

NOT POUNDED BY ANYTHING WHILE I PRACTICE
RESPONSIBLE SOCIAL DISTANCING

By Chuck Tingle

So far, my life has had a way of staying pretty much the same, regardless of what kind of massive upheaval or political turmoil comes rumbling down the path of history. I've been through plenty of different eras and, while the styles tend to change, there's always a thread of familiarity running through the whole thing. As much as I think the world is about to fundamentally alter course, it never really seems to get that far off track.

Until now.

It started as a few news stories here and there, reports coming in of a strange and terrifying trotting plague.

Honestly, I didn't pay much attention at first because I wasn't even sure what those talking heads on the news meant when they uttered these strange and seemingly disconnected words. Trotting is a form of movement, similar to dancing, that gets folks from place to place with their head held high, similar to the confident strut of a pony. How could anything resembling this wonderful maneuver be considered a plague.

The news stories didn't stop, however, and eventually I saw a video of someone suffering from the bizarre disorder with my own eyes. There they were, broadcast across the world in all of their playful trotting glory.

This short clip depicted a man on the street, his knees kicking high and his hands held out in a perfect trotting position. He's moving in wide circles, randomly swooping out of the loop sometimes but always returning to his chosen path.

"What are you doing?" the person behind the camera calls out to the man, a deep confusion and concern in their voice.

"Trotting," the man calls back. "Can't stop trotting."

"Are you tired?" the voice behind the camera continues.

"Pretty tired," the man offers. "Just feels good to trot."

Soon enough, more and more videos of this strange disorder start to pour in, and while this disease has caused no injuries or fatalities, and the trots only last an hour or so, it appears to be quite contagious. On the surface it seems vaguely harmless, but nobody is interested in finding out what happens to these playful trotters in the long term.

To be honest, this whole thing has hit me pretty hard. If there's one thing I love to do, it's trot around cutely, and the way this illness has transformed and distorted an activity that I love this much has been personally devastating. I want my trots to be on my own terms, not because some bizarre disease compels me to do it.

Like I said, life has changed.

"Did you get enough food to last you if the government quarantines everyone?" my friend Grommo asks as we sit in the middle of a near empty café.

I nod, then take a long sip from my glass of cold chocolate milk. “Yeah, I’m all stocked up,” I reply. “Got in early. There’s almost nothing in the stores now.”

Grommo’s eyes light up in shock as I say this. “Really?” he questions. “You move fast! How did you know all this was gonna go down?”

I shrug. “Paid attention to the news and took things seriously, I guess,” I explain. “I just wanted to be prepared because I figured I should socially distance anyway.”

“Socially distance?” Grommo continues. “What the hell do you mean? You’re gonna stay inside even if the government doesn’t tell you to?”

I nod. “Seems like a safe thing to do. My job is allowing us to work remotely, and it’s the best way to keep myself from risking exposure. I can still go out if I want to, like this coffee shop, but I don’t want to be around large groups of people for a little while. Even this coffee meeting might be a too much, we’ll see. I’m not perfect.”

Grommo glances around, noticing how empty this place is. There’s only a handful of other customers and they’re all sitting incredibly far apart from one another. “Oh wow,” he finally offers. “I didn’t really notice how few people were here right now.”

“It’s wild, huh?” I continue, then nod affectionately. “If they’re not here that means they’re probably self-quarantining. Social distancing is an important tool for fighting this thing, or at least making the cases spread out over time so the healthcare system isn’t hit with patients all at once.”

Suddenly, my friend is struck by a wave of alarm. “Wait a minute, why the hell are *we* here? Are we gonna start trotting?”

I consider his words. Honestly, maybe he’s right, but I’m no expert. I try and remain calm. “We probably won’t start trotting from this, but it’s important to be safe and aware. I’m certainly not gonna touch my face until I’ve washed my hands, and if I start to feel any trots coming on then I’ll immediately self-quarantine to stay away from other people. I guess it’s case by case. I decided to meet with a single friend at an empty coffee shop, but I’m also not going to be attending the yearly hug party that my grandparents are throwing tomorrow. It’s all depends.”

