

Things fall apart...

An on-line novel by Fred Heiser

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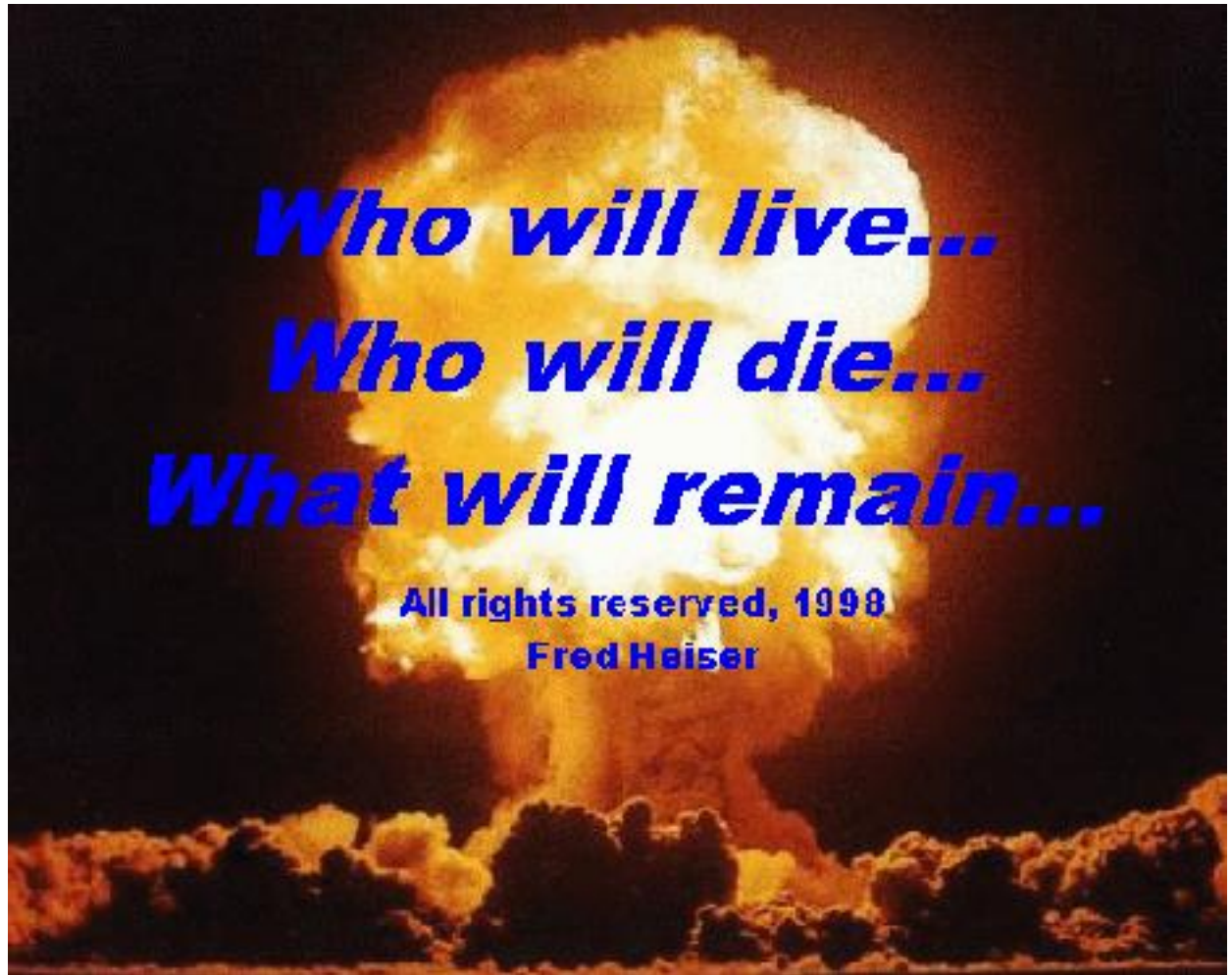
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Chapter 1

Prelude

The end of the world as we knew it came early in August when Americans had their minds on other things. We each pursued the business of life, be it in the comfort of air conditioned office buildings, the factories of our unrivaled industrial base or the vast agricultural fields of the heartland. With nary a thought for the future except the next report, the next date or the next weekend, we were immersed in the life of the here and now. Unsurpassed in our military might, our economic power and our technological superiority, our leaders sought to look strong and busy to an uninterested electorate by imposing our will on nations far away in the belief that nobody would be stupid enough to stand against us.

Wisdom is not traditionally the strong point of the American government. When not confronted by an obvious threat, the subtle ones tend to be ignored. After the crumbling of the Soviet Union, and later the crushing of Iraq, no new crisis filled the gap, nothing galvanized our native streak of patriotism any longer. A whole raft of police actions were engaged in to justify the continued maintenance of the industrial-military complex, but they lacked urgency and accomplished little. Nobody even suspected where the greatest threat to American survival since the Revolution would come from.

Among it's many other tasks. the North American Air Defense Command is responsible for keeping watch on near Earth space. This involves tracking not only satellites, spaceships and missiles, but also nuts and bolts and space garbage. It is their job to plot the trajectories of these various objects to chart safe orbits for American space craft, to predict reentry points for those objects whose orbits are decaying and to assess the military implications of everything they find or are informed of. They do a good job of it, but a determined adversary can hide almost anything.

Far above the earth, where there dwells little but space dust and the occasional satellite, the Earth had a number of dark partners. Each of these dark partners was accompanied by a small but very bright and noisy companion which ensured the dark one would remain unseen by radar, infrared or regular optics. As they circled over the eastern hemisphere one of these dark partners began a steady drift away from it's companion, a drift that would soon take it over Smith County, Kansas.

End of Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Lynn

Lynn McArthur was busy drilling a patient's tooth when it hit. The lights went out, the drill stopped and the muzak quit. Simultaneously, the battery powered emergency light kicked in. Though her face didn't betray the slightest surprise or discomfiture, under her breath she was muttering curses that would have turned a strong man to jelly to hear. Reassuring her patient, she stepped out to the lobby to speak to the receptionist in the lazy southern drawl she turned on while around customers because they liked it. "Dodie, honey, could you turn on that battery powered radio of yours? And check see if y'all can make a phone call for me please?"

Dodie pulled out the antenna and turned on the radio she kept for when she just couldn't stand the canned stuff piped into the building by the owner. Nothing but static. She tuned up and down the band repeatedly, there just wasn't anything. Next she tried the phone. All lines were dead.

"Sorry Lynn. There just isn't anything. No dial tone either."

Lynn thought this most curious. "Nobody on the air at all?"

"Nope. Nothing at all."

Worried thought flitted through Lynn's mind. Didn't they have emergency generators? Half the state must be down. And the phones didn't depend on AC power, so the exchange must be down as well. But didn't they also have emergency generators? Somebody is going to pay hell for this. Her day looked shot, too. The stopped wall clock read 9:59. Back to the patient.

"Mistah Peterson, I'm going to give y'all a choice. You can wait around here 'till the power comes back on, or I can put a temporary in and y'all can come back later. Normally I'd be closed, but you can set up the return appointment in the evenin' or the week end. What'll it be?"

"Murphulgumph!"

"Okay. It'll take just a minute to put in the temporary. Now rinse and spit. Pretty please?"

"Glublumf." Mr. Peterson spat.

"Now, open real wide. The light's not so good right now"

Dental drills are pneumatically powered by about 30 pounds per square inch of air pressure. Lynn could only hope that she had enough pressure in the tank to finish the job in case the compressor didn't kick in

again. And cursed her cheap landlord for refusing to install a backup generator.

In ten minutes she had him out the door. There remained two customers in the waiting room. They were offered the alternative of waiting a half hour or setting up a return appointment and being on their way. Something about this blackout really bothered her. One man leapt at the opportunity to postpone the inevitable, while the other stubbornly insisted on staying to the last second and then had to be coaxed out the door with promises of substantial discounts. All that time Dodie and Ken (the dental assistant) fussed with the radio, tuning up and down both AM and FM bands and still getting nothing. The phones remained dead. The nearby intersection had a stop light, now nonfunctional of course, and a number of automotive near misses had been signaled by the screeching of tires without any concluding 'thump'. It appeared that a fair number of cars had stalled outright in random positions on the road as their drivers cranked their engines in an attempt to restart them. Some succeeded. Most didn't.

A half hour is a long time to fret. First, Lynn did a quick inventory of the earthquake supplies stashed in a closet. Then she tried the battery/crank/solar powered emergency radio in the kit, to no avail. Then she tried the car radio. Nothing but static. Then the cell phone. Dead as well. Plots from 50's science fiction thrillers danced in her head as she inventoried her medical bag and added some extras. Struggling to keep her composure, she sent Ken and Dodie home with instructions not to come back until power was restored. Not surprisingly, no new patients had shown up in the intervening time. Just in case one did, she posted a crude "closed until power returns" sign on the outer door and locked it. The alarm wouldn't come on as she attempted to set it. It should have, as the battery backup was supposed to last at least 24 hours. Misgiving began the transition to fear.

"Gort! Klaatu barada nikto!" she spoke aloud to nobody in particular. And laughed. Whistling by the graveyard was a Lynn specialty.

Tossing the bag in her Caravan, Lynn started the engine, fearing it wouldn't. She breathed a heavy sigh of relief when the engine started. "At least one thing works." she said aloud to herself, then pulled out of the small lot and drove home.

Or rather, tried to drive home. Since every traffic light in the area was out the situation was approaching gridlock. Major intersections were passing the few functional cars through slowly at best but most were blocked by stalls, fender bender accidents or just plain stupid drivers. Traffic was backed up such that you could follow residential streets only until you had to cross a major thoroughfare, at which point you were blocked. Fear began to well up inside her, fears from childhood. Visions of flames and fire trucks and blood. The sound of sirens and anger and gunfire. The smell of smoke and fear. It took a vigorous effort to quell the feelings. But then, Lynn was never short of willpower.

Being a child in Los Angeles during the summer of '65 had certainly left an impression on her.

Taking advantage of sidewalks and the occasional front yard, Lynn had finally been brought to a complete halt only a half mile from home. Five miles of driving had taken an hour and nearly a quarter

tank of gas. She was forced to give up by a chain reaction collision blocking the road ahead, other cars on her tail blocking her retreat and just too many yards with block walls to cut across. Lynn did manage to leave the Caravan in an empty spot in a driveway, hoping to return for the car before the owner of the driveway got home. Just in case, she left a note full of profuse apologies and promises to return soon in case she didn't.

From there she hoofed it. A handsome young police officer, maybe no more than half her age, was attempting to unsnarl the mess and keep tempers cool. He flashed her a brilliant smile. Despite herself, Lynn returned it, feeling the beginnings of a pleasant flush. Momentarily distracted from the problems at hand, he watched her disappear with great appreciation.

Making it home at last, her shoulder aching from the strap on the overloaded medical bag, she made a mental note to transfer the contents later to a backpack. She was always making notes. Some of them even got followed up on. Now her first concern had to be for her children.

Todd, a handsome strapping 17 year old, was at a public school and could take care of himself. He would easily make it home on his motorcycle. Jenny, her 13 year old daughter, would be getting out of 7th grade at 3:30, still plenty of time there. Ellie was 8 and attended 4th grade at a private school for the gifted. She would be getting out at 2:30, in a mere 15 minutes and somehow it didn't seem likely she could count on her childcare provider. There was only one option. Lynn would ride her bicycle there and the two would walk the two miles home together.

Just in case she didn't return before Todd got home, she left a note telling him to pick up Jenny. She didn't want her girl walking home alone with everything falling apart like this. Lynn next allowed herself a moment to be angry with her husband to be off playing politics five hundred miles away. She did this frequently, as she felt that blowing off a little steam now and then was probably better than letting it build up. Lynn had begun to feel abandoned and unloved and he was certain to hear more than an earful when he came home for the weekend Friday night.

