SURVIVOR

 The global pandemic was unstoppable.

 As soon as one vaccine was developed for the deadly air-borne scourge, the virus mutated, and the race was on to develop another. But it was a futile battle against time and statistical certainty. The human species was in a fatal downward spiral. Nature had outwitted medical science. The deaths came in a tsunami of disbelief, horror, and despair.

 Businesses closed for lack of workers. The world economy collapsed. Governments gradually shut down. Police and fire protection dwindled, then vanished. Civil unrest led to panic, violence, and looting. Television, radio, and the internet all eventually went silent. Military installations were soon abandoned. Essential services, like food delivery, were first crippled, then halted all together. Overwhelmed hospitals ceased to function for lack of qualified personnel. Religious leaders pleaded for calm and faith, but were largely ignored. Suicides skyrocketed. Many people fled the cities and poured into the country sides, but then wandered around lost until they collapsed, not knowing what to do to survive on their own.

 The virus took about a week to kill its victims. Lungs filled with choking fluid, and the gruesome end resembled drowning. It felled young and old, healthy and sick, men and women of every race on every continent. Most died indoors in their homes or inside hospital wards or in public buildings or houses of worship. Other rotted where they fell on the streets. There were not enough workers to collect the corpses and bury them properly. The smell of decay was overwhelming. The stages of bodily decomposition were systematic and unchanging: first, after death, the corpses began to consume themselves from within, their gut bacteria breaking down the internal organs; next, the bodies bloated to as much as double their size, as rotting gases were produced, splitting the skin; then came the blowflies, who laid their eggs, which evolved into maggots which busily consumed the putrid flesh; and lastly, the victims' remains liquified into a kind of revolting sludge which bacteria and other insects feasted upon, the result eventually leaving only skeletons with some hair clinging to the skulls. The warmer the climate or being in the open air, the faster the bodies decayed.

 To further complicate the disaster, the air-borne virus killed all terrestrial and avian species that breathed air as well -- mammals (including domestic livestock and pets), reptiles, amphibians, and birds all perished. Only insects -- and who would be surprised that cockroaches again cheated their extinction? -- and bacteria survived on the land, as did all plant life. Oddly, all aquatic life also survived, because living underwater somehow made fish, mollusks, crustaceans, corals, and the like immune from the virus. But marine mammals -- such as whales, seals, and dolphins -- also perished when they came up from the water to breathe the infected air.

 It took just eighteen months to destroy any life around the world that could live on land, other than bugs.

 That is, all except for one, last man.

 His name was Hans Ende. He was twenty-eight years old, and hailed from the small southern Swiss village of Saas Almagell. Hans had no idea why he alone was spared, and was apparently immune from the virus. He speculated that it had something to do with the time when he was a lad hiking in the Alps with his father, Konrad. The boy was struck by a bolt of lightning when the pair was unable to go down fast enough from the mountains during an unusually violent summer thunderstorm. Hans was in a coma for three days in hospital after the event, but miraculously recovered. Perhaps his DNA was somehow 'scrambled,' making the virus unable to recognize him as a host? But Ende never knew for sure why he was immune. He was helpless as he watched his mother, father, younger brother, and two sisters die. He dug their graves alone, while one by one, all the other people in his village succumbed to the heinous virus.

 Because electricity was by now no longer being generated, gasoline stations could no longer be used to pump gas. Fortunately, Hans knew how to 'hot wire' cars, so he chose a vehicle at random and would drive around looking for other people from town to town and city to city until the car he was using ran out of gas. Then he would simply take another and repeat the process. Car batteries could last for several years before failing, he realized. But after that, his motorized forays would likely be over.

 He never saw anyone else alive, however, even after several months. For fear of getting ill from the germs of decaying human remains outdoors, Hans had wisely taken a protective 'haz-mat' suit from a deserted hospital and wore the gear daily except when out in completely empty rural areas. Once the uncountable corpses had been rendered into mere skeletons, the young man no longer needed to wear the specialized outfit. It was hard getting used to seeing so many grisly-looking skeletons virtually everywhere, but Hans coped.