My friend considers this for a long while, then stands up. “Well, if I don’t see you for a bit, I’m glad we got to grab one last cup of coffee. I’m gonna head back.”

I smile and stand with him. “Likewise, Bill.”

Grommo reaches out to shake my hand but I don’t put mine out to greet him. Instead, I offer an elbow, which he notices and then quickly shifts gears. We knock elbows proudly.

I head out of the coffee shop and arrive at my car, climbing in and starting it up. One of my favorite songs is playing on the radio, and the sweet sound of it’s

glorious, soaring vocals immediately cause a smile cross my face. With all this craziness in the world, I've started to appreciate the simple pleasures a lot more.

I pull out onto the road and find that almost all the traffic I'd expected at this hour has completely vanished. It's smooth sailing all the way, which I love, but it also makes me consider my opinion on a few things. As I explained to Grommo just moments earlier, my definition of social distancing had meant not going to large gatherings.

Apparently, however, there are people out there taking things a lot further.

"Do I really *need* to avoid content with *everyone*?" I say aloud to myself. "I was only gonna skip the spit contest and the hug party."

The thing is, I wouldn't be *that* hard to spend two weeks inside my apartment, regardless of a government mandated lockdown. Other people might not have a choice in the matter, required to leave for work or something similarly important, but I'm in the fortunate position to make this decision for myself.

Maybe I should use this privilege for the greater good.

"I'll make it a game," I state proudly, suddenly alarmed by the way this whole situation has caused me to start having conversations with myself. Maybe it's my mind preparing for the two weeks to come.

I decide right then and there, for as long as this crisis is going on I'll practice extreme social distancing. No more coffee shop trips, no more anything.

I take a deep breath and let it out, suddenly looking forward to the challenge of it all. Maybe I'll watch a few seasons of my favorite TV show, or find a new one to enjoy that I'd been meaning to check out but hadn't found the time. Maybe I'll read all of those Tingle's from the world's greatest author, Chuck Tingle, that I'd downloaded but still hadn't cracked open.

Eventually, I find myself pulling into the garage of my apartment building. I park and get out, a new spring in my step as I grow more and more excited for the self-imposed challenge. Sure, it's going to be difficult turning down social engagements, but everyone else seems to be doing it, too, so I'm sure they'll understand.

The second I get inside, I head to my bathroom and give my hands a deep, vigorous wash under the hot water with some antibacterial soap. Next, I head over to my calendar, which hangs on the wall of my entryway, to get a real look at what I'll be missing out on this week.

I grab a pen from the nearby table, crossing things off just to make them official.

"Canceled. Postponed. Canceled," I say, slashing out the few spaces for events that have already been taken care of, whether I want to go or not.

I have no problem drawing a line through the aforementioned hug party and spit contest, and make a mental note to call and give my apologies.

The next event's give me pause, however. I'd completely forgotten about the three dates I'd had lined up this weekend, falling on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

I take a deep breath and then let it out, remembering my commitment to social distancing. Sure, I was excited, but I'm sure they'll understand if we push things back two weeks.

Suddenly, my phone starts to buzz. I glance down and realize two things in unison. First, today happens to be Friday, which means my scheduled lunch was supposed to occur now. Second, someone downstairs is ringing the bell, hoping to be let in.

Instead of pressing a button on my phone to open the gate, I dash through my apartment, throwing open the screen door and stepping out onto my second story balcony. I look down to see my date, Krimble, waiting patiently with a flower in his hand.

The muscular T-Rex is dressed handsomely in a dark, well-cut suit, the black fabric making the color of his light green scales pop.