The ride to the private school presented more of the same as she had driven through earlier, only the bike made the trip a lot easier. Every major road had come to a complete halt. Many of the cars appeared abandoned. Stranded motorists sat on the curb taking refuge from the August sun in what shade was available, snoozed in their vehicles or browsed aimlessly in nearby shops. Others could be seen walking determinedly, as though not to let anything so trivial as a citywide traffic jam block them from their destinations. Those gas stations, grocery stores and other businesses with the foresight to have emergency generators were still lit up and pedestrians wandered into them seeking air conditioning and snacks.

Crossing Chatsworth Blvd. was positively frightening. All six lanes plus the turn lanes were packed with bumper to bumper cars. She was forced to dismount and walk the bike across. Three kids, skinheads by the looks of them, were systematically walking down the lanes checking each car as they went. For what purpose, Lynn didn't have to imagine very hard. She only hoped that her car was still intact when she

was able to retrieve it. Crossing the street it occurred to her what a vulnerable target a single woman on a bicycle was, particularly to types like these. Under the circumstances, the ten speed would look like gold to them. Or for that matter, to any stranded desperate motorist. Lifting the bike up and over and squeezing between two cars, she cleared the last lane, then remounted and pedaled off as fast as she could manage.

For the first time she regretted leaving the small semi-auto pistol back home, under the night stand. She had carried one with her ever since she had been nearly raped at college. Tom had pulled some favors in and claimed their vacation home in the Sierras as a residence to get her a concealed carry permit for it from the Kern County Sheriff, but living in the upscale neighborhood had lulled her into a sense of security. Now, as a legislator's wife, the permit was a snap of the fingers. Still, she hated carrying it.

The veneer of civilization was thin. And when it got damaged, it only took a few bad actors to really mess things up. Already south-central would be ablaze. Liquor stores and pharmacies and department stores were being looted, fires started, gangs warring upon one another, stranded motorists beaten and murdered for the color of their skin or the green of their cash. She didn't need to hear reports to know exactly what was going on. Lynn had been a 10 year old on summer break in Los Angeles in '65. Her father was serving a tour of duty in Vietnam from which he never returned. After the Watts riots, her mother sent her to Michigan to live with her aunt in Detroit, not exactly a winning move. Then in '68 she'd gone to live with her mother and grandparents in rural Georgia.

Her grandfather had been a stern, but loving man, constantly quoting one source or another. Sometimes Shakespeare (he had a fondness for Hamlet), sometimes 19th century American poets, sometimes Twain, sometimes the Constitution or the Declaration but most often the King James Bible. No occasion went by without some appropriate quote. As an old fashioned country lawyer he put this ability to very good use, frequently defending the poor folk for livestock, labor or produce. He introduced Lynn to the great books of the world and made it clear in no uncertain terms she would be a success in life. He would settle for no less.

People had sometimes called him 'Atticus' as a nickname, even though his real name was Leon Jennings. Lynn was unable to figure out why and her grandfather was unwilling to say. There was a bolt action Springfield "ought six" over the mantle, used once a year in deer season and kept meticulously clean. On her 13th birthday Gramps, as she came to call him, took her out to the forest and taught her how to shoot with a .22. This was an experience both frightening and exciting to a city girl who had previously only associated guns with fire and fear and death. He taught her that firearms could also mean food, recreation and protection.

The streets were full, but the school parking lot was empty Apparently nobody else had had any luck driving there either. Nervous parents, mostly females with frightened children, milled about discussing

the event.

Never heard of such a thing... Stranger than the Northridge quake... Saw looters... Car won't run properly... Alien invasion... I'm scared... Husband is 30 miles away at work... War...? What about the children whose parents can't make it...? End of the world...? Smoke in the sky over LA....

Lynn made her way to the office, taking care to chain her bike to the fence. Some of the other parents there had ridden bicycles too. More than a few of the of the parents were on foot and gazed enviously at her transport.

"Hi, I'm Lynn McArthur here to pick up Ellie McArthur?" Inside the heat was building. Absent air conditioning or fans, it would soon be hotter inside than outside. As a sign of the times, this school had been designed with no large exterior windows. Those few that were in place could not be opened, only the doors. Of course there was no backup generator. This sort of thing just never happened.

"OK Ms McArthur, just one moment. The classrooms are dark and as hot as ovens, so we have all the children in the courtyard. I'll send an aide to call her name." The aid dispatched, the receptionist fell to half heartedly twiddling with a portable transistor radio. Unexpectedly a station came in and the entire office froze.

"This is your emergency communications system. This station has emergency information for the San Fernando Valley area. This is not a test. Repeat, this is not a test.

"At ten fifty nine am this morning an upper atmospheric event of unknown origin cause a blackout over the contiguous forty eight states, southern Canada and northern Mexico. Severe damage to much electronic equipment has been reported throughout this area, particularly anything connected to a power line, television cable or the phone lines. Small portable radios should be unaffected, particularly if not in use at the time of the event."

Lynn had a brief, horrifying thought of the carnage the must be taking place at the airports. Then of all the delicate electronic life support equipment at the hospitals. She shuddered.

"Do not panic. If you are at home, stay there. If you are at work and are within walking distance of home, please turn off all electrical switches before leaving to walk home. Otherwise please stay at work.

"All surface streets are blocked. Many vehicles with electronic ignition that were running at the time stalled. No power is available for traffic lights. Please do not attempt to use motor vehicles on the surface streets or freeways. All roads are totally blocked. The city is working to clear off lanes for emergency vehicles.

"Gas and water utilities are still on line, but we request that you use as little water and gas as possible. Please follow the same procedures you would for a major earthquake or other disaster.

"The National Guard and Reserve are being activated. All military personnel are hereby ordered to the nearest military station by whatever means possible. All public safety officers are ordered to the nearest police station for duty. Martial law has been declared and the following executive orders are being implemented.

"There is an eight p.m. to eight am curfew. Any civilians outside during this time frame are subject to immediate detention.

"Looters, vandals and marauders are subject to being shot on sight.

"Public safety and military personnel will respond to any public display of firearms by any civilian. The right to *habeus corpus* has been suspended. The public assembly of more than five people for purposes other than disaster recovery is forbidden and such civilians are subject to immediate detention.

"All gasoline, oil or other energy resources have been nationalized, as have all electronics equipment on retail shelves or warehouses. Continued sales of these items to the general public is forbidden. All trains, commercial boats, aircraft and all motor vehicles of three or more axles have been nationalized. The nation desperately needs these resources to help us get through the immediate crisis.

"Again, please stay at home. There is no reason to panic. This message will be repeated every fifteen minutes. Please stay tuned to this station for periodic updates. This is your emergency communication system. This is not a test."

The people in the office started to panic.

Lynn thought it was an excellent time to panic. Not only was all communication and power down over the entire country, but the government was moving to nationalize everything in sight and promising protection it couldn't give. Unlike many others, Lynn did not trust to the government's competence and to deal with the situation. Uncle Sam wasn't telling everything it knew and Lynn had a sinking feeling she knew some of the missing details.

At this moment Ellie appeared in the office. "Mommy! I'm so glad to see you. Do you know what happened?"

"No honey, not exactly. But I have an idea. We'll talk about it on the way home."

Mercifully, the bike was still chained to the fence. The word of the radio announcement had spread through the crowd and the parents were visibly shaken. The sooner they got home the better. Ellie would have to ride slowly while Lynn walked/jogged along side. She only hoped she would be up to the task, not having exercised regularly for years.

"What happened? The power went down, then they led us out to wait in the courtyard. We waited for hours and the power never came back!"

"The power is down everywhere honey. Here, downtown, other cities and other states." Lynn was huffing along adequately, but just barely. It was difficult for Ellie to ride the adult bike slowly. Soon Lynn decided they had better walk the bike.

"I'm worried about Daddy! I wish Daddy were here."

Ellie had just rubbed a raw spot in Lynn's mind and she almost winced.

"We gotta be careful honey. With the power and all the radios and telephones down people will be acting crazy. Some of them will be scared. Some of them will be thinkin' they can get away with something because the police got so much to do.

"I'm still worried about Daddy. I hope he's OK."

"I hope so too." her words said. But Lynn's tone suggested something entirely different.

"Do we get to use the earthquake plan?" The kids always enjoyed the earthquake plan. It was very much like camping out without leaving home. Ellie was too young to remember much of the Northridge quake but the older two had positively enjoyed it.

"Yes, we get to use the earthquake plan. And you will probably not be going back to school again for a long time. Maybe we can get up to the cabin after the roads get cleared out." This was sure to bring quick approval. Ever since the schools went to year round schedules it had been difficult to find time when everybody was free for a vacation. Lynn feared that this vacation would be a little longer than people might expect.

They approached the traffic jam on Chatsworth. It was just as Lynn remembered, except that nobody was still in their vehicles in the 100 degree August heat. No doubt many had run their tanks dry attempting to keep their air conditioning going. Looking both ways for trouble first, they stepped out and hurried across as quickly as possible.

When they got home, Lynn found a message from Todd:

"Got home before you. Have gone to get Jenny. Don't worry, got everything covered. Love, Todd"

"Everything covered? Right. Teenagers!" she grumbled to herself.

"Here's the rules Ellie. You don't open the door to anybody or even answer the door unless you see them

through the peep hole and you know them. Otherwise you tell me and you get back from the door. Now try to see if you can pick up anything on your radio and start collecting water, just like after an earthquake."

Ellie she set to work, first tuning up the emergency station on her portable radio, then filling up containers with water. The two dogs, a couple of Blue Ticks called, creatively enough, Blue and Tick were then let into the house. Tick and Blue has been purchased as puppies because the McArthurs were all dog lovers. Tom had chosen that particular breed for their loyalty, friendliness, sharp senses and their loud baying. They reminded him of fond childhood memories of raccoon hunting in his native northern Michigan. They would make excellent alarms.

First she went to the master bedroom and retrieved the small semi-auto pistol from under the night stand. Purposefully she removed the trigger lock. Then she went to the farthest nether reaches of the closet and retrieved a long gun case and a locked metal box. Out of the gun case came a double barreled shotgun. From the locked metal box she extracted several boxes of different types of ammunition and three clips for the pistol. She loaded the clips and slipped one into the pistol and the rest in her pocket. Then two rounds went into the shotgun and then five more into the fabric shell holder on the stock. After thinking for a minute, the shotgun and some extra shells went into the closet by the front door, the pistol and its ammo into a cubby near the back door. All her children were completely safe around guns, but Lynn didn't want to cause undue anxiety by leaving them out in plain sight.

Having done all she could think of, Lynn sat down to worry and wait as only a mother can and to conceal this from her youngest daughter as only a mother could.

Lance

The dark heat was oppressive upon the backs of the three soldiers. Mosquitoes buzzed about hungrily as the sweat dripped down their brows, but the cammo clad soldiers paid no attention. They were fixated on their mission, to sabotage a truck that would soon be carrying a team of narco terrorists. Boomer watched their six while little Joe observed the target and Lance prepared the charge. The three of them concurred everything was go and Lance half crawled, half scuttled across the empty yard and under the deuce.

Lance paused for a moment, waiting for the tell tale noise that would indicate he'd been blown. Nothing stirred in the fetid Colombian night. It seem amazing that not even one guard would be set on a truck that would be used for a critical mission the next day. But then even the cartels make mistakes once in a while and the good guys get lucky. First he attached a motion sensor to the transaxle. Then he quickly wired the detonator across it with a power pack in series. Last he attached the lump of *plastique* in an inconspicuous spot adjacent to the fuel tank. The bomb would explode as the truck started to move forward and spray burning diesel in all directions.

Lance once again scanned the area for any sign of a threat, still amazed that security was so lax. Moving

slowly out from under the truck slowly he risked running in a crouch back to his partners. They then made their way back to a safe observation point, 200 meters distant. It was possible the explosive might fail to detonate. The intel they had indicated that the driver was always in the habit of starting the engine as the truck was being boarded. However, it was still possible the driver might break his habit and move the truck before the terrorists were on board or at least close enough for the blast to take out. These things would have to be reported if the mission was a bust.

