition. In the ensuing days, he came by to do most of the work in helping me become self-sufficient. Theo was now immune, so there was no risk of spread. He did the best he could, his handyman skills put to use to set up my apartment for a life without hands. He installed the bidet, the voice-activated systems, and handles I could work with my wrists to open my doors, fridge, and shower. A nurse was scheduled to come by every day to test my blood. But aside from that, I received no contact with the outside world.

It took some time for the reality of my situation to really sink in. I was turning into a fucking horse, and I'd never so much as set foot on a farm! Yet while the changes were random, anyone catching the disease from someone who had already begun to change had a high likelihood of developing similar traits to the initial victim. If the host had a dog's tail, anyone it spread to would likely acquire canine paws or ears, for example. The breed was random, but there was a high correlation of species, which potentially made contact tracing possible in the long term.

It seemed either Theo or I had initially caught some strain of the virus and transmitted it to the other, but that's where the similarities ended. His changes started with a tail, I got hooves. After the spread of some fur around his ass and more pointed ears, my brother's

changes stopped. For the last two weeks, every morning, I woke up covered in a little more horsehide. There was a slim chance that I could test negative, but the longer I was still positive, the more likely my humanity could potentially be lost completely.

I stared mournfully down at my hooves, still shiny and new, something that was unheard of in nature. Most animals were supported by them all day, wearing them down and covering them with dirt. My palms had stretched longer, now half the size of my lower arms, which made my arms far longer and ungainly compared to the rest of me. Horsehide had swept up my arm to my elbow, covered with sparse patches of horse fur that seemed a little thicker every day. They weren't the size of an actual horse's hooves, thankfully. I was told they could be up to twice the width of my current arm and would be a massive pain to carry around, making my shoulders sag. They were heavy enough as it was!

The daily tests were all the hope I had for my humanity. A negative test would indicate my form was locked in and that I was no longer a carrier. So far, all the tests had come back positive, and the following day I would discover a little more of my humanity stripped away. My muscles were sore from growth. Fur was steadily crawling down my thigh. The hair on my head was getting so much longer than I preferred it being. Even my ears were getting longer, more pointed. But nothing major had changed since that day with my hooves. I was thankful for that. It meant I still had hope. The minor mutations I could live with but the major ones? If I experienced another significant change like when I'd lost my hands, then my hopes for the virus stabilizing within me were all the slimmer.

I sighed, bringing myself out of my self-reflection. There was no point in dwelling on it now, and I was hungry. I headed to my fridge and used my wrists to finagle the door and then pull out the desired greens or oranges, as was the case with carrots. I wasn't sure how much my digestive tract was altering, but it was likely that I was on a mostly veggie diet for the rest of my life, especially if the virus continued to change me. So, better to get used to it now, I figured. I could still eat sugar too, but I had to be careful of that since my changing physiology would find it pretty addictive.

As I bent down to pick out my breakfast with my mouth, I did my best to ignore the aches that had been plaguing my spine all week. A little protrusion of writhing skin, muscle, and bone made it harder to sit down, and I had to be careful of the way I slept sometimes to not bruise it. It was an identical sensation to when my brother had grown his horse's tail, he'd informed me. I tried my best not to be too concerned at first, but in the last few days, when I'd woken up, the damn thing was *throbbing*. I was fearful it was the sign of another change, but from what I'd been told, it could be a sign that the virus was slowing down, and this would be it!

Yet now, as I tried to stand straight, the pain in my back grew more intense, and a sharp electrical surge shot up my spine. I hunched over, trying not to cry out from the sudden agony. I used my massive hooves to run over the area, trying to work out the pain. All the while, I told myself that it was nothing. That I'd just been sitting on it wrong. It was a spasm that had nothing to do with the change. I hoped, I *prayed*, that was all it was.

But it was becoming impossible to deny the reality that I was shifting further. A protrusion of flesh and bone was wriggling above my ass, and I could even detect it through my numb hooves. Looking back, I could see it twitch more frantically as with a burst of agony, it started ripping visibly from my spine.

“OOHHH FUUCK! NONONONONO!” I began screaming in protest, in denial, pleading and swearing as the agony in my spine grew to a crescendo, and the new flesh ripped from the force of my coccyx painfully unfurling. I could feel every inch pressing outward, the bones extending at an impossible speed as the virus gave me another inhuman growth, the beginnings of my horse's tail.

At the same time, the entire surface became peppered with uncomfortable itching. I instinctively reached back to rub it, but my hooves weren't up to the task. It was taking everything I had to stand up straight, trying to find a position that eased the pain as best as I could.

