

THE VIRAL SOLUTION

A novel by

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This novel is a work of fantasy. Even if some places exist, names and characters are imaginary and anything concerning persons, still living or having lived in the past, is absolutely fortuitous.

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Chapter One

The sun filtered through the shutters, splitting into two strips of light that covered the whole bed, then breaking up every which way on the opposite wall. One of the two rays, the more spiteful one, lit the upper part of his face. What woke him was not the persistent buzzing of the clock radio, which he turned off at once, but a subtle feeling of warmth that was progressively coming up from his neck through his right cheek.

His eyes refused to open. The night before, he had stayed up late at June's house. It was supposed to be an intellectual kind of party, but after a while, all of them had started drinking and academic conversations had faded into the background. All he could think of at that night was Debbie, with one of her tits hanging out right in front of his nose.

It was hard to say if she had done it intentionally, or if it were just the effect of too many screwdrivers. Then, just a fog. Maybe Marlene had driven him home, dumping him at his front door with a pitiable "Good night." Yes, as far as he could remember, that's exactly how things must have gone. Damn, what a headache. Tom finally got up from the bed, searching the carpet with his feet for his flip-flops. Then he stretched his legs, ruffled his hair, glared at the window, and finally looked at the clock. It was ten past seven, earlier than he remembered setting the clock for the night before. *Well, so much the better*, he thought. At least he would have more time to get ready, since he had to be on campus by nine.

He wanted to have his coffee but was too out of it to make himself some. So he took off his clothes and got into the shower after making sure that the water wasn't too warm. On the radio somebody was announcing that ex-Attorney General John Mitchell and ex-presidential advisers H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman were found guilty of Watergate cover-up charges.

A few minutes later, he felt like a new man. He walked out for a breath of fresh air. Dressed in jeans and a blue polo shirt, he released the safety catch and slid the glass door along its rails, then stood on the balcony.

The fresh air woke him up completely. Finally sober, he took a look around. The sky was a clear, deep blue color. The canal running through the condominium reflected the same hue, drawing a large "L" into the lawns around the buildings. Not a living soul was walking on the wood bridge across the canal connecting the apartment building with the gym, the sauna, and the administration office. Below, to his right, the swimming pool was deserted and just stood there, surrounded by empty deckchairs and closed beach umbrellas. On the opposite side, standing near a small palm tree, a shirtless old man was busy fishing with a small rod. Tom recognized him: he was a tenant on the first floor who spent much of his time trying to catch a big black bass that swam about the canal eating all the fry. Maybe this was the morning he would finally catch him.

Tom went back inside the apartment, leaving the glass door open so that the air could circulate. He knew that the air conditioning would immediately go off, but

what the hell, once in a while you need to breathe some fresh air.

He poured some milk into a bowl with a big helping of corn flakes and ended his plain breakfast with a large glass of orange juice. He reminded himself to buy more milk before he returned home. He checked his wallet to see if he had any money and if his credit cards were there, then he put it into his back right pocket, took his jacket, and shut the door behind him.

In the corridor, waiting for the elevator, he met Bill Adams, the condo's security guard.

“Good morning, Bill,” he said.

“Good morning to you, Mister Dempsy. Nice day, isn't?”

“Hope it'll last. If it's like yesterday, we could get a lot of rain in the afternoon.”

“No, I don't think so. My knee would be hurting by now. Take it easy. See you later.”

Another person was riding down in the elevator: a middleaged man wearing a necktie and jacket, very distinguishedlooking. Under his right arm, the man clutched a black briefcase with his left hand, as if he were afraid somebody might steal it.

Tom said hello and the man reciprocated his greeting politely. It was not a quick ride down, even though there were only four floors. The elevator stopped twice

without taking any other passengers. Tom was thinking about his own business when suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the man was not well. He turned his head and looked at him. The man had turned deadly white and, glancing back at Tom, opened his eyes wide and started to gasp, as if he couldn't breathe. At that exact moment, the door opened and the man ran out, then stopped and leaned against the wall.