Suddenly, I feel a powerful trot pulse through my body. I have no idea if this involuntary movement is from my excitement at seeing Krimble, or a warning sign that the trotting plague might have found its way into my system, but the symptom is there. What had started as a choice to self-quarantine has now transformed into an absolute necessity.

Sure, this little bounce of joy is likely a complete coincidence, especially since I'm prone to trotting in exciting circumstances, but I'm happy to follow the model of better safe than sorry.

"Hey!" I call out to the handsome dinosaur below, catching his attention and drawing it upward.

Krimble smiles when he sees me, waving and nodding. "Hey up there! I just buzzed you on the door. You ready to roll?"

"Yeah... about that," I begin, not exactly sure how to break the news. "I know we were going to pound each other tonight, but right now I can't be pounded. I'm socially distancing."

"Socially what?" the dinosaur questions, confused.

"Socially distancing. I'm staying in for a few weeks. Most people are just avoiding major events to stop the potential spread of the trotting plague, but I just trotted a bit and now I think it's best for me to postpone the bone."

A look of concern washes over my date's face. "You trotted? Are you okay?"

I nod. "Yeah, I bounced a little bit, but it was definitely a trot. Not sure if I was just excited to see you or if it's something more, but right now I should probably stay inside for two weeks. I've got all the supplies I could want."

"Well, if you need anything else call me," the handsome T-Rex offers.

I nod, thankful for his understanding. “I will. I’m really sorry, I should’ve messaged you sooner.”

“It’s all good,” Krimble replies. “Take care of yourself. I’ll see you in a few weeks!”

With that, the dinosaur turns and heads back towards his car.

The second that Krimble leaves a wave of relief washes over me. I’d been a little worried about canceling last minute, but he was incredibly understanding of the situation. Of course, Krimble is a kind dinosaur and I figured he would take things in stride, but having that whole situation out of the way is a huge relief.

It’s such a relief, in fact, that I find myself incredibly exhausted. I collapse down onto my nearby couch, laughing to myself as I consider how much time I’m about to spend here. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, then let it out slowly. The anxiety that has been building up within my body seems to flow out along with the air, putting me at ease as I float in a haze of relaxation.

When I open my eyes again, I realize that the shadows streaming across my whole apartment have changed, shifted vastly in their angles. I must’ve been asleep for hours.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes and I glance down at it. Someone is at the door again.

I stand up and creep back over to the deck, gazing down to find my next dates waiting for me. Hanging out below are two gorgeous bigfeet, Mario and Amber.

“Hey!” I call down.

The couple glances up, waving when they spot me. “We’re here!” they call out.

“Aren’t you a day early?” I question.

“It’s Saturday,” Amber replies.

I suddenly realize that what I’d assumed was a brief nap was actually an entire day’s worth of sleep. It was my intention to call the bigfeet and reschedule our date, but I slept through the whole damn thing. Now I’m stuck here in exactly the same position I was yesterday, forced to break the bad news to them.

“I’m really sorry,” I begin apologetically. “I’m practicing social distancing right now.”

“Aw okay,” Amber continues. “We understand. We’re doing the same thing, canceled all of our big events and stuff, but we figured just the three of us would be fine.”

“It might be,” I offer, “but I had a small trot yesterday and I think I should probably fully self-quarantine for a while.”

Like before, I’m incredibly nervous about their reaction to this news. I really should’ve called ahead to make this cancellation a little less disappointing, but this

is the situation I've found myself in and now it's my job to deal with it. My heart is slamming hard within my chest, anxious for their reply.

The bigfoot couple exchange glances, then gaze back up at me with warm smiles. "That's totally fine! We're all in this together! Thanks for doing the responsible thing and staying home when you're sick," Mario offers. "Don't worry at all."

Their kindness means the world to me, and I can't help the pleased grin that works its way across my face. "Thank you," I offer. "Once this has died down we'll have a wonderful date night."

"Looking forward to it," Amber calls up. "Feel better! Let us know if you need anything!"

