

Sojourn

Word Count: 1,773

I found Darius Meyers at the edge of a lake three days before the world ended.

By then, half the country wanted him crucified and the other half wanted him bled dry. His face had been painted across buildings and projected onto the sides of evacuation centers like a long-lost hero but, depending on who held the marker, the words beneath his face ranged from savior to coward.

I did not know Darius personally. That's something I should confess before this disease finishes hollowing me out. I was a reporter during this time, and a damn good one at that. My name will be of no importance to anyone who reads this but perhaps none of our names will. The truth, however, should live on, even if it survives only as a bundle of stained pages found beneath a dead man's hand.

The thing is, Darius could have saved us all, but he never promised he would. The world simply decided he owed it to us. We'll get to that part later.

Darius was born on a hot Alabama night to Walter and Marianne Meyers. He had entered this world without a sound. No matter how hard the doctors slapped his feet, cleared his lungs and pinched his skin, he simply remained silent.

This silence went on for the first five years of his life. He neither mumbled nor gestured for anything. His parents learned sign language, but Darius refused that form of communication as well. Instead, he pointed and shook his head when necessary.

Then, on the morning of his fifth birthday, he stood at the living-room window and watched a flock of birds gather along a telephone wire. His mother came up behind him and asked what he was looking at.

“‘Sojourn,’ he said.” An odd word for any child but stranger still for one who had spent five years in silence.

Regardless, his parents celebrated as though they had just found out they won the lottery. They called relatives, doctors, and neighbors to come see that their child was just like

everyone else! They encouraged him to repeat the word. Instead, Darius said “Mother”, then “Father”, and by the end of the demonstration it was clear that he possessed the vocabulary of a child several years older. But conversation never truly interested him.

While in school, he would answer questions when required. He completed assignments, passed exams, and sometimes corrected teachers when they made mistakes. When asked to explain himself, he would simply say “No.” Naturally, he was called defiant by his teachers and unreachable by his counselors. Despite all of their opinions, Darius remained unbothered.

This is not to say that Darius was a completely unemotional human. He had his peculiar habits just like anybody else. He never unpacked completely when his family traveled for the summer. He enjoyed spending nights lying in the grass under the stars. He refused to paint his bedroom under the pretense that “There was no point making permanent choices in a temporary place”.

You’ll have to forgive me for trailing off. My hands have begun to shake as I fight off this inevitable dark sleep. Bear with me, reader. I shall explain how we came to this point momentarily.

Years passed, and Darius grew into a tall, narrow young man with an unreadable face. He enrolled at a state university and studied biology, though he never told anyone what he intended to do with the degree.

During his freshman year, a blood bank parked one of its vans outside the student center. Darius had volunteered along with his classmates. It was a small act of kindness that would eventually kill billions of people.

At the time, no one noticed him among the line of students eager for free cookies and an excuse to miss class. He filled out the forms, allowed the nurse to draw a single vial, and left without taking the juice they offered afterward. Four days later, the blood bank contacted him.

They were calling it the “God Blood” at first, although it has had many names since then. Darius was one of four people in the entire world to have it running through his veins. With it, he could give blood to anyone in need of it; no matter the blood type. Like the

other three, Darius was asked to become a frequent donor. I can only imagine the look on their faces when he refused by saying a single word: “Sojourn.”

Research facilities offered him money and anonymity in hopes he would change his mind, but he refused every bribe that came his way. His parents gave the same answer when government representatives visited their home and insisted that Darius could change the future of medicine. Then, people started dying.

If my memory is still any good, the first confirmed case appeared in Huntsville, Alabama. It was the biggest story of my career and I poured every ounce of my abilities into covering it. My headline was one for the books: “A Healthy Woman Wakes with a Fever, Then Dies Before Sunset.” Little did I know that over the next two weeks, similar deaths would be reported in twelve countries.