 Ende always noticed the eerie silence whenever he stopped driving for the day. Only the wind, or rustling tree leaves, or a murmuring stream splashing over rocks, or a rushing river, or sea waves if he happened to be near the shore made any sound. There was no music, no birdsong, no dogs barking, no human voices. Everything was empty and lonely, day after day. He shouted out hails in the four different languages he knew, and sang songs aloud to himself to hear something, anything. But if he was lucky, he only got an echo in return.

 By walking into any grocery store and helping himself, Hans had plenty of canned and packaged foods which were good until they expired in months or a few years. There were also plenty of dried fruits and nuts and bottled water, but fresh fruits and vegetables were now gone from the shelves of such marketplaces. He knew that orchards would continue to be wildly pollinated by bees and bear fruit annually, so that was a blessing. He thought about settling down in a prime farmland area and planting some of his own vegetable crops, except that he knew nothing about farming. Maybe he could use a library and teach himself how to do such tasks from studying books? Certainly, all the tools and equipment needed to farm were freely available. (All he really knew was the dairy business and the raising of cows from his Swiss family upbringing, but that was a moot point now.)

 Ende had his choice of new clothing to wear and places to sleep. Similarly, pharmacy or toiletry items were around wherever he traveled. Hans wisely stocked up on matches, flashlights, and battery-powered lanterns for his necessary lighting needs when night fell. Without electricity, he habitually went to sleep when it got dark and rose with the dawn, like mankind did for prior millennia. And if any store he wanted to enter was locked, he would simply ram his car through the door to go inside, then later grab another vehicle if the first one got too badly damaged in the act.

 When he grew despondent and depressed, the young man would occasionally frequent a bar or liquor store and drink until he got very drunk and fell asleep after dancing in circles, singing with abandon. He also helped himself to a Glock pistol and ammunition at a gun shop. He figured that if his loneliness ever became unbearable, he could simply shoot himself in the head to instantly end his misery. But Hans was not that desperate yet. He had other ideas to try.

 His chief fears at this point was having a medical or dental emergency, like appendicitis, or an accident leading to a broken leg, or getting a cracked molar. Who could help him then? No one...But being only twenty-eight and fit, he figured his chances for such misfortunes were hopefully unlikely. He had always been a careful man. That trait, along with his upbeat personality and boyish good looks, made him especially popular with the eligible young ladies of Saas Almagell and the surrounding cantons. How he missed their alluring voices and their many charms now! Meanwhile, he used scissors to trim his blonde hair and beard every month, and began writing a daily journal entry in a notebook to have something useful to do each day while also helping him keep track of the calendar. These simple acts maintained his sanity and made him feel like a man who was still civilized.

 Later helping himself to a large road atlas from an abandoned bookstore in the deserted city of Paris, Hans plotted a route down through southern France to southern Spain. It was mid-September, and he thought he should set himself up in a warmer climate zone before the winter set in. While walking, then bicycling, for exercise around the ghostly French capital, Ende wound up visiting the empty Louvre Museum, and stood alone in front of the famous Mona Lisa. There, he pondered humanity's legacy and history, and harkened back upon the many wonders that civilization had brought to the world. Hans also visited France's largest library -- Le Bibliotheque Nationale -- near the river Seine, and took several volumes of various fiction and non-fiction reading materials in French, English, German, and Italian.

 Leaving Paris (after ruefully noting that not a single baguette was left in town, but that there were still plenty of surplus bottles of wine), the young Swiss man drove south to Arles, then crossed the Spanish border and went through Barcelona and continued on into Valencia. Once there, he loaded a sack of their famous, sweet oranges, and grabbed a fishing pole on a whim at a sporting goods store. On a pier at the seashore, he first learned the fact that fish had survived the pandemic. This was reassuring, seeing as he was guaranteed fresh protein for the eventual time when his canned and packaged foods would expire. Later, in a Mediterranean tide pool, he saw that clams and oysters had also successfully lived through the awful pandemic.

 Hans next hot-wired a large recreational vehicle, and procured several 20-liter gasoline jerry-cans. He figured out how to safely siphon fuel from abandoned cars using plastic tubing to fill his steel containers, so as to never be stranded on empty between towns and cities, for he knew that RVs guzzled a lot of gas.