“Please, help me.” His voice was nearly inaudible, but he was obviously speaking to Tom, who didn't know what to do. “It's my heart; I can't breathe, my chest. My God.”

Tom had just enough time to hold him up to keep him from falling to the ground. He recalled reading something about first-aid in case of heart attack, but at that precise moment, he could think of nothing. Meanwhile, the man was breathing heavily.

“Take it easy, don't move,” Tom said, even though he knew that the other man had lost consciousness. “I'm going to get help, don't move.”

He started to run like crazy, hoping to see a friendly face somewhere, but no one was around. He crossed the bridge with a jump and stopped, panting, in front of the administration office.

“Hurry! There's a man dying over there,” he shouted to the clerk who was just opening the door. “Move, for heaven's sake, call an ambulance. I'm telling you that

near the front entrance there's a man having a heart attack."

"Okay. Okay. Take it easy, I'll call right away."

While the woman was calling, Tom hurried back to the man. He found him in the same position. Tom put his head on the man's chest to hear if his heart was beating, and although what he heard was weak, he knew the man was still alive. Then he loosened the knot in his tie and unbuttoned the top of the man's shirt. The man was foaming at the mouth, splittle mixed with blood, but Tom held back his revulsion and cleaned the man's lips with his handkerchief. Then he leaned against the wall and waited.

A few minutes later, he saw Adams running towards him, probably radioed by the clerk. An ambulance with sirens wailing followed shortly after.

The rescue operation was fast. Two men wearing white coats jumped out of the big Ford van and opened up the hatchback to take out the stretcher. The one who looked to be in charge approached the patient to determine his condition. He held his right wrist with two fingers and, looking at his watch, took his pulse. Tom noted that he shook his head. Carefully, the two male nurses placed the man on the stretcher and then in the ambulance.

"I'll go with him," Adams said. He disappeared inside the van while the siren again wailed its warning sound. As soon as the ambulance disappeared beyond the bend, Tom looked at his watch. It was already ten past nine. *I've got to hurry up,*

setting out towards his Maverick.

He put his right hand inside his jacket pocket and, as he was taking out the keys, saw something black in the green, freshly-mowed grass of the entry. The man's briefcase was there, near the wall, and nobody had noticed it. He absentmindedly picked it up, planning to hand it over that same night to Adams, who would then arrange to return it to the owner. He opened the car trunk and threw it inside. He didn't have time to go back to the office so, his tires squealing, he went towards University Drive.

He liked that road. He was in too much of a hurry to drive with his usual pleasure, but he loved to go slow so that he could appreciate the beauty of the Florida countryside with all its mansions, and even those oases of consumerism, better known as shopping centers, that every now and then broke up the monotony of the landscape. After the umpteenth canal, Tom turned to the left to take the narrow road that lead to BCC Central campus. He was finally in Davie.

He stopped his car near the english department, in one of the large parking lots that surrounded the campus. Then he took the path that led to the center of campus. When he finally made it to the library stairs, he caught his breath. It was 9:35 and he was very late.

“Where have you been?” Norma Rose, the head librarian, asked when she saw him. “We thought something bad had happened. You should have called me.”

“Sorry, but I couldn’t. I had to help a man who was having a heart attack. I don’t even know his name; he lives in my condo. So I had to wait for the ambulance.”

“Poor guy. How he’s doing now?”

“To be honest, I don’t know, but he really looked in bad shape. I hope he makes it.”

“Hope so, too. Well, here today, but tomorrow, who knows? Anyhow, next time let me know. Okay?”