I wave goodbye as the bigfeet turn to leave. Their kindness and understanding was above and beyond, and I feel thankful to know such an understanding couple of sasquatches.

As my gaze lingers, however, I see yet another group passing them by in the opposite direction. I gasp when I notice who it is, recognizing the enormous crew immediately.

The swarming mass of unicorns approaching my building are none other than The Lobsters, one of my favorite teams in the Unicorn Baseball League, as well as my dates for tomorrow.

"You're a day early!" I yell out.

"Sorry about that," the team calls up to me from the street below, their voices erupting forth in the strange wash of a crowd. "Did we say Sunday? I thought we said Saturday?"

"I thought we said Sunday," I call down, then open up my phone to check our text messages. I read them over quickly, then realize my mistake.

My date with The Lobster baseball team was today, and apparently I'd double booked myself with Mario and Amber. Fortunately, this isn't a mistake that's likely to cause a problem because I'm not going out either way.

"You're right, it was today," I yell down to the team. "My bad. I should've called to cancel. I can't go out tonight because I'm practicing social distancing. No crowds."

The team of unicorn baseball players all begin to chatter amongst themselves, the soft hum of conversation rising up to my position on the balcony. Moment's later they quite down.

"We understand," the crowd yells up to me in unison. "It's difficult to date with a team this large anyway, and now that people are avoiding crowds I think we'll be seeing plenty of cancelations."

"I'm sorry," I retort. "That sucks. Have you considered dating separately?"

The team chatters amongst themselves a bit more, coming to a decision on the matter.

“That’s probably a good idea,” they finally shout back.

“I mean, you shouldn’t be in a large crowd right now anyway,” I remind them. “I know it’s hard to separate when you’re such a close knit group, but sometimes it’s worth the effort. It might be a lot safer if you all took a break from doing everything together.”

“You’re right,” the team replies in unison. “Thanks Bill.”

It takes a minute, but soon enough the crowd below my deck begins to disperse, heading off in their separate directions after some heartfelt goodbyes.

Once most of the unicorns have disappeared I head back inside, feeling a little broken hearted about the whole thing. I understand that canceling these social engagements is an important part of staying healthy at the moment, but that doesn’t mean I won’t get lonely this evening as I think about all the wonderful dates I would’ve been going out on.

If only I could go on a date with myself.

Suddenly, the idea hits me like a lightning bolt. I *can* go on a date with myself, and that’s exactly what I intend to do.

Immediately, I spring into action, searching through the cabinets for food as I prepare myself for an ambitious task ahead. I’m typically not much of a cook, but tonight that doesn’t matter. Tonight I’m going to use this self-quarantine as an excuse to flex my creative muscles, a reason to do something that I typically wouldn’t even begin to attempt.

Once I’ve gathered a few supplies, I hop online and start searching for recipes that make good use of the items at my disposal. I quickly discover a delicious looking lasagna that will take some time and push my limits, then dive in.

Normally, this kind of thing would be incredibly overwhelming, the long, drawn out process of crafting a meal causing me all kinds of anxiety. It’s difficult for me to focus on things that require this kind of patience, my mind always floating back to some other activity that I “should” be taking care of.

Now, however, this social distancing has allowed me a moment to relax and enjoy the natural process of crafting a meal from scratch. For once, there’s no part of me that’s crying to simply give up and head out to a restaurant for the exact same thing.

I put on some music and, soon enough, the process begins to flow, the oven heating up as I take on this task step by step.

At the same time, I begin to set the mood with a few candles on my dining room table, pulling out all the stops. If this is going to be a date with myself, I might as well show me a good time. I pull out all the stops, even cracking open a

bottle of finely aged chocolate milk from the eighties that I'd somehow managed to get my hands on and was saving for a special occasion.

Eventually, the meal is completed and I find myself sitting alone at my table, a beautiful plate of steaming, gooey lasagna sitting before me. I smile as I cut into it, breaking off a selection with my fork and then lifting up to my mouth slowly.

