

## **An Ominous Message**

#3, Fiction, 899 words

Frank Cortazo

(Former Valley Byliners President Frank Cortazo has been writing from an early age. His main influences were Mexican western movies with Zorro-like characters, super-hero comic books, horror movies/comic book magazines, Italian western movies, 1940's serial movies, along with many TV series such as the original 1960's versions of "Dark Shadows," "The Outer Limits," "The Twilight Zone" and many others. He is a retired elementary school teacher and was a co-editor of one Valley Byliners anthology. His enormous collection of books include many in the western, horror, science-fiction genres, particularly those by Louis Lamour, Ian Fleming, Robert E. Howard, Stephen King, Edgar Allen Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sax Rohmer, Edgar Rice Burroughs, among others. He joined this project in order to see the directions that other writers would take in creating a story written from multiple perspectives.)

"Have you heard the news?" asked Mrs. Vargas as Mary opened her front door.

The gray-haired neighbor who lived across the street held an electronic tablet. She looked at it as she walked in, not waiting for Mary to invite her.

Mary could not get over how Mrs. Vargas's fascination with modern technology made her something of an oddball. She often saw her browsing the internet on a cell phone or on the tablet she carried. This time Mary did not think about her eccentricity as she welcomed the elderly lady.

"The Coronavirus is spreading everywhere!" exclaimed Mrs. Vargas with a look of concern, pushing up her wire-rimmed glasses. "Everyone's in a panic and . . ."

"Hold on!" said Mary, raising her hand.

"It's right *here!*" said Mrs. Vargas, holding out her tablet, pointing a finger toward it. "My son sent me an e-mail. You remember Ronnie, right? He's up in New York, *still* wanting to break into the writing profession. Well, it seems the entire city of New York has been hit with the Coronavirus. It's spreading everywhere! And Ronnie's out there! He's..."

Mary noticed the woman become teary-eyed.

"He says he's all right, isolated and all, but worry I he might..."

She held out the tablet to Mary.

Hesitant, the young woman took it and began reading. Like the writer Ronnie aspired to be, his e-mail read like something written for a fiction piece. Only what he wrote about was all too *real*.

"Mom, I want you to know I am all right and I love you very much," she read. "I know from your e-mails and phone calls you are doing well. Stay isolated as much as possible. Your area might not have been hit yet but it soon will be. This illness is spreading, everywhere, like wildfire. It has been one week since the outbreak began here. We've been told to avoid contact with others and to remain indoors. Doctors are working around the clock to help people who

have become ill with the virus. It is spreading at an alarming rate. More people are dying each day. And long grocery store lines are everywhere. The panic has set in.

“Essential, basic supplies are disappearing off the shelves. Instead of people willing their thoughts into a dreamscape of hope and recovery, they are submerging themselves into deep waters of nightmares and despair. It’s almost as if we are unwillingly embarking upon some type of bizarre adventure. At night, the streets are empty. The buildings stand silent against the skyline like cold, gigantic tombstones.

“It’s like a graveyard out there. Desolate. Silent. Cold. The people are confined, like prisoners, within the safety of their own homes. It’s practically like something from some apocalyptic science-fiction movie. I keep thinking if we were being invaded from outer space would the world become some type of ... barbaric battleground? A place where only the fittest will be destined to survive?

“But my writer’s imagination is getting the better of me. Each night I go to bed, and wonder what the next day will bring. When I awaken each morning, I feel the rays of sunlight striking my face through the glass of my bedroom window. They are beams of hope from the giant light bulb in the sky. As I rise, my thoughts turn to the reality of this crisis. I look at the wall calendar. Each time, it tells me this month will soon be over. The days, however, are long.

“I brewed my morning coffee and looked outside my kitchen window to see a dreariness across the sky. It is there every day. It blocks the sunlight with dark, rain clouds. It is depressing to look at. However, I know that nothing can block those beams of hope which grow stronger. I know that, in due time, this crisis will be over and that we *will* prevail. All that I ask is that my loved ones and I are protected and that this crisis will soon come to an end. Whatever you do, stay home and do *not* go out unless it is absolutely necessary. They’re saying the elderly are more susceptible to this virus but younger people are beginning to test positive for it, also. Stay at home. Take care and we will see each other, soon. Love, Ronnie.”

Mary handed the tablet back. The look upon her face now appeared to be one of shock and fear.

“You need to go back to your home,” she told her neighbor. “Stay indoors. Don’t go out unless it’s absolutely vital. You have my phone number. Call me if there is anything you might need, like water and food or whatever.”

“But Ronnie?” asked the elderly woman. “He’s out there...all alone!”

“He’s fine,” said Mary, assuringly. “And he will remain that way. Keep *that* thought in mind.”

Mrs. Vargas left and Mary closed the front door and walked into the kitchen.

*“This situation is becoming more serious,” she thought. “So much for the trip to San Antonio. I should phone Sylvia again to let her know about...I wonder...if there could be anything about this on TV.”*

Approaching the kitchen countertop, Mary switched on the small television set that stood there. It flickered and voices and images came to life on the screen.

Still and silent, she gasped at what she saw and heard.

She did *not* like any of it.