Tom smiled and went into his room. Norma reminded him of his mother. Mom was about sixty, and every time he called her, she gave him lots of advice. Always treated him like a boy. *By the time you’re twenty-eight, he thought, you are supposed to know how to take care of yourself.*

Anyhow, he didn’t like to be late to work. This was the first job he had after earning his Master’s in American Literature. Doctor Hawks, an old professor who had taken a liking to him, told him that a college in South Florida was looking for an assistant librarian. The job, he was told, might not pay too well, but it was an easy one, in a wonderful place, and he’d have lots of free time. One more chance to study so that he could get into the Ph.D. program. Hawks arranged everything. His old friend, Miss Rose, kept the position vacant so that the young man could fill it. One day, Tom left the history-laden halls of Adelphi University and his father’s home in Garden City, New York, to fly to Florida.

On his desk that morning he found the usual mess. He kept meaning to straighten things up, but then he would put things off 'til tomorrow. That morning, he was supposed to file the students' cards and someone hadn't brought back the books they'd taken out. It was up to him to find out who and to then send out the requests. The job would take all morning, as long as things went smoothly. In the afternoon, instead, he was supposed to continue filing. Time flew. At five minutes to five, Tom switched off the lights and began to leave. Somebody was still in the library; Norma was talking to a student. He waved goodbye to her and, hoping she wouldn't stop him with some excuse, quickly went down the stairs.

There were only a few people around. Classes were almost finished and only a few students lingered on the paths or near the library. In this town, Tom thought, nobody seems to like to stay outside.

He recognized his car from a distance. The metallic brown body and the beige convertible top stood out in the grey, deserted parking lot. He opened the trunk to put in the three books he had with him, and he suddenly saw the black briefcase. Unbelievable, he thought. The day was over and he hadn't thought of what had happened that morning. Then he recalled the stranger's face, the ambulance, and Adams' expression when he closed the car door.

"I wonder how he's doing now," he asked himself. "Hope he made it." He'd go straight to the administration office to ask for news.

On the radio, Jud Strunk was singing, “A Daisy a Day.” Meanwhile, Tom, relaxed by the persuasive words of the country song, wondered why he was feeling so anxious. He had a premonition, a subtle sense of fear that in some way was connected with the stranger. He remembered that the man didn’t have a tan. His skin didn’t have the color that most people had after living under the Florida sun a few months. Maybe he had just arrived. Maybe he had come for business. *But it’s not my problem*, Tom thought. He was surprised by his own curiosity.

After parking, he clutched the briefcase under his left arm and walked to the administration office. Near the swimming pool, two women politely said hello to him. He was aware of their insistent stare that verged on the provocative. He knew they liked him, but he didn’t want to end up in bed with an old lady wintering on the Gold Coast in search of men. He bowed in greeting and kept walking.

When he got to the bridge, he saw that the office was closed. On the door handle was the sign “Be right back.” Adams’ office was empty, too. He stood thinking, not knowing what to do. He didn’t like waiting. Besides, that evening he was planning to go to Tony’s Pizzeria on Oakland Park Boulevard because he didn’t feel like cooking. But before gobbling down a twelve-inch pizza, he thought he’d better go do some grocery shopping. He passed by the two ladies again, who said hello, and entered the elevator.

He had just taken off his jacket when the phone rang. “Hello, Mister Dempsy? Adams speaking. I hoped I’d find you. I’m calling about Mister Prescott, you know,

the man who had the heart attack this morning.”

“Of course. Just a few minutes ago I went to your office, but you weren’t there. I wanted to ask you how he was doing.”

“Well, he didn’t make it, the poor man. Sorry, his heart just stopped. And we don’t know anything about him. He came two weeks ago and rented apartment 84, on the floor above yours. All we know is that he came from New York and worked in pharmaceuticals. He was in Florida for business. We’ve called his office and they told us that they’ll send somebody to take care of everything. They sounded really concerned.”

“It’s understandable, don’t you think? How old was he? He didn’t look that old.”

“As a matter of fact he wasn’t. He was fifty-four years old. It was a classic way to go: a heart attack. Well, what can you do? We never know what the future has in store for us.”

“You’re right. Let’s not think about it. Anyhow, thanks for your call. It was very kind of you. Good night.”

“Good night to you, Mister Dempsy. My pleasure.”