Slowly the hours crawled past. Dawn streaked the sky and still no sign of the targets. It was fully light when they at last showed up, marching in single file from the nearby village. Something was wrong, horribly wrong. The terrorists were all too short. They looked just like children carrying lunch bags and books. Lance suddenly realized they were really the children of the nearby village, children of the peasants who worked the coca fields.

That truck was no terrorist transport. It was used as a school bus.

Lance tried to cry out a warning, but the words wouldn't come. All he could produce were some croaking sounds. Then he tried to run, to move, to fire his gun just to make some noise, but he couldn't. His arms and legs were pinned together as though wrapped in a sheet and all he could do was watch helplessly and wriggle uselessly as the children boarded the back of the truck.

Still there was the occasional popping of small arms, mostly handguns. Why would children be going to school if combat were nearby? Were they fleeing some kind of localized cartel warfare?

The children all got on board the truck. The driver started the engine and lurched into gear. The plastique detonated. The ground shook as the fireball climbed high into the sky. The wreckage of the bus was engulfed and everything within 20 meters was spewed with burning oil. Pieces of body parts and hot wreckage arced gracefully through the air and showered around him.

A little girl's severed head landed directly in front of him and began to speak. "*Para los niños?*"

Lance looked up at his partners. Somehow little Joe had morphed into the Bogota CIA station chief. He spoke, "We needed a credible deterrent."

Then Boomer, who had turned into the Colombian Army liaison to the CIA, spat out, "*Suis indios!*"

The station chief smiled and replied with enthusiasm, "The horror. The horror!"

Gunfire erupted almost next to Lance.

Lance Willis woke up screaming. The sweat soaked bed linen was wrapped tightly around him and had been torn from his struggle. Oddly, even though he was awake, the distant gunfire continued. Warily he raised his aching head to look around.

It was a small three room apartment in a seedy part of town. The living room was dominated by a hideaway bed, a coffee table littered with empty wine bottles and a decrepit old chair. The one window looked out over a trash strewn alley and the windows of another equally seedy apartment complex. The kitchen had another window with an identical view, a small table, a two burner gas stove and an elderly refrigerator. There was nowhere any sign of personalization or any artifacts - other than empty bottles - to give clues about its occupant.

Aside from the occasional gunfire, (unusual even for this neighborhood) there was something else wrong. Lance forced his eyes to focus as he squinted as his clock. In a few seconds it came to him - there was no time display. Also it was stiflingly hot and still in the room - no fan. Power must be down. worked its way into his alcohol fogged mind.

A painful look out the window indicated the time must be getting past noon. Lance was due at work at 14 hundred hours to pull another 12 hour shift as a security guard at a high rise building, a shift he pulled three times a week mainly to keep himself in booze and pot the remaining four days.

The phone was dead.

Lance powered up the walkman he kept for the late night hours at the Miller building, when the doors were locked and all he had to do was make the *Detex* rounds and listen for the fire alarm. None of the usual stations were on the air. After a couple minutes of tuning he picked up something on the AM band, some kind of a repeating emergency recording.

The blood drained from Lance's face. He knew exactly what had happened.

At first he was inclined to go back to sleep. There was nothing he could do about it. He really didn't give a damn about his own life anyhow. But that last ineradicable vestige of stubbornness that all truly strong people have in them would not allow him to give up. Curiosity get the better of him and he decided to stay awake after all.

Slipping into his skivvies, he stepped to the window and opened it. He was immediately assailed by the smell of smoke. The sky overhead was hazy and turning red from reflected firelight. Ash floated lazily down from the sky, a gray summer snowfall. Looking up the alley to the street, he caught glimpses of people carrying boxes and various articles of merchandise, no doubt liberated from local retail establishments. The sound of glass breaking, of people screaming obscenities, of random gunshots and general chaos accosted his ears. No doubt people were dying throughout the barrios and ghettos of the city for their race, their money or even the baseball insignia on their hats.

"If the cops were smart, they'd simply wall off the evil bastards and let the ghetto burn", Lance mused to himself. "Too bad the good ones and the children would die along with them. Maybe the station chief had it right. Kill 'em all and let God sort it out".

But then even under the best of conditions the gang-bangers outnumbered the cops by a hundred to one. Lance suspected the few cops who stayed on the job after a few hours without communications would all be hunkering down at the police stations. With no way to report fires, no way to distribute orders and no way to get to them anyhow, the fire department would be pretty much off line as well.

Would the Miller building be burning? Would he have a job left? In a week would there even be a world left to care? In a minute? Time to split. Not the first time he'd walked out on a job. Hopefully not the last.

Where to go? Lance had an old buddy from his Special Forces days who'd left to buy a ranch out by Paso Robles. He'd offered Lance a job there whenever Lance decided to get out. It looked like as good a destination as any. If things got as bad as they could, there'd be career opportunities aplenty for a man who was good with a gun. And Lance was very good with a gun. North and then west it would be.

It was a Spartan apartment for a Spartan life. A life that fit easily into a GI issue duffel bag. The walkman. A couple pairs of jeans, some shirts, socks, skivvies. A pair of combat boots, dress shoes and tennies. A Bronze Star, a pair of desert cammies, Section 8 discharge papers. A tooth brush, a disposable razor and a mess kit. A six pack of beer from the fridge and a package of Polish sausage.

His guard uniform he decided to leave behind. If things didn't get all FUBAR, the company would no doubt come to claim it. Instead, he put on the combat boots, a loose fitting pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. Over this went a well worn black leather jacket. The apartment and building keys he dropped through the slot on the landlady's door. Then he picked up his motorcycle helmet and left, never to return.

So easy to discard a life and start over!

The aging Harley waited in its assigned space in the complex garage. His storage area contained a small tool box he used to work on the bike with. This got strapped to his sissy bar. The engine kicked over with a satisfying growl and he was gone.

There wasn't any vehicle motion on Western Boulevard. It was a solid parking lot. The autos having the misfortune to get stuck there during the looting were in the process of being stripped. So many cars in fact, that it would take a long time even for the crowds present to get to them all. There were, however, throngs of looters, enjoying the vacation from police enforcement. The streets were littered with broken glass and discarded packaging. A corner liquor store was burning brightly, it's proprietor sitting on the curb, blood streaming down his face, weeping. Every store had been broken into, consumer electronics stores, pharmacies and liquor stores had already been stripped bare. The crowds were now working on the furniture clothing, and other less glamorous retail outlets.

Men, women and children staggered about with loads of clothing, furniture and food. Occasionally

someone would decide that it was easier to steal from the looters than to loot the stores. A fight would break out, sometimes just a tug of war, other times a gun battle. It was dangerous, maneuvering the hog down the sidewalk, maneuvering among the pedestrians and around the debris and abandoned vehicles with the occasional bullet whizzing by. At least nobody decided to go after him. *Must still be too much candy in the store to try chewing on jerky yet.* he mused.

As he slowly cruised north, he entered a new neighborhood. This was a area of Korean immigrants. Here and there he saw determined looking men either on the roof or in front of their businesses. They held pistols, rifles and shotguns at the ready, many of them clearly illegal under California law. No looting here. Every time the looters came too close, a few warning shots sent them scurrying.

Now he had passed Korea-town and was into Hollywood. It was time to make a decision. He could take the Hollywood Freeway north, stay on surface streets head through the Cahuenga Pass or cruise through Griffith Park on surface streets. None of these appealed to him. The major surface streets were at a stand still. The freeway was jammed with people fleeing the disorder on foot, compounded by a massive number of stalls. Even though he could split the lanes on his bike, it would only take one skewed car to turn his lane into a *cul de sac*. Griffith park with its chaparral, narrow twisty roads and tunnels was an ideal place to set up an ambush.

Turning east, he could work his way down Los Feliz towards the Golden State Freeway and the LA River. The Golden State would be as clogged as the Hollywood was. The 200 foot wide concrete channel of the LA River would make the fastest way out, all the way to Grenada Hills. But Lance had no idea how to access it. There were very few ramps down into it and they were barred by gates and heavy padlocks.

He flipped a mental coin and decided on a cruise through the park, up through Fernwood, then drop by the Observatory along the way. "If you're going to flee the apocalypse, you might as well take the scenic route", he thought. Maybe he could catch the river easier on the other side of the park.

It only took a few minutes to travel the winding road, easily passing the other cars along the way. The Observatory was out of his way, but he couldn't resist taking in what must be an incredible view. It stood high atop Mt. Hollywood and had a spectacular view of the LA basin. Facing south, to the left was the San Gabriel Mountains. To his right was the famous Hollywood sign and the LA Sheriff Department's now useless secret communications center. Spread out before and below him was the panorama from hell he had come to glimpse.

The sky over LA was an ugly, dense smoke-brown. Lance could make out at least a dozen different fires within a couple of miles. Farther out there were larger conflagrations billowing smoke high into the atmosphere, each one indicating an impoverished community lighting its own funeral bier. Should fire get started in the dry chaparral between the LA basin and the San Fernando Valley, it would burn from the park all the way to Ventura County and beyond, probably taking thousands of homes and tens of thousands of people with it. And Lance would bet that somehow it would get started.

The Hollywood Freeway could be seen at a total standstill as stranded drivers, desperate to escape the carnage behind, had turned the road into a foot path. It did not take much imagination to guess that fear drove people to make stupid decisions resulting in fights and death on the stalled freeway. Coupled with the inevitable boil-overs of both tempers and radiators on the few functional cars, heat related illnesses and criminal assaults, nobody was going anywhere this day; not even on foot. Maybe the CHP and LAPD out in force and a couple dozen tow trucks could have got a lane cleared in a couple hours, but Lance had yet to see sign of police of any kind. Some were probably at the station trying to patch together communications with radios from storage and awaiting orders. Others were themselves hopelessly stuck in traffic and out of touch. Lance suspected that most of those who had a chance had split for their homes in the exurbs as soon as the peril of the situation made itself clear.

For a quarter, he looked through a small telescope and viewed things more closely. The buildings and foliage obscured most of the action at the ground level. Here and there he could make out individual looters. The madness seemed to be spreading. Soon it would reach Hollywood, La Brea and Los Feliz. Lance wondered how long the Korean merchants would last. Assuming no further catastrophes impinged they could probably hang on as long as there was food. When the food ran out, nothing could prevent the city from erupting in a great explosion of panic, an orgy of madness and hunger that would compare in destructiveness with a nuclear strike.

The Observatory area was getting crowded. Others, fleeing the gradually spreading riot below, had come here seeking shelter or out of curiosity. It was time to leave while he still could. He mounted the Harley and rode north.

Todd

An extended power outage during the day meant one thing to Todd McArthur: School's out! It was just a matter of how quickly he could get free.

Todd was a bit brighter than the average 17 year old boy. A little more confident than most, but with justification. Tom and Lynn had raised their children to be both confident and competent, not an easy thing to do in a time where victimhood was all the rage.

Tom's philosophy was that the best way to learn not to make mistakes was to make a few and suffer the consequences. Advice was always free and offered often and the information proffered was as accurate as possible, but he wasn't about to force you to take it. Having suffered from more than a few mistakes, Todd was more leery than most teenagers about wild and half baked schemes.

Todd's schemes were always fully baked.

Lynn was less willing to stand back and watch her children make mistakes. Although Tom would never knowingly let his children do something life threatening or that could land them in jail, he had a much higher tolerance for highjinks, busted knees and youthful rebellion than she. Lynn was perhaps more

disciplinarian than necessary while Tom was perhaps more permissive than optimal, but the two balanced each other well.

Along the way Tom had taught his children many things their friends never learned. How and when to shoot and how to avoid having to shoot. How to hunt and navigate. How to identify tracks and edible plants. How to calculate risks. The vital importance of an agile intellect and the cleansing power of physical labor. To never set their sights lower than a little better than the very best they thought they could do. Most importantly, how to think for themselves.

Lynn taught them of surviving the street. The importance of prudence and caution. The importance of organization. How to plan a party, a vacation, a lifetime. The joys of gardening and the importance of family. How to cook, sew and budget. Why you should do the right thing when doing the wrong thing was easier and how to know what the right thing was. How to deal with people who don't want you to think for yourself.