The disease was spreading so fast that scientists could only determine that it was airborne, yet no amount of face masks or hazmat suits prevented it from entering the body. The infection announced itself by way of fatigue, followed by the darkening of the veins beneath the skin. Excruciating pain ensued over the next few hours until finally the pain stopped. Victims became calm, almost euphoric in their final moments.

As you can imagine, a cure for this deadly disease was found in God Blood. Scientists used the blood to save as many as they could but eventually the blood ran out. Even when the three donors allowed the scientists to drain every usable drop from their bodies, it just wasn’t enough.

Darius became the sole owner of the miracle blood.

At this point, my headlines had taken a darker turn: “The Man Who Could Save the World but Chooses Not to.” Looking back on it, it was an unfair accusation on my part, but I digress.

People began looking at Darius as a savior at first. Children recorded messages from hospital beds, families gathered outside his parents' house carrying candles. Even religious leaders called him chosen.

But no matter the amount of praise or how heart-wrenching the pleas, Darius remained silent. This went on for a few days until finally, the world became impatient.

Senators classified the epidemic as an inevitable extinction of the human race and with this, proposed emergency legislation allowing the government to seize what they called Biological Resources “necessary for species preservation”. A fancy way of stating that the God Blood that Darius carried could be taken by force if necessary.

Naturally, chaos ensued.

His parents’ house was burned down although the official report blamed it on an electrical failure of some sort. Rumors spread of samples of the God Blood in lavatories across the world. Each one was destroyed without a single drop of the blood found. And as the world burned and the bodies piled up, Darius was nowhere to be found.

I can’t tell you what persuaded me to begin searching for him. At first, I told myself I wanted another interview. A last hurrah of some sort just to say I did it. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that I just didn’t want to die.

I had spent hours following rumors that led nowhere, until eventually I found myself walking without direction. I ended up on an old trail through a forest untouched by the evacuation camps and mass graves. The air smelled of oak and damp earth; a mercy after weeks of ash and burning flesh. Soon, the trees opened onto a lake.

The water was serene. There were no bodies floating on the surface nor were there any aircraft flying overhead. It was an oasis of peace and there, standing right at the water’s edge was the sole inhabitant; Darius.

He had the same smooth face and distant eyes from his smeared photos. He wore a pale shirt and dark trousers completely untouched by dirt or grime. I was petrified at the sight of him. My dry mouth lay agape as he continued to stare out into the lake in silence.

“Well...” I finally uttered. “Aren’t you the man of the hour?”

He turned towards me, his gaze moving over my cracked lips, trembling hands, and the dark veins climbing my neck. For a brief moment, I wondered whether he knew my face, or whether he had read the headline that helped turn the world against him. But there was

no pity in his eyes nor was there cruelty. He looked at me as if I was just a leaf blowing in the wind. My knees finally gave out and I collapsed to the ground. Darius turned back to the lake.

Above, the clouds began to glow.

At first, I mistook the light for more planes flying over, but then the brightness separated into dozens of pale shapes descending without sound. One of them stopped above the center of the lake. Two figures stood within it.

I cannot tell you what they were but I will say that their bodies appeared almost human. They were tall, thin, and their outlines shifted whenever I tried to focus. As I tried to decipher just what I was looking at, Darius stepped onto the lake.

He stepped onto the lake, and the surface held beneath him as he walked towards the waiting figures. I crawled after him in a pitiful attempt to beg for my life. “Wait!” I managed to scream. To my surprise, he stopped and turned towards me. We held each other’s gaze for what felt like a lifetime. “What are you?”

For the first time in all the photographs, interviews, recordings, and stories I had collected about him, his expression changed. He smiled

He approached and knelt beside me, placing one hand on my shoulder.

“‘I am what we all are,’ He said.” “Only passing through.”

Then he rose and walked into the waiting light. It ascended through the clouds as silently as it had arrived, and the lake became still again.

There were many things in this world I never understood: the meaning of life, the vastness of space, whether anyone will actually read this final report.

But I know Darius Meyers was neither the world’s hero nor its executioner.

He was just here temporarily.