As my tail continued to grow, I realized in horror that I could move the damn thing. It wasn't much, a simple up and down motion, but it was still sufficient to be unnerving. The whole thing was itching like crazy as if hundreds of ants were crawling over my skin. The skin prickled as I could feel the damn horse hair growing, like a time-lapse video of sprouting weeds. It was going to complete its change into a full horse's tail in virtually no time at all.

Though I was terrified, a part of me still wanted to witness its growth. It was likely the beginning of my fall from humanity, and it was imperative that I truly come to terms with what was happening to me. The initial pain was more manageable for now, and I walked towards my bathroom, the mirror providing me my only vantage point to view myself clearly. Closing the door for privacy that I really didn't require in my own home, I pulled down my pants as the growth reflexively flicked back and forth. The sight of the white hairs shouldn't have bothered me as much as it did. Still, it was a preview of things to come. The blackened leathery hide now ran even further down my backside as if to affirm my fears. If this didn't let up, I would have a horse's ass soon!

The disturbing visage of my extended spine became more natural as the appendage filled out with fat and muscle. The coarse horse hairs were growing longer, running down to my knees, though it was difficult to ascertain from the way I was standing. The hair was a dull white and tickled my legs as my tail reflexively swished.

After about an hour, the irritation and prickling finally subsided, and I raised my new tail, moving the damn thing as well as Theo could flex his. I could clearly see it if I looked back, and I could feel its weight and the tickling on my skin even through the fabric of my jeans. I soon found it was difficult to pull them up all the way with the stubborn new growth in the way. I was certain that Theo had holes in the back of his own. Thinking about it, I could live with a tail. I could *maybe even* live with hooves. There were lots of tasks I couldn't perform, but I was technically a person with a disability, and people lived without hands and stuff, right? But if any more of my body changed...

As though in a trance, I walked out into the living room and had Alexa put on a now-familiar documentary on domestic horses. The series I'd been watching focused on care, grooming, and track training in stabled animals. Depending on the breed, that might be something I could request for my life should the changes continue further. I had a will prepared just in case I lost my mind, but unless the family had an active say in their changed loved ones, then the former persons often lost autonomy whether they retained their faculties or not.

From what I had learned in my research, equine life didn't really seem so bad, but the video played up the life of stabled horses quite well. They were cleaned regularly, groomed, and treated with the utmost respect and humanity when in the care of the right people, but I knew that was the best-case scenario. There were plenty of places that didn't manage their animals so well. Animals? Was that all I was going to be? Just another dumb beast, isolated from others, not cleaned, not groomed, and barely fed. Whipped and forced to work long hours or perform for the entertainment of their masters. ? Were horses still even regularly whipped?

Not for the first time, I tried to imagine myself as a full horse. Walking on four hooves with my muscular, bulky body, swishing my tail, flicking my ears. The downstairs equipment would be a boon, I was sure. Every man has always wanted to know what it was like to be hung like a horse! Even though I wouldn't be able to clean my own equipment without help... not to mention what I'd seen developing due to complications of lack of cleaning... but I'm sure that the smells of barn life wouldn't be too bad, not to a horse, at least. But who was I to say? Especially depending on how much of my mind I ended up keeping. Still, I wasn't fond of the idea of standing in my own filth. And then there were the flies. Biting insects seemed like a bitch without hands. Hell, I hated having to deal with a single mosquito in my apartment! You don't even realize the things you need hands for, well, until...

Not for the first time, particularly in the last few days, a tear rolled down my cheeks. I mourned the thought of all I'd lost, and what I stood to lose if the changes proceeded. There wasn't much chance the metamorphosis would stop here if it hadn't already. If I was still infected with the virus, if I was still positive, then the next changes could come at any time. It might take days, it might even be more than a week. But it was nearly inevitable.

There were one or two cases I'd heard of where the mutations stopped here. People who lived with paws and snouts and tails who seemed thankful that they retained some bit of humanity. I watched those videos with a sort of reverence these past few days. They were the slim hope I had not to be an animal for the rest of my life. It was all I had, and I clung to it as stubbornly as a drunk to his bottle.

I sighed, allowing the tears to fall more freely. It was one of the methods that my therapist had taught me as a coping device. Letting the emotions out when I felt them was important for my mental health. It would keep me stable, keep me human. As long as my body matched that mentality, at least.

"Alexa, turn off the TV," I said, waiting for her little cheery message saying she'd be happy to. I heard the click as the TV went off, and I sat there in silence. The nurse would be over soon, to take the next blood sample that would decide my fate. All I could do was wait and see how the test turned out. If I was still positive, then I would wait further. I had no control over my future, a helpless victim to an invisible entity that could change me on a whim. All I could do was wait to see what my next change would be and how it would impact the rest of what remained of my humanity.