Tom and Lynn really did have different outlooks on life. Caution vrs. the calculated risk. Security vrs. adventure. What they shared was the belief in individualism, the importance of knowledge and acceptance of responsibility for your own actions. The two girls tended toward Lynn's outlook on life and Todd tended towards his father's, which should not be surprising. Regardless, all the McArthur children were formidable in whatever they chose to do.

After two hours of heat, frustration and boredom, Todd chose to cut class.

Neither the teachers nor the administration had any idea what was going on. Those students in classrooms without windows were herded into the outdoor cafeteria area. Emergency lights had come on in the interior, but they were getting noticeably dimmer.

"Hey Todd, why don't they let us out of here?"

"I dunno. A lot of parents use the schools as a baby-sitter. Maybe they'd get sued if we got out early and someone got busted during the school day."

"I tried calling home. They wouldn't let me. Said they couldn't tie up the phones in case of emergency."

"That's a real load. Sam, I already checked. Phones are dead."

"How'd you do that?"

"When I took the roll sheets in to the office I checked the PBX. Hit the pay phone too."

"Whaddaya think happened?"

"Dunno. Joe told me the radio stations were all off the air. Took his walkman with him when he got sent to the yard."

"How'd you find that out?"

"When I was turning in the roll sheets, I signed myself a hall pass to get out there. It was easy to spot him. Everybody was standing around while he diddled with his radio. He was getting static, so we know his batteries weren't dead."

"You signed yourself out a hall pass!?"

"Yup. Been doing it all year. Ever since I worked in the office as a volunteer. I found lots of reasons to need a hall pass. After a while they just said to sign my own. Been doing it ever since."

"That's bold, man." Sam could only shake his head. "Wish we could get out of here."

"We can."

"How?"

Todd pulled out a copy of the student hand book. "Read book, rule number 17."

Sam took the pamphlet, then squinted. "Boy, that really is fine print.... Minor students may be signed out of school early only by a parent or other designated legal adult.... What's that got to do with us?"

"How old are you?"

Suddenly a broad grin spread across Sam's face. "I'm 18. I can sign my self out?"

"Yup. They tucked it away in the footnotes, put it in fine print and said it in a tricky way. Didn't want us to see it. But it's there."

"That's great. But how does it help you?"

"The office has a list of designated adults for every student. Guess who got on my list on his birthday."

Sam's smile got even broader. "We're outta here dude!"

The office was dubious, but they liked and trusted Todd. Eventually they relented and allowed him to be signed out by Sam. As soon as they hit the parking lot they discovered Sam's car was not going anywhere. The major thoroughfares were parking lots at best and full of wrecks at worst.

The two boys took off on Todd's motorcycle, an aging Honda Twinstar. With all the traffic problems, the little bike easily split lanes and took advantage of side streets, alleys and sidewalks to end up at Sam's house. The heat inside was stifling so they opened the windows to air the place out. Sam's parents were not going to be home any time soon as they were both off at a proctology convention in Honolulu. (Sam's house had been the scene of a number of rather wild pool parties as of late.) Within minutes they stripped to their birthday suits and dove into the back yard pool.

Some time later Sam climbed out and sat on the pool edge with his feet in the water. "Want a cold beer? Some smoke?"

"Naw. Better not. I gotta drive the bike, gotta get home soon." Todd started doing slow laps.

"She-e-e-it! You're no fun. You never do anything. Don't smoke. No booze. Don't do weed, 'shrooms, blow or acid. What do you do, doo-doo?" Sam leaned over to a nearby patio table and grabbed a metal tin the size of a book which he opened up and rummaged around in. With some ostentation he pulled out a baggie of pot and a pipe and filled it. He replaced the baggie in the tin and then the tin's cover, lit the pipe and drew deeply, his eyes closed.

Todd took the opportunity to quickly climb out of the water and do a cannon ball off the board, creating a splash that soaked Sam and his pipe.

"What the hell you do that for!"

"Cause you're all wet! You ever do anything without getting high?"

"Awww man! Now I gotta dry all this crap out! You should talk Mr. Senator's son. So scared of getting caught, you don't do shit. Your life must be crap."

"Funny. I don't feel crappy."

"Then open your eyes, bud. Life's a bitch. Then you die. My motto is live fast, die young. Hell, I bet you're still a virgin!"

"I mess around with dope on special occasions. You live your entire life either inside that pipe or up some straw.. How the hell can you afford all this dope? You don't have any job, you don't knock off liquor stores and you don't deal."

"Snot mine. It's dear old Pop's and Mom's. They really don't give a shit as long as I leave most of it be.

Todd had to think about this. His own parents had spoken to him on numerous occasions about drugs.

They had both smoked pot in college. (His father had tried a few other drugs besides. He said that if you remembered the '60s, you probably weren't there.) No hysterics, no doomsday stories, just facts and their own personal experiences and those of people they had known.

But to share your stash with your own kid? Unthinkable.

"They really don't care?"

"No. And neither do I." Was there more than a hint of anger in Sam's voice? "Sometimes I think life is such crap that doing shit is the only thing that keeps me going."

"Ya know, as a proctologist's kid, you should know that when all you can see around you is shit, it tells you where your head is at."

Sam stared at Todd for a moment, uncomprehending. Then burst out laughing. "That's why I keep you around. You crack me up sometimes."

Casting an eye toward the sun, Todd said, "Gotta split. I wanna get home on time today. With the blackout and all, Mom'll be worried. She's a great worrier"

"Sure. Drop me back off at school. Maybe I get the car home some time today. It's only a few miles."

Had the anger been replaced with sadness? They dressed. "Good not to have parents around. Your Mom'd be fit to be tied if she caught us naked in *her* pool. She'd go ballistic. I know both my parents would."

Todd had been having a cool afternoon's fun without even thinking about it. Yet somehow Sam needed to see everything as an act of rebellion. Didn't he understand that you could be comfortable with your parents? Or did he want to believe it wasn't possible?

Todd chuckled. "She might, she might not".

But to himself he thought that one day he might just give Sam a little surprise.. Summer skinny dipping in the pool or in the backcountry and hot tubbing in the winter had been a way of life in the McArthur family for as long as he could remember.

Todd dropped off Sam and went home where he found the note from his mother. He then grabbed a second helmet, picked up his sister and returned home. The trip was unremarkable, with the same clogged traffic and more cars breaking down or being abandoned. That is, except for noting the appearance of an ominous cloud of brown smoke just above the southeastern horizon.

Tom

"It has been a long, strange road getting here", thought Thomas J. McArthur as he looked about on the floor of the State Senate chamber. "I don't belong here. These aren't my people. I belong in Grenada Hills with the wife and kids." A sinking feeling started in the pit of his stomach as he realized how little he understood the levers of power here, how far out of his element he was. Still, duty had called, even if in a backhanded manner. Having gotten here, he was determined to tweak those levers where he could, be subversive where he couldn't and keep some sense of personal integrity about him. Even if he had to spit in the face of the Abyss that stared back at him.

As the speaker droned on about some corporate subsidy he asserted was essential to the California economy, Tom's mind was on another wavelength entirely. "Resign. Tell them what I really think about this organized criminal activity they call government. That will piss off everyone and guarantee I won't have to sit through another 4 years of this crap. It would be worth it just to look at the faces of these fools when I did it." He smiled. Giggles began to escape him as he convulsed with the humor of the idea. He was completely unaware that the Cal Span cameras had just decided that misinterpreting his apparent reaction was more interesting than the Honorable Senator's speech.

A few of the other Senators present began to glare at him. He was being most discourteous. Nobody realized it at the time, but that evening he would become an instant celebrity as every television newscast in the state would find it as interesting as Cal Span had. To millions of viewers across California he would suddenly become the taxpayers champion against corporate welfare.

When his turn before the cameras had come at last and he was allowed to present his own position on the matter, he concluded in the most melodramatic fashion he could muster, "It is a violation of the voter's trust and the essential equality under the law to offer tax credits to one specific industry that are not offered to them all. I point out to the Honorable Senator Morden that there are no crustacean processing facilities in the Sacramento area to benefit from such a credit, even if the credit were a valid one. This was a very bad career move for you and your supporters, Mr. Morden. It will bite your butt - and very soon at that."

Thomas always had been a bit of a showman, with an off the wall sense of humor. He'd much rather have been doing Saturday Night Live. Politics was going to be as close to a three ring circus as he was going to get. When quizzed by a disbelieving reporter, he predicted (in a fake German accent) that Morden and company would very soon be rotting in prison for "cr-r-rimes against ze stet". The reporter failed only to report the accent and the sarcasm.

A week later The Lobstergate scandal broke when the Justice Department announced the arrest warrants for the Honorable Sen. Morden and 2 other Senators including the President Pro Tempore. 'Lobsters International' had been the front for a sting devised and handled very similarly to another sting some years earlier. Had Morden even performed a cursory check of the business it would have been clearly identified as a front. He became too excited at the prospect of hundreds of thousands of dollars wending

their way into his Swiss bank account to even think about it.

McArthur was now a minor legend. Those in charge of the secret investigation were certain he must have had hidden sources in high places, sources they were unable to ferret out despite furious efforts. The Republicans were ecstatic at gaining control of the State Senate (they now thought of Tom as a Republican) and he was proclaimed as a hero. The voter saw him as their last best hope, a crusader against corruption, an honest man in office. Some pundits thought he was prescient, others insisted he must have been an integral part of the sting. Everything he had ever said was now deconstructed and reinterpreted in a new light.

Most ironically, the Senate's junior most member, unaffiliated with any party, was now the most powerful legislator in a body split 38 Republican, 38 Democrat, 3 vacancies - and him.

He had almost managed to slip back into the netherworld of politicians whose names one couldn't quite remember unless prompted, when he became outraged at the misappropriation of funds meant for earthquake preparedness. It was spent instead on armies of consultants and paying off the state's bonded indebtedness. Tom held a press conference, concluding with exaggerated vehemence that very soon there was going to be a serious tremor and the lives of thousands would be imperiled.

The next day there was a 6.9 quake on the San Andreas near Fort Tejon which caught the state emergency preparedness office with its pants down. The legend was resurrected and grew. Astrologers and "psychics" across the nation began watching the California legislative debates with keen interest.

The legend began to grow even more as whatever he said, people began to find. Didn't matter if what he said was accurate (although from Tom's perspective it was all true). His words were redefined and current events reinterpreted to make them true.

Tom's only resources were an internet savvy second to none, a naive, hero worshipping political science grad student named Ed Parsons and one extremely crafty operator, Paul Marlin. He'd really never had a specific idea something was going down, just that something was wrong. But the more he denied knowledge, the more credit he was given. He felt somewhat like he was in a Peter Sellers movie. Unfortunately, he was unwilling to play the part.

Years earlier, as a struggling entrepreneur Tom had met Paul during the formation of an industrial association. The Los Angeles High Technology Association (LAHTA) was created in reaction to a city plan to tax internet access. Paul had long been a fixture in entrepreneurial circles, claiming that he had started and sold off a successful business for every wife he had divorced. Mr. Marlin was currently single and had nothing special going and so decided to dabble a bit in politics, choosing to play the part of Mentor rather than be Odysseus himself. Tom was a nondescript person of average height, weight and appearance, while Paul was tall, bearded and bespectacled, with a perfectly coifed mane of white hair. They made rather an odd couple but hit it off immediately. It took little effort on Paul's part to get Tom installed as the first president of LAHTA, a position that Tom attempted to resign from on a regular

basis, starting as soon as the internet tax had been beaten back.

Then came the despicable Senator Morden.