I take a huge bite, the bountiful flavors hitting my taste buds immediately. The sensation is incredible, and I chew extra slow just to savor every moment of this wondrous meal.

I'm much better at cooking than I thought.

It suddenly hits me that I might actually be better than I'd thought at plenty of things. While it's a little frustrating to cancel all these social obligations, and refrain from making new ones, there's still plenty of things to learn, practice and enjoy.

I'm gonna be fine, I realize. This is going to be a very productive week.

I'm waiting at the restaurant in a way that I typically don't. It's not the physical manner in which I've positioned myself on this chair, it's the mental clarity that I now possess. Typically, I'd be checking my phone in a situation like this, trying to occupy my mind while I waited for my date to arrive, but right now I'm happy to simply enjoy the sights and sounds around me.

This place is buzzing with excitement, and with good reason. It's been about a week now since everyone came out of hiding, and while things haven't entirely returned to normal, there's still a sense of calm in the air.

My time in self quarantine was difficult at first, but I got about as much done as I expected. I read every book on my list, and enjoyed a few television shows that friends had been recommending for ages. Thanks to my phone and computer, it also wasn't nearly as mentally isolating as I thought it might be. I still chatted with my loved ones and spent plenty of time catching up with the folks who I'd otherwise be running into face to face.

I also didn't get sick.

Strangely, the whole thing ended up making me reach out to *even more* people than I normally would, texting friends just to catch up as we passed the time together.

Most importantly, though, the experience allowed me to enjoy the wait and the patience that used to be a part of almost everything we do. I'm happy to just sit here now, appreciating nothing more than the hum of the voices around me.

I suddenly spot Krimble entering through the doors of the restaurant. We lock eyes and he waves excitedly, clearly happy to see me. I stand up and meet him halfway, embracing him warmly.

It's nice to feel the dinosaur's scales against my skin, and despite his literal cold blood I can immediately feel a powerful emotional warmth between the two of us.

"It's so good to see you," I gush, then motion towards our table. "Come, sit down."

Krimble follows my lead and, soon enough, the two of us are sitting across from one another, smiling wide.

"I can't believe we're finally on our date," I offer.

"I can," the handsome dinosaur retorts knowingly. "We knew it wasn't going to last forever. Sure it was difficult sometimes, but for the most part I just got to do some work I'd been meaning to get around to. Also, my house is spotless."

"I know!" I blurt. "That deep clean was priceless!"

The two of us start laughing for a moment, when suddenly our attention is caught by two other figures approaching.

"You're here!" I cry out excitedly, standing up to greet the rest of our party.

Mario and Amber, the gorgeous bigfoot couple, wrap their arms around me. They make their way over to Krimble in turn.

"It's been a while," Mario offers.

The two sasquatches take seats of their own, joining in to create an even larger group date.

"We were just discussing what we did during the lockdown," I inform them. "Mostly cleaning and reading. What about you?"

Mario grins. "I learned how to speak three new languages."

"And I learned magic," Amber chimes in.

The beautiful bigfoot reaches out her arm and waves her hand in the air for a moment, then suddenly snaps her wrist to make a deck of cards appear.

The whole table gasps in astonishment, impressed with her slight-of-hand maneuver. "Pick a card," Amber demands, spreading out the deck and pushing it towards me.

I take my pick, showing it to the rest of the table and then putting it back into the deck.

"Five of spades," Amber says.

The table gasps again and I laugh, nodding.

It's incredible sitting here right now, feeling the warmth of this gathering after making such tough choices just a little over a month earlier. At the time it felt like I might never see these people again, and now here we are picking up right where we left off.

I suddenly notice something from the corner of my eye.

“There they are!” I announce, taking note of the entire handsome unicorn baseball team that has crammed into the restaurant entryway.

I wave them over, excited for the company.