 Heading further south and west down the Spanish coast, he eventually saw the impressive rock of Gibraltar looming in the distance. Ende realized that he was only fourteen kilometers from Morocco and hence the continent of Africa. Although he knew how to paddle a canoe and row a rowboat, if he ever wanted to cross the strait, he realized would need to commandeer a motorboat. Such thoughts made him realize that he could also sail the thirty-five kilometers from the northern coast of France across the English Channel to the British Iles, or simply drive there through the underwater Chunnel. Furthermore, he could even retrace his route and go east across Europe, and theoretically then drive completely across Russia to the Pacific, or motor across Asia via Turkey and Iran all the way to India or China. Although the final satellite news communications he heard before they ceased altogether indicated that all areas of the Earth were dying, perhaps somewhere in the remote regions of Siberia or Mongolia a few people survived, Hans speculated. It might be worth it to venture there and see for himself. Besides, he had nothing but time anyway.

 The young Swiss man drove on, however, to Cadiz, on the Atlantic side of southwestern Spain. Here, he found salt waters which were still warm enough for swimming, off an attractive, expansive beach ("Cortadura") of beautiful golden sand. Hans parked his RV close to the shore and gathered some dry driftwood to build a fire on the beach. It was nearing sunset, and he had decided in the pleasant weather to sleep outside tonight in a sleeping bag, rather than inside the RV in his bed. He made a simple dinner of tinned tuna, sliced peaches, garbanzo beans, a wedge of cheese with crackers, and chocolate-chip cookies. He heated up the beans and tuna over a compact Bleuet portable Campingaz stove, and ate off an aluminum mess plate. He also opened a small bottle of Mateus white wine. Then he relaxed after starting the fire. Soon, the moon rose and stars appeared, after the skies had faded from their dramatic purple and pink colors of day's end.

 Hans had never been a particularly religious or introspective man, although his family raised him as a Lutheran. Now, he had the time to wonder: Why did God unleash this pandemic horror upon His creation? Why was I spared? What is my new purpose to keep on living? What will happen to me? As the embers died down from his beach fire and the gentle rhythm of the ocean's waves peacefully lulled him, Ende grew sleepy, curled up in his lime-green sleeping bag and drifted off to dreamland.

 The young Swiss man, as always, awoke with the sun. Grabbing a towel from inside his RV, Hans went down to the water for a wake-up swim. But what he saw stunned him!

 It was a fresh human footprint in the moist sand, toes facing towards him. There was no further trail, for whoever made the mark must have entered the water and then left the area by going either north or south, staying in the water so as not to be followed. However -- and even more shockingly -- next to the footprint were the letters "FE," printed in the wet shore sand. What could that mean?

 Upon closer examination, Hans realized that the footprint was smaller and narrower than his own. Was it a male or a female foot? Why hadn't the person woken Hans up? Was the person afraid that Ende was infected and hence a mortal danger? And, more importantly, how had the mysterious stranger who made these marks survived for more than two years, like Hans did?

 As for the imprint of FE, Hans knew that was the chemical symbol for the element iron. But wait...it was also the Spanish word for "faith." Or could it be the initials for a name?

 Was the mystery visitor trying to urge Hans to have 'faith' that he or she would eventually return? His heart leapt in amazement and in joyful possibilities. Hans quickly cupped his hands and shouted out in four languages in all directions -- hailing hellos, reassuring whoever had done this that he himself was not contagious, pleading for a response -- hoping for something, anything in reply. But he was met with silence in the wind.

 Still, he had the gut feeling that the stranger would be coming back sooner rather than later. He would wait and be patient. He would have faith. He even said a tearful prayer in thanks to the Almighty.

 He returned to his RV and grabbed a fresh notebook and his pen, then went back outside and sat in the warming sun on the sand by the footprint and the two letters. He laughed at the irony that today was indeed a Friday, as he recalled Daniel Defoe's novel, "Robinson Crusoe."

 On the first page of his notebook, he wrote happily in bold capital letters: YEAR ONE...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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