Thomas' original reason for running for State Senate was to stop a particularly insidious piece of legislation authored by Morden to tax all internet service providers according to how much traffic they carried and to require them to keep copies of all internet mail sent through them for 72 hours. Any law enforcement agency was to be authorized to inspect these communications without warrant. Thomas surmised quite rightly that this would be the end of the internet as he knew it and a 90% cut in his income.. Paul was Tom's campaign chair. Tom was more than willing to carry the banner as a paper candidate. Nobody was more surprised than Tom was when he won

Unknown to him, the solidly entrenched Republican incumbent had a penchant for incognito trips to Nevada where he patronized houses of ill repute. One of the service providers, a cute little girl of barely 18 who'd happened to run away from his district recognized him and managed to get some interesting photos with a hidden camera the next time he visited. She couldn't decide whether she wanted to sell the photos or go for blackmail. Stupidly, she decided to try for both and ended up in jail for blackmail, getting paid for neither. The scandal crippled the Republican. The Democrats had previously written off the district and their candidate was under financed, ill advised and obnoxious to boot. The Libertarian, The Green and the Peace & Freedom candidates were considered essentially irrelevant as far as the final results were concerned.

Paul leapt at the opportunity. Nobody knew public relations and marketing like Mr. Marlin. The forlorn hope suddenly seemed possible. A professional staff was assembled almost overnight headed by a famous political consultant who came out of retirement to manage it. LAHTA members were squeezed for every penny of contributions they could spare. A nationwide Save the Internet organization sprung up to raise money for Tom, the most effective internet fundraising venture ever conceived. It was here Tom met Ed Parsons who was to later accompany him to Sacramento as his assistant.

Oddly enough, the minor parties coffers were suddenly all filling with money, money from successful businesses that appeared to have little in common with the objectives of these parties. Money even flowed in unusual quantities to the minor candidates themselves. (But, being minor parties, nobody noticed this.) Equally odd, the Libertarian's entire campaign seemed to be based on ripping the Democrat a new bodily orifice, while the other two exclusively attacked the Republican with unrelenting vigor. (Nobody seemed to question this strategy either.) The two major party candidates spent hundreds of thousands smearing each other. Tom could have won simply by showing up.

Which he very nearly didn't do. Show up, that is. In his heart he didn't want the job, so he spoke exactly what he thought against all the advice of his handlers and did pretty much what he wanted to. Had the media paid as much attention to what Tom was saying as they did to the scandal, Tom might yet have pulled out a loss. For Tom was speaking of eliminating many government programs precious to both the right and left. And enshrining a breadth of civil liberties that would leave many a lawman unemployed.

The press was looking for a Mr. Clean to endorse, so they put their words in his mouth (since they had not listened to his own words) and crowned him Mr. Alternative.

The final tally gave him a plurality victory with barely 34% of the vote. The reluctant candidate had won.

But now, his mission accomplished and Morden resigned in disgrace and people beginning to stare at Thomas as he walked down the halls of the legislature, he wanted nothing more than to go home to his family and his business. The strain on his relationship with his wife and not seeing his children grow up was more than it was worth. He decided to announce his resignation from his seat August 12th at 10:00 AM.

"Well, that was surely a bust."

Tom spoke to Paul Marlin on the steps of the capitol building. A motley collection of politicians, lobbyists, bureaucrats and other criminals milled about aimlessly in the area.

"Do you get the feeling that something or someone doesn't want you to quit?"

"I don't know. This is simply the strangest power outage I've ever seen."

Tom had called a press conference for 10 am to announce his resignation. At 9:59, the lights went out and the emergency lights kicked in. The capitol building had an emergency generator and it had indeed sputtered to life, bringing the electrical circuits back to life - at least those whose breakers hadn't tripped. But neither the built in sound system nor the electronics brought by the media would function.

The press conference was postponed, pending resolution of the outage. It would be a long wait.

Many people had poured out onto the capitol steps. Reporters frantically tried everything they could to transmit this new story back to their outlets. Of course nothing worked. Not the telephones, not the cell phones, not the sophisticated digital packet radios nor the less sophisticated analog units.

"Hey Ed! What does the environmental movement have to say about this?" Tom waved at an intense young man about 6 feet tall and in his mid-twenties. This was Edward Parsons, Tom's chief legislative assistant. Ed broke off an animated discussion with a Sierra Club lobbyist and ambled over.

"He's scared. He thinks it's the Y2K bug come back years later to get us for our sins."

Paul spoke pensively. "Maybe we have more to worry about than a late Y2K...."

"Look at the situation. We all agree that this is very unusual. The phones are down. They have their own power supplies and are not dependent on the grid. You might even be able to explain the loss of satellite uplink by solar flares. But I've been talking to cabbies and they've lost their vehicles as well. Even the in-dash AM-FM radios don't work; picking up nothing but static. My bet is that the radios are working properly and it's the transmitters that are down.

"Commercial radio stations have backup generators just in case of blackouts like this. If my hunch is correct, and based on my electronics background I'm certain it is, there is not a commercial radio on the air in northern California. I checked personal computers inside and even those with power are dead. The power supplies spool up, but they don't even get to the POST routines. Look at all the other electronics that has failed. Anything that was plugged in and turned on at ten o'clock this morning."

Now it was Tom's turn to frown. "EMP?" he conjectured.

"Looks like it. This could be the opening salvo of World War Three."

"But surely somebody would have seen an explosion or something.", Ed interjected. "You'd have to set it off way up there. You have to be in line of sight for it to affect you. Nukes aren't known for being unobtrusive. There could be some other source for the power surge."

"Not if you set it off above the atmosphere. A fireball is created when x-rays and gamma rays emitted by the bomb are absorbed by the air, which is essentially opaque to them. The air then re-radiates the energy at a longer wavelength. This keeps happening until the radiation has dropped down to the level of near ultraviolet, visible and infrared radiation, which air is transparent to. That point is the surface of the fireball and is about the same temperature as the surface of the sun.

"The blast wave is caused by the nearly instantaneous expansion of air and bomb debris that have been heated to millions of degrees at the core of the bomb. About the temperature of the center of the sun. Think of it as a huge clap of thunder.

"No atmosphere means no fireball and no sound. At night you'd almost certainly notice it as a bright star sized flare that would rapidly expand into a dull red sphere and then vanish. The area of the upper atmosphere directly below the burst would kind of glow and there would be one heck of an auroral display. During the day? You'd see it if you happened to be looking exactly the right place at the right time, but most folks wouldn't recognize it for what it was."

Tom moved into the conversation. "If this is the opening move of the next war, they're playing a very deep game. I don't think the balloon is going up right away. In fact we may not even know who did it or why yet. We may never know."

"Why do you say that?" asked Ed.

"First of all we haven't noticed any nuclear explosions. An all out attack would have coordinated the incoming missiles with the EMP burst. Sacramento may not be first strike material, but within a couple hundred miles there are probably several prime first strike targets. By not immediately following up with a counterforce strike, they guarantee our aircraft won't be caught on the ground. Instead now they will get dispersed to many remote locations and be almost impossible to target. All our ships will have a chance to get safely out of port, especially the nuclear subs, and our attack subs will be zeroing in on other countries' boomers

"Likewise our missiles have been on a low stage of alert for a long time. Now we've had time to spool up the targeting computers and do all the checkouts. I may be wrong on this. The northern great plains may resemble the craters of the moon right now, but I doubt it."

"What do you think is happening then?"

"If anything, this event has made us a much more formidable opponent militarily. On the other hand we have been made an economic cripple. Oh, we have the resources to recover. The knowledge still exists, we still have superior non-electronic equipment, plenty of natural resources and Yankee ingenuity. Even so, it'll take decades before we catch up to where we were.

"More severe consequences could happen if the government handles this poorly, which is entirely possible. What we need now is a relaxation of economic restrictions. The people need to be reassured their civil liberties won't be trampled upon and that basic survival essentials will be available to all who are willing to work. What we are likely to get is tight controls on everything. Rationing, wage-price controls, seizure of private property for public use, confiscatory taxation and tariffs, and so on. That could send us into a depression that would make the '30s look like the good old days.

"You know, the inner cities are probably already starting to burn....

"If they start hammering on political freedoms such as speech, assembly, firearms, search and seizure, due process and so on, it could get really nasty. We might tolerate a few weeks or even months of that sort of thing in the name of the immediate emergency. But suppose President Simpson decided that we really can't afford the disruption that national elections would entail. Suppose people balked at having martial law imposed for an extended time period. What if the military decided its duty to its commander in chief outweighed its duty to the Constitution?" .

Paul spoke very quietly, "Fascism. Civil war. Anarchy. Domination by foreign powers."

"It makes sense." Ed was speaking slowly and thoughtfully. "Economic warfare. Holding us hostage as well because we wouldn't know when it might happen again. Actually holding the entire world hostage. No one would know who might be next.

"Without us to feed them, the third world will starve. They might just go to war to get their food. The

world economy will go down the toilet, regardless, because everything is so interconnected."

Tom broke the thread of the conversation. "To hell with Sacramento. I've got to get home while it's still possible. I've got to establish communication with home as soon as possible, find out what Lynn's plans are and try to make mine match. You guys want to come with me, you're welcome. Otherwise, go your own way and God speed."

Paul arched his eyebrow. "You know Tom, this is may just be a lot of paranoid fantasizing on our part. There might be a perfectly reasonable explanation for this, one we don't see."

"Well, there may be such a reason. The other possibilities I come up with are not very satisfying. Sabotage? Huge solar flares causing some kind of natural EMP? Space invaders? Even if the underlying cause is perfectly benign, even if limited to California, the effect will be catastrophic. I've got to get home to my family."

"I guess that means we have to formulate a plan to get us there", replied Paul. "I have a large number of ex-wives to worry about."

"Me too", said Ed. "I don't have any family on this side of the Mississippi, so I may as well stick with you."

Tom looked at the two men thoughtfully for a moment. "I guess that makes us the three musketeers. Or the three stooges. Whichever, I just want to say thanks."

The problem was broken down into three pieces to be solved in parallel. They decided local roads would be crawling at best, but the freeways should be passable outside the city. Given the massive exodus they expected out of LA, they might have to walk the last few miles into the San Fernando Valley. They also agreed to spend plastic or write checks where possible, though given the phone outage, that might not be too many places. Between the three of them they coughed up about \$200 which they mostly gave to Ed.

Ed was dubious about buying camping gear. He didn't think it likely they would get stopped so far from LA they couldn't make it there on foot in a day, but Tom prevailed. He had no idea what the future held and he wanted to be prepared for the worst.

Paul would look to communications since he knew some local ham operators. He would also try the nearest ham radio shop, try to get a better idea of what was going on and try to get a message through to Lynn using the Amateur Relay League or the Amateur Emergency Service. He would also try to pick up some functional mobile radio equipment. Ed would hit a nearby camping and surplus shop for packs and other camping gear in case they needed it. He already had a tent, a backpack, a sleeping bag and a bicycle at his apartment. Tom would purchase some food while it was still available and try to work out the transportation problem. They would rendezvous at Tom's apartment within two hours if possible. Each of the three men needed to stop by their own apartments to pick up personal gear as well. It was

now almost noon.

The streets of Sacramento are not as congested as those of LA. There are hundreds of different roads entering and leaving the city in all directions. Still, getting out of town and on the freeway would be a real challenge.

It took Tom an hour just to drive his battered and aging Suzuki rag top the three miles to his apartment. He took routes through alleys and over lawns. He weaved among the stalled cars as though it were a slalom. Twice he was forced to simply winch and shove stalled vehicles out of his way, lucky their occupants had abandoned them. Walking would have been faster, he grumbled to himself. En route, he first stopped at a department store running it's own emergency generator and bought two five gallon gas cans, a five gallon water carrier, 5 feet of thin rubber tubing, some instant rice and some deviled ham. There was a functioning gas station nearby and he filled up his tank and cans. And then he was broke.

The decade old Suzuki had been the only car he could afford, not wanting to take either of the family cars to Sacramento. And he liked the 4 wheel drive for going off road in the nearby Gold Country and the Sierras. Unlike most of the other legislators he was neither independently wealthy nor willing to accept freebies from lobbyists, so there were no Caddies or Bimmers in his stable. Fortunately it lacked electronic ignition which had permanently failed on a significant percentage of cars on the road.