So the man was dead and Tom hadn’t said a word about the briefcase. He felt uneasy. He had never behaved that way. Why shouldn’t he give the black briefcase back? Somebody might think he’d stolen it, which wouldn’t look good. But, if

nobody had been aware of the briefcase, who could accuse him of stealing it? And, after all, there had been that mysterious premonition. That was the point. Following some unfathomable line of reasoning, he decided to inspect what was inside the bag.

It was locked. He felt a small, strange shiver going down his arms when, sweating, he tried to break the lock with a small nail file. He didn't recognize himself when he thought about what he was doing, but something inside his head told him to go ahead. Finally, the lock gave. Gingerly, or one might say cautiously, Tom opened the black briefcase and looked inside. There was a daily planner with a black leather cover and a folder made of transparent plastic containing five sheets of paper. He pulled them out and started to read. The letterhead read "Temple Corporation of Atlanta, Georgia." The first sheet was titled, "Selection criteria for people destined to the For a Better World survey."

Tom, was intrigued and kept reading:

Based on previous experience accumulated in different areas of the planet, we can say that the best subjects for our survey are male drug addicts or homosexuals, who lack family ties or are far from their family. The attached questionnaire will help identify the right subjects, and with their cooperation, we shall put together all the information required. Our goal is to find out why these human beings went down the road of vice

once they left the path of the Lord. We need to know everything about these subjects, from early childhood to the present. By digging into their past, we shall find out why these lost souls left the Lord's flock. First, we shall discover what kind of psychological and sociological conflicts lead potentially good citizens astray, on the road to perdition. When published, our study will be helpful to anyone who is working on behalf of our fellow men, at all levels. Our study could also be used as an outline by the federal government for future social programs they might plan to institute. To all of you, dear soul hunters, the most grateful thanks from myself and all our Brothers.

—John D. Cotton, Chairman.

As the introductory letter stated, the other four sheets contained a very thick questionnaire. Tom was astonished by the depth of the questions, often delving into private matters and overstepping the privacy of the interviewee. Certain questions required full disclosure of the identity of the interviewee's lovers: first name, last name, address, profession of any lovers. Isn't this too much? thought Tom, who was increasingly puzzled by what he was reading. *And who would be so stupid to open up in that way? Maybe, Tom thought, they're paid to do it.*

Then he opened the daily planner. There were few notes. The man's full name was George Arthur Prescott and his office was at Chemical H, 272 Madison Avenue,

New York. Up to March 2, the pages were blank.

On March 3, there was a little note: *Meeting with F.T. in Mai-Kai. Looks like a good subject, is willing to collaborate, and has contacts all around South Florida. We must come to an agreement about compensation.*

March 6: *Completed business with F.T. I heard about a group of people who I think are interesting. We must set appointment.*

March 10: *First meeting with F.T.'s friends. It's only a question of money, but I think they'll end up going for it.*

March 15, the day before the heart attack: *The date is for tomorrow at Waterways. No problems. The group transfer to our base is expected for the end of the month.*

Tom couldn't find a rational explanation in those documents. The dead man, as far as he could judge from the little information he had about him, sold pharmaceuticals or chemical products. Nothing strange about that. But in his briefcase the same man had documents that told Tom he was involved with a religious group searching for special people to interview for a national survey. But if that were the case, why had he traveled incognito? What did he have to hide? After all, it wouldn't be the first or the last religious activity with a publishing aspect to it in the States.

Everything considered, Tom decided that it was much better to forget about the whole thing. So, with a vague feeling of guilt because he hadn't returned the

briefcase, added to his misgivings for having looked inside the briefcase, he decided to find a good book to read and go to bed. That evening, he didn't feel like going to the pizzeria. And he was no longer too hungry. He fixed himself a hamburger and got ready for night. But which book was he reading lately? Well, he thought, *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* might be the right one tonight. But Truman Capote's elegant novel didn't help reduce his uneasiness. And the night was full of nightmares. Fate, which he unconsciously perceived was at work, held more surprises in store for him.