Entering his apartment he began unloading the small refrigerator and then his pantry of everything edible. This consisted mostly of peanut butter, bread, milk and frozen grape juice. He slipped out of his suit and put on a loose fitting pair of khaki cargo shorts, a matching shirt, tennis shoes, crew socks, sunglasses and a floppy brimmed hat. Into his suit case he tossed some jeans, underwear, T-shirts and a windbreaker labeled "California State Senate" and then a small bag of toiletries, soap, a beach towel and a roll of toilet paper.

One thing remained. From the deepest recesses of the closet, buried under a pile of dirty laundry, Tom pulled out a zippered gun case, a box of .357 magnum hollow points and a wide black leather "Sam Brown" belt with a break front holster and several types of pouches. Opening the pouches, he inspected a pair of loaded speed loaders, a pair of hand cuffs and a small can of tear gas spray. The hand cuff keys were missing, but that didn't bother him much. Strapping the belt on, he grimaced - mainly because he couldn't breath any more. Letting the belt out to the very last notch, it finally fit.

He took the revolver from the gun pouch, removed the trigger lock, checked to ensure it was unloaded and holstered it. Then practiced drawing it in front of the mirror a few times. At least he probably wouldn't shoot himself in the foot.

The tear gas can looked rusty. Hopefully it was only cosmetic....

Long before becoming an entrepreneur or even before joining the National Guard, Tom had worked his way through college as a security guard. Although he had fired his revolver many times recreationally

since, he'd never felt a need until today to wear the belt. Somewhere along the way he'd put an extra four inches around his waist. He was fortunate he didn't need another notch - there weren't any more. Removing the belt, he loaded the revolver, reholstered it and placed it in the luggage along with the box of ammunition.

Ed showed up first, driving a small pickup. In the rear was a bicycle, a backpack, a couple of large rucksacks, three sleeping bags, blankets, a backpacking stove, a mess kit, canteens, miscellaneous other camping gear, a suit case and two paper bags of food. He was dressed in a fashion similar to Tom except he was in brown and had on high quality hiking boots. He had also filled up his gas tank. The two men immediately decided to use Ed's truck as their primary cargo vehicle and use the Suzuki as the lead vehicle.

"Glad I had a camper shell on it. I couldn't have kept anything from being stolen if I hadn't." he said. "Why do you think My car and Paul's car are running while everyone else's is dead?"

"I don't know. Probably because you were both in underground parking. Could also be the direction you were facing or that they weren't running at the time. Could be just dumb luck."

An hour passed very slowly with no sign of Paul. It was past two in the afternoon and, if anything, the surface streets were worse than before. During the increasingly worrisome wait, the two men studied maps and dredged their own memories for information to determine the best routes out of Sacramento and into the San Fernando Valley. Ed was on the verge of a bicycle expedition in search of the wayward Mr. Marlin when his Mercedes pulled up in front of the apartment complex. It was scraped on both sides and had lost both side mirrors. The bumper showed signs of impact damage and a throaty rumble indicated a leak had developed in the muffler.

Paul was dressed like an ad for Eddie Bauer. "Where were you? What took so long?" The mixture of relief and annoyance was clear on Tom's face.

"Weeeeellllll, It isn't easy getting around. I don't do curbs as well as you two, not enough clearance. I've been busy doing what I do best, snooping and dealing. Here is something I think you need to hear." Paul produced a small multi-band receiver and cranked up the volume. The recorded message on the emergency communication system was being played.

"Oh hell! Just what I wanted to hear. That fool Simpson is going to start a general panic."

"I've been a very busy boy. There is only one serious amateur radio shop in Sacramento. Not surprisingly, there were a number of serious amateurs in there. Serious as in knowledgeable and involved and serious as in very, very nervous. Some of them were already heading out of there for points north. The international short-wave is full of panic and fear. NATO has gone on a total war footing as has every other major power. The European media are acknowledging what our own government would try to conceal from us. It was an EMP attack of unknown origin with a extremely high yield device,

probably ten megatons or more. Whoever did it really wanted to fry all the electronics they could."

Tom was shocked. "Omigawd. That's huge. At least it rules out the minor powers like Israel or Pakistan who lack heavy launch capability. Unfortunately the biggies are all perfectly capable of putting several tons in low earth orbit. Even India."

Paul picked up his narrative again. "I spoke with several hams who said they'd try to get your message, that you are on your way, through to Lynn. If they can get through to anyone at all in the Valley, the message will get to her. Can't guarantee it will get there before we do."

"Along the way I stopped by a jeweler. He was most willing to purchase my diamond cuff links and tie tack and my Rolex for a reasonable sum. Then I dropped by a pawn shop and pawned off the Nikon I keep in the trunk of my car and my cell phone. Here is what I managed to buy."

With that, Paul popped open the trunk of his car. There was a case of 9 volt batteries, what looked like a solar car battery charger, 3 small two way headset radios, a small ham transceiver a large spool of enameled wire, some coaxial cable, an electronic hand tool kit with various connectors and 2 five gallon plastic gas containers. The back seat held several bags of groceries, a 5 gallon water bottle and several pieces of luggage.

Tom took one look at Paul's bounty and shook his head. "Why did I even bother?"

"I didn't know I'd be able to sell off my jewelry so effectively. I bet the price of gold has risen substantially in the last couple of hours. My friend the jeweler was pretty much convinced that green backs were going to be worthless real soon. That's why he paid so much. The guy in the pawn shop just didn't seem very connected to reality. Why else would have taken a cell phone in pawn, especially on a day like this?"

"With the nationalization, I figured gas would be getting scarce, so I bought these containers and filled them up when I had the chance. I've got another 1 gallon can I normally keep empty with me and it's full now as well."

Tom then spoke. "Here's the drill. It's 375 miles from here to home, mostly a straight shot down I-5 to the valley. We'll be driving slowly, 55 or thereabouts depending on conditions, to conserve fuel. I have no idea what the freeway traffic will be like, but I suspect the bulk of it will be north bound and stationary."

"Paul, your car probably has a 350-400 mile range, unrefueled. That puts you at the ragged edge of making it all the way on one tank. Wish every car had a 20 gallon fuel tank! My car has a 10 gallon tank but should have no problem getting me 250 miles using very conservative numbers. The remaining distance will require at most 6 gallons. Ed's pickup is about the same. That gives us a surplus of 9 gallons."

"My plan is this. We will travel as a convoy. I have the slowest vehicle so I'll take the lead. Ed will take the middle slot. Paul has the most reliable car so he'll take the rear. We stay close together, no more than three or four car lengths with our low beams on. Don't want someone cutting in between us. Picking up those headset walkie talkies was a stroke of genius. We'll wear them as we drive. Each of us gets one third of that case of batteries. I doubt if they have more than a couple hundred yards of range and reception inside cars is bound to be crappy, but it should be enough."

"If any of us has a problem, first we'll try speaking over the radios. Failing that, three flashes of the high beams or three honks on the horn or turn on the emergency flashers and we will all pull over to the side of the road to talk. If I see any opportunity to refuel en route we will. Gas may end up as precious as gold soon and we may encounter difficulties that will degrade our fuel economy. In any event I expect to be stopping in 150 miles or so just to stretch my legs. I also plan to stop in Grapevine and Santa Clarita. If we have to leave any cars behind, we'll try to park them in a safe place and disable them."

"In the mean time, lets try tuning up and down the commercial radio bands to see what we can pick up. We might get lucky and hear some truth."

Ed at last spoke up. "Let's do it!"

The three men got in their cars and began their odyssey.

It took less than a millisecond for the mightiest industrial power on earth to be brought to its knees. High over the geographic center of the United States a new sun briefly flared and then faded. At the speed of light, a powerful electromagnetic pulse was generated and disbursed over an area 3000 or more miles across. Yet the event itself was barely visible unless one were looking right at it, the flash of a brilliant pinpoint of light rapidly expanding to a dull red sphere and then vanishing. In space there are no mushroom clouds.

Federal emergency services and strategic military systems had long been hardened against EMP, as it was called. This hardening was not 100% effective, being dependent on proper maintenance and scrupulous construction technique. Additionally much military and most government communication depended on unhardened lines and on ordinary commercial lines. The ability to control and direct tactical and logistical military forces was severely impacted while the ability to direct the civil government was almost gone. Entire branches of the executive totally lost their computing resources.

In many places it took hours just to get emergency communications stations back up on the commercial bands. These stations gave little useful information about the event and were mostly used to disseminate a growing list of executive orders being placed into affect.

State and large metropolitan government were even more helpless. Their police and public services were scattered over wide distances. Lacking communications the individual officers and workers did as best they could in isolation. Those with families often simply went home, if they could get there through the instant crush of slow to stalled traffic on major urban thoroughfares. Small to medium sized cities were able to use systems of runners and to get urgent messages through. Larger cities and states were dependent on motorcycles and whatever spare radios they had on hand and the few ham radio operators with the ability to repair or replace their gear and get back on the air.

Consider now the situation of the President. His country was just subjected to nuclear attack causing tens of thousands of immediate deaths, trillions of dollars of damage and threatening its cities with hunger and anarchy. The immediate mantle of suspicion fell on the Russians or the Chinese, but President Simpson wasn't going to risk retaliation and possibly World War Three until there was solid proof of who was responsible.

Who did it? How to respond? These are the questions that an electronically crippled government now began to search for answers. Whatever government employees showed up for work and any military personnel who could be spared began sifting through the NORAD database and thousands of hard copy reports produced in the previous years for clues to the perpetrator and their motives.

With an even worse catastrophe looming in the form of civil unrest and economic collapse, the President decided that normal constitutional procedures should be suspended until the immediate crisis was over. He felt the country needed strong central control and that all its resources and manpower must be directed towards the immediate goal of recovery. That individuals must be required to subordinate their individual selfish desires to the well being of society at large. (And to hell with that idiot Speaker in the House and those nine senile fools in black...!)

He was going to make the trains run on time.

End of Chapter 2

Chapter 3

A Committee of Vigilance

Lynn's relief was palpable when Todd returned safely with his sister Jenny. For the rest of the afternoon, they busied themselves with inventorying their assets. The McArthur's were not survivalists by any means. But they had learned the lessons of quake and riot well. The two parents had lived through enough calamities, both natural and man made, that an ample supply of food and water was on hand - certainly enough for a couple of weeks.

Todd came up with the idea of draining the swimming pool, removing the pool chemicals and refilling it with fresh water since the pool chemistry rendered the water unusable for drinking. They could then pull out the pool cover and keep leaves and dirt out of it. Since the pool cover was opaque, there would be very little algae growth as well. Now would be the time to do it while they still had water pressure. It would be easy to purify the water later if they needed it.

As evening approached, the power had not yet returned. Scattered about the city occasional were homes and establishments where light still shone, but they were few and growing fewer as time went by. Not only did fuel for generators run out, but the lights themselves attracted vermin of the two legged variety, so many who could have continued to generate electricity went without.

It would be a long time restoring power to the grid. Even though the basic electric distribution infrastructure was intact, a number of transformers had shorted out and almost every breaker and fuse in the city was blown. The utilities and the government were limited to working with the few personnel willing and able to stay at work. The traffic problem began to alleviate itself as more people either finally got home or gave up. A couple dozen Cal-Tans employees and private tow truck operators began the seemingly hopeless task of clearing the major stoppages.

With no light pollution and the Santa Anna winds blowing the smog out to sea, Los Angeles was treated to a spectacular light show when the sun set. The stars in the sky shown more brightly than they had for a hundred years. Rarest of all, looking northwards the McArthurs were treated to the extreme southern edge of the most spectacular aurora borealis ever seen by man. To the south east, dense pillars of smoke were illuminated from the top by the moon and from underneath by the red of flame as the city's underbelly consumed itself in self destructive frenzy.

Many people feared it was the end of the world. And just possibly they were correct.

As sun set, the household grew dark. A battery powered fluorescent lantern was set up on the living room table, next to the portable radio. There was no luck in picking up local broadcast radio, only the maddening repetition of the emergency communications network. The public didn't realize it, but by then many broadcasters had been able to restore power and effect enough repairs to get back on air in a limited fashion. However, one of President Simpson's executive orders (one that was not being

announced on the emergency channel) had been to seize control of all commercial broadcast assets.

The light show was just too good to resist. Taking the lantern with them, Lynn and her family stepped outside to watch it. So had many of their neighbors. Curtains of multicolored light rippled across the northern sky. One could only imagine what the display was like in the far north.

Lynn was a doer, not a worrier. As the president of the local neighborhood watch group she began pacing up and down the block, family in tow, chatting up her neighbors, trying to get a watch group meeting set up. Surprisingly, at least to Lynn, it was not so simple.

People were reluctant to take action. Many of them were in denial about the seriousness of what had happened. Most of them simply didn't want to think about it. Some households locked the doors, pulled the curtains and went into isolation. Other people were packing up to leave as soon as the roads were clear.

Not everybody was uninterested. Golda Silverstein, the widow across the street, was game. She had been in the Israeli Defense Force back in the '67 war. Now in her 60s, she was still active and vital. In fact she still possessed the same rifle she'd been issued all those years ago and proudly kept it in a display case with a commendation she'd gotten and her discharge papers.

Miriam O'Conner lived adjacent to the front entrance to the development. If something came their way, she would be the first to spot it. Now in her 40s she had once been a Catholic nun. She had left that calling but was still employed as a registered nurse (formerly in the emergency room) and a marriage counselor at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows Hospital. (At one time she would have been described as a spinster, but that term was no longer politically correct.) She considered it part of her duty to God to do what she could in the crisis.

And then there were the Hendersons, Henry, June and their 14 year old daughter Rhianon. Henry had some kind of a job in the theater and June wrote fiction. They probably made enough money that they could have lived in a much nicer neighborhood if they weren't always traveling. One time it was Thailand, another it was Himalayan trekking, still another it was some kind of kayaking expedition down somewhere called Hell's Gorge. June was a stay-at-home mother, something that made Lynn secretly envious, although Lynn wouldn't have traded her independence for the world. Lynn was never able to get a handle on exactly which faith they belonged to. It just seemed like some kind of New Age mumbo jumbo and June was always vague about it when they talked. To the Hendersons, this was going to be just another adventure.

The last person to agree to a watch meeting was John Gowan at the other end of the block. He'd taken a bullet in the spine during the Tet offensive in '68 and hadn't walked since. He was self employed, something to do with telemarketing, to supplement his disability pay and his military pension. He had gotten involved with ham radio as part of his occupational therapy and over the years become a minor expert in it. Todd would often hang out over at the Gavin place, picking up what he could on electronics

and listening to old war stories. John Gowan was one person Lynn intended to pump hard for information. She found him outside in his van trying to clamp jumper cables onto it's battery terminals. Todd jumped in to help him.

"Here, lemme get that for ya."

"Thanks Todd. I can't get under the hood very well. While you're at it, clamp the other ends onto the 12 volt inverter terminals and then plug this extension cord into the socket."

"OK. Done."

"Now let's get inside and see if the radio works."

Lynn, Todd and the two girls followed John's wheel chair into his house. He wheeled into a room with a bank of radios and maps. One radio was plugged into the extension cord from the van. He flipped the power switch and the radio responded with the sincere crackle of static.

"My gawd, sometimes I surprise even myself." he spoke more to himself than to anyone else."

"A short-wave radio!" spoke Lynn. "Now we can get some real news about what's going on."

"Actually a two meter tranceiver is more accurate. I've been listening to the short-wave bands all day on my little portable. Every other radio I've got has its RF amp blown all to flinders, sometimes even a cooked power supply. I've been using this baby as a door stop for years, but I could never bring myself to part with it. It was my first ham radio. Now I can send and receive. At least until I run out of gas and my battery dies."

"What have you heard? What happened?"

"Maybe the kids should go into the kitchen and get some cookies."

"No. I've never concealed the truth from them before and I'm not going to now."

"Ok. As you wish. Someone touched off one hell of a bomb, way high in the sky, about ten this morning."

"An atomic bomb?"

" Yep. A big, big, bomb. My bet is that most of North America was hit by the electromagnetic pulse from it. Fried everything electronic. Radios and broadcasters, telephones and switching computers, blew fuses and shorted transformers. We got off lucky, being on the extreme periphery of the effect."

Lynn's face turned ghost white. Penny and Ellie gasped. "I'd suspected something like that. I'd hoped it was solar flares or something."

"I've been listening almost continually to this mutiband portable. Seems the cheap little transistor jobbies don't have enough antenna to collect enough pulse to knock them out. Stuff that was sitting on the shelf out of use survived too. I imagine vacuum tube electronics are doing quite well, if anybody still has any out there."

"Anyhow, there is very little to be heard inside of the continental US, Canada or Mexico. Just that bland garbage the government is putting out. The rest of the world seems to be up and running, just running scared is all. Nobody knows who did it or why. At least Alaska and Hawaii seem to be unaffected. Thank God for small favors. But the atmospheric are very strange. Not good for long distance communications. There are at least two other hams in the valley still on the air, though I don't know how long it will last. There's Jubal up in Sylmar. And some crazy survivalist type out in Westlake who keeps reading passages out of Revelations."

"John, we've got to get organized. You must have seen all the smoke to the south and east. South central, the east side, Compton all those areas are going up in flames. If this is true, there won't be any police around for a long time. The rioting and looting will spread. Where will it go next, Pacoima? When the easy picking are gone close to home, they'll spread out, maybe come our way. We look easy. Remember during the riots. The cops mostly stayed inside while the city burned."

John looked up from the ham rig he was diddling with. "These old tube sets should have survived in fair quantities. Ham operators never discard anything, they just pile it up somewhere. I should be able to make contact with some ARES or RACES people out there. They'd have the backup equipment and generators to stay on the air. Wonder if maybe everybody is listening and nobody is talking?"

"John. You're wandering. I'm talking riot. You're talking radios. Keep to my subject."

He snorted. "Can't do jack about any riots." He gestured at his wheel chair. "But I might get you communication, even uncensored news. You want help with security? You and those kids of yours go knock on some doors. Maybe one in a hundred will give you the time of day."

Taking a different tack, Lynn spoke softly. "Can you give me any useful information that might help wake people up?"

"Jubal over in Sylmar says the Newhall Pass is locked, at a dead standstill. There was some traffic from the National Guard station in Van Nuys. They are sending a radio in an LAPD helicopter up to Mount Disappointment to try to set up a radio relay out of town. Most roads are marginally passable except those going out of town. Sorry but I don't have anything to monitor the police and fire bands with. My scanners have been fried."

"Ok. So I'll have to rally the masses to protect their own sorry hides." She got up with a resigned look on her face. "Nobody will want to do anything this late."

"Nobody will want to do anything. Period. Listen girl, these people are not goats, they're sheep. They'll wait and whine for help until the barbarians are at the gates. Then they'll be easy pickings for whoever wants them."

"You're different. You came up the hard way. You've seen gangs at work and gunfire in the street. You've seen poverty but you've managed to rise above it. But they've never known anything 'cept security and won't admit to its loss."

"Save your own butt. When they are good and scared, maybe then they'll think about action. And probably follow anybody who'll promise them what they want, but it'll be too late."

"No, not quite everyone. I've got you. You've seen more hell than the whole block combined. There are others I can count on too."

"Me? You're loony. I can't even hold a rifle any more. I can't move without a van. For this job you need a dozen strong men and Tom to take charge of 'em. Who else do you have lined up for this children's crusade?"

Lynn thought for a moment "I don't have a dozen men. *Yet*. I don't have Tom here. *Yet*. I have Golda. She's seen action in war. The '67 Arab-Israeli war. And there's Todd. He's mature with a sharp mind. Miriam has agreed to help. She's worked ER. The Hendersons, well, they're the Hendersons after all. They're always tramping off to some God forsaken armpit of the world on expeditions and calling it fun. Jenny will be able to help. There will be others once they see we are serious."

"You're crazy. Golda's sixty years old. Todd's only seventeen. Jenny's only thirteen. Miriam and the Hendersons might be some help, but they're not fighters, they're soft, civilians. Who knows what would happen if they saw danger? Forget trying to organize these people. You get your family out of here ASAP. Head up to that property in the Sierras and wait this thing out. If they wanted to vaporize us, we'd be dead by now."

"Golda lived through three wars and fought in one. Her parents survived Auschwitz. She's tough. How old were you when you signed up for the Marines?"

"Eighteen, but...!"

Lynn cut him off. "No buts about it. You think you had some advantage Todd doesn't? Jenny will be helping me with organization, not combat. Miriam is a good medic and is well located to watch the main entrance. As for the Hendersons, if they've done half the things June has claimed, they'll be up to it."

Todd and Jenny looked at each other quizzically.

"John, I'm not leaving. I won't be a refugee, even if I have to carry a shotgun myself. Even if I wanted to leave, I couldn't. The traffic is going nowhere. Even if it were moving, I couldn't. I'm going to wait for Tom as long as I can. If nothing more happens then power will be restored eventually, the streets will get cleared and the police will be back on them."

"I give up. What do you have in mind?"

"A barrier across each entrance to Shady Acres. A sign on each barrier warning of armed response to criminal activity. A patrol of some sort. Communications to coordinate."

"That would deter small time hoods, maybe packs of kids. Wouldn't slow down a mob or a gang. You need big men carrying ugly guns. Funny, the government seems to be trying to discourage that sort of thing..."

"We have to make do with what we have. If that means grannies in sneakers with big ugly guns, then that is what we will make do with. This place is pretty central to the development, so we'll have our first meeting of the neighborhood watch here just as soon as I can get people's butts out of bed in the morning."

John sputtered, "But...!"

"But nothing. You're my communications chief, honey chile." Lynn had slipped into her southern drawl. "Y'all bettah have me some news tomorrah."

The night passed, full of tension. The next morning Lynn was walking the area, once again looking for volunteers. She was always at her best when doing the impossible. Todd and Jenny worked one side of the street, while Lynn and Ellie worked the other. Somehow things looked better in the light of day.

Word came over the radio that emergency supply centers would be set up along the train tracks at various locations throughout the city. Two brigades of armed National Guard units had arrived from the more rural areas of the state with shoot to kill orders. Some areas of the city could even have power restored in a few days. Lynn carried this message, as well as her proposed meeting, wherever she went.

The meeting was better attended than John had predicted. Buoyed by the good news, many people took a more optimistic view. It was held in John's back yard as his house was not roomy enough to hold the twenty or so people who showed up.

As head of the neighborhood watch, Lynn decided she would also chair the meeting. "Afternoon folks. As head of the neighborhood watch committee, I thought it would be wise to call this meeting." The

murmuring in the crowd abated somewhat.

"By now y'all know that power is down over the entire country. Martial law has been declared." She then outlined the information so far broadcast on the emergency radio message. "I think that we can look forward to a return to normalcy within a few weeks. In the mean time we may be pretty much on our own. I think right now is a good time to pool knowledge and decide what course of action we want to pursue. Does anybody have any more recent or more useful information on what's going on?"

There followed a litany of rumors regarding the cause of the event, the situation regarding the rioting and the immediacy of federal assistance. Everyone was given a respectful hearing but nothing new emerged that Lynn would give credence to. Then John, looking and feeling exhausted from spending all night on the radios, spoke up.

"I have some news from the outside."

Suddenly the crowd became silent.

"First, the rest of the country is as much in the dark as we are about why this happened. In fact almost nobody is on the air anywhere near us. There are parts of the country unaffected by this. Alaska, Hawaii, parts of Canada and Mexico."

"Troops are reporting to the guard and reserve bases in Van Nuys. They are working to get radio communications up and running with the outside world. The police have gone to foot, horse, bicycle and motorcycle patrols because cars still have limited mobility. Lots of cars that stalled, overheated or ran out of gas and were abandoned are still clogging the roads. The fire department typically can't respond to fires farther away than line of sight.

"No serious rioting in the San Fernando Valley, only scattered looting, mostly the eastern end of the Valley."

Somebody exclaimed, "How on earth did you get all that information? I couldn't get any of my radios to work!"

"This old rig is a tube model. When I was in the VA hospital back in '68, a friend gave it to me. It was already ten years old at the time, but it worked. I had it in storage until last night. Whatever happened probably didn't affect tube technology anyhow, only transistorized stuff. With a little tweaking I was able to pick up the police and fire VHF bands. It sounds like they still have a few radios working, probably whatever happened to be in storage or in parking structures. They are out commandeering whatever they can find off retail shelves to reestablish operational communications, mostly CBs."

"I've been up all night running the radio off an inverter jumpered to my van battery. I've used close to a quarter tank of gas keeping the battery charged, so I can't keep this up forever. Tube radios are power

hogs."

"I have one more bit of information of a personal nature. A message was relayed to me by a friend in Sylmar who got it from a friend. It basically says that Tom is returning from Sacramento ASAP and to hang on. It concludes to Lynn:

*Wait for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight,
Though Hell should bar the way.*

Ellie's and Jenny's faces lit up like fireworks and they jumped up and down, hugging each other and laughing as they heard this. Todd broke into a broad smile and spoke a muffled "Hot damn!" There were some exclamations of approval from the others present as well. Lynn found herself turning red.

In many respects Lynn had become self sufficient since Tom had gone into politics, rewriting her life so as not to need him any more and resenting it where this was inconvenient. This expression of love, a love she wasn't sure she could return any more, was embarrassing. Her children's enthusiasm for his future return reminded her that he wasn't entirely disposable.

Lynn had never been a big believer in romantic love. For years now she had written it off entirely. Tom hadn't and this annoyed her.

"Ok folks, lets get back on target here." she said, attempting to direct the discussion away from the personal. "We still have to get ourselves organized here. I've taken the liberty of putting John here in charge of our communications. He can put us in contact with the outside world and bring us the information that is not on the emergency channels. John, what do you need from us?"

"Well, first if anybody here has a generator, I'd like to hook it up to the radio instead of using what I've got. Even if I only go on the air a few hours a day, it won't be long until I'm out of gas and my battery is dead. A generator would be much more efficient."

An elderly man spoke up, a retired insurance salesman. "I've got a generator for my RV. I've been living in it since the power went down."

Lynn stepped in. "Could you just park the RV in front of John's place so he could use the power for his radio?"

The gentleman agreed and Lynn went on. "We need some kind of presence to show that we are actively watching out for ourselves. I am most concerned about things happening at night, with no street lighting and a reduced police presence."

Lynn could be a clever manipulator when she wanted to. Pretty soon they had all agreed to blocking off

the entrances to the development as best they could, putting up warning signs and having a regular patrol without any of it seeming to have been her idea. It was not so easy to get volunteers to do the patrolling. Todd got volunteered. Lynn volunteered. After some hesitation, Amy Snyder volunteered her husband Horace, a retired aerospace engineer. He declined, but at least he woke up and paid attention to the rest of the meeting - lest he get volunteered again.

Lynn had expected this and vaguely asserted that the problem would resolve itself. The patrol person would duplicate as a runner for disseminating news and checking up to see how everyone was doing. All she had really wanted to do was to get the idea of a patrol planted and accepted. The meeting was adjourned with the plan of holding another when the situation had changed.

The crowd left, feeling virtuous and empowered. The McArthur kids went home as well, elated that their father was en route. Lynn stayed behind, feeling very much in control - which was exactly how she wanted to feel.

"Do you want the real story now?" John inquired.

"Yes"

"The rioting continues unabated. Nobody is even bothering to move in and stop it. The areas are being quarantined to the best of the ability of the police and the few troops that have arrived. A brigade is about a thousand troops. Sounds like a lot until you realize there are probably a million or more people living in the areas of the worst rioting. Two brigades, plus maybe another thousand or so police who actually showed up for work plus maybe a thousand local national guard & reserve troops scattered over a dozen locations. It ain't diddly compared to what we need."

"During the last riots, they went on for days until they burned out naturally. The cops were helpless and paralysed. Even at max strength with communications and easy transport they couldn't do diddly squat. Ditto for the fire department. I'm amazed we haven't seen the hills go up in flames yet."

"What we need now is the 101st Airborne and the 5th Cavalry division in town. What we need is a citizenry with the spine to turn vigilante and kick those looters asses!"

"Then that is what we shall do." boomed out the theatrical voice of Henry Henderson. "And we shall form a committee of vigilance to do it with."

"Now the real meeting begins." spoke Golda.

June and Henry, Miriam, Golda and Todd had returned to the back yard. The Hendersons were both now wearing a matched pair of revolvers in flapped holsters. Everyone looked grim. Except Lynn.

Lynn was smiling.

Knight Erroneous

The ride north from the park was actually kind of relaxing. The scenery was nice, the road demanding. Lance wasn't particularly worried about being blown up in the next few minutes. There was a part of him that would even have preferred that, but Lance could never surrender to it. He came out onto Riverside Drive, fairly crowded but passable. On the other side of that was the freeway, full of angry drivers inching along. Still beyond that lay his goal, the LA River channel.

Through this section the river channels were vertical and protected with a chain link fence. A couple of cars could be seen driving west inside the channel. There was no access ramp visible, but there was an access road along the side which would serve Lance just as well. The only problem was a large padlock on the gate. Two years ago, Lance could have picked the lock with a bobby pin in about 30 seconds. Today his hands were too shaky. He needed a drink.

Reaching into his pack, he pulled out a can of slightly cool beer, sat down, and started to drink. Cars ground by on the nearby freeway, moving a few feet, halting, then moving again. What Lance really wanted was a long crow bar or a heavy sledge but no such implement was available. Cursing his own intellectual and genetic inferiority, he remounted the motorcycle and proceeded west on the sidewalk.

Slowly working his way north and west on side streets, alleys and side walks, he found he could make reasonably good time across town. In perhaps a couple of hours he'd be up to the Santa Susanna Pass, a serious choke point. When he encountered an impassable accident in front of a biker bar, he decided to cut through the alley behind the bar to bypass the obstacle. His mind was on other wars in other places and not in the here and now. Suddenly a rope materialized across his path at neck height.

Lance's hands reflexively left the handlebars, flying up to ward off the obstacle. Perhaps this saved his life because he would have otherwise taken the full impact across his throat. As it was, he was slid easily back on the bike's seat until his duffel bag hit the sissy bar at which time he was flipped backwards off the machine. Hitting the ground, he heard the beer cans in his pack exploding as they were crushed by the impact. His bike continued its merry way, sans rider, soon wobbled over and sideswiped a wall. A man, dark and Mexican, short with a massive body like a barrel, lunged out from a doorway and caught the bike before it fell.

"Bitchin' man. A Harley!"

The scuff of shoes on the pavement and the whistle of something in the air inspired Lance to lurch to the side as best he could, although he was still confined by the straps of the duffel. The crowbar landed with a crunch on the beer cans, exploding more of them.

"Hold still you sonovabitch!"

A huge man towered over Lance, with steely gray hair and eyes to match. Cord of muscles knotted as the bar was brought down again and again for another strike. Lance's instinct for self defense kicked into overdrive as he rolled over, absorbing the blows on his duffel even as he struggled to get untangled from it. Finally slipping out of the straps, he scuttled out from under it much like a crab scuttling out from under a sea shell. Dodging the tireless swing of the iron, he finally made it to his feet with his back to a wall.

The two men glared at each other for a moment. The gray haired giant was quickly joined by his heavysset compatriot who produced a nasty looking knife.

"I'm gonna cut you man! You're gonna have a new smile, under your chin!

"You busted my beer."

Something about the flat monotone of that simple statement made the aggressors hesitate. Or maybe it was the direct and unflinching gaze of his eyes or the relaxed fighting position he assumed. But the two big men hesitated. Lance took a classic knife stance and moved slightly to his right. This would force the tall man to move around the thick man to get at him. A lifetime of forgotten training began to resurface.

Lance spoke again, slowly and distinctly, as though speaking to one who was hearing impaired. "You broke my beer cans, you assholes."

The shorter man lunged in low, bringing the knife upwards in a stroke that would have driven it into Lance just below the sternum and up into his heart. With the hard edge of his left hand, Lance blocked his assailant's knife hand hard to the left and allowed the attacker's momentum to carry the weapon past Lance's body. Bringing his right fist hard up from his waist, he connected solidly with the heavy man's temple. The knife clattered to the ground and its former wielder collapsed most satisfyingly.

Next, Gray eyes came in with the bar in an overhead blow which Lance allowed to glance off the muscular part of his right forearm. The attacker was now off balance, having over swung the weapon. With his right hand, Lance then grabbed the big man's wrist, pulling him down and forward. Pivoting around, Lance kicked him in the face four times, speaking a word each time for emphasis.

"You...wasted...my...beer!"

The big man's leathery face was now spattered with the red of his own blood and he curled up into a fetal position on the pavement.

First Lance picked up the knife and the tire iron. The knife was no small pocket knife or even a switch blade. It was a Bowie and it had good balance. He quickly relieved its unconscious owner of the sheath for it. Then he dumped the sodden mess that was his clothing out of the duffel, wringing the beer out as

best he could. The beer was history, all 12 cans of it. He swallowed the dregs that remained and discarded the crumpled cans. Then he repacked everything as neatly as he could, placing the tire iron such that he could reach back and pull it up and out in a single smooth motion.

Speaking to nobody in particular, he said, "*Adios cucarachas*" and rode off on his way.

Turning north, Lance began to work his way through Van Nuys. The southern area of the valley, particularly the Sherman Oaks area, seemed to have been spared the violence of central LA. You'd expect this. Maybe it was laziness or heavy traffic or just that they felt more secure, but rioters and looters tend to stick close to home.

In areas where the people are more affluent, more is required to inspire total social disintegration than mere opportunity. Van Nuys is not an impoverished area. Here the gangs were made up more from the children of lower paid blue collar and service workers. While Van Nuys and the East Valley were not going up in flames, liquor stores, jewelry stores, drug stores and other such establishments were being robbed and looted on a random basis.

Lance had not planned on intervening in any of the many criminal acts he saw going on around him. There were so many and he was only one person. His efforts would be just a dangerous waste of time helping people who would just be hit again a little later on by another looter. Besides, he'd seen worse, much worse. Then he saw the girl.

She looked to be Vietnamese, about 13 at most. Her clothing had been mostly ripped off and she sat on the curb sobbing and holding her tattered dress up. Smoke wafted out of the back of a mom & pop liquor store. Inside he could hear a woman screaming, male voices laughing and glass breaking. A teen aged skinhead type walked out of the shop, his shirt off, exposing a scrawny, zit ridden torso covered in tattoos. He laughed and drank deeply from a bottle. He then grabbed the girl by her long black hair and began dragging her back into the store.

Jim "Skins" Muggeridge had never had success with girls. In fact he'd never had success with people in general. Most of his life he had been lonely, an outcast. He'd never been any good at sports, never bothered with schoolwork at all and had never considered that his problems in life were possibly at least partly his own fault. Dad beat Mom, the both of them beat him and that's how life was. So "Skins" as he was called, because of his emaciated appearance, set out to find those even more helpless than he. Shit always rolls downhill and he always felt that whoever else he was around either was or ought to be downhill of him.

When Skins managed to make it to high school (through the miracle of "social promotion") he found his place in the sun with a group of lowlifes who called themselves the Aryan Nazi Brotherhood. These individuals had discovered that the reason why their lives stank was because of lowlife scums who weren't white and didn't speak English. This enlightened belief system gave Skins entire races and classes of people to feel superior to, regardless of how bright, attractive or industrious individuals within

those races might be. With others who felt the same way, he could now socialize without needing to hurt those he socialized with. Causing pain to others now became a group project. And while a coward by himself (as were the rest of the ANBs), he could now feel like a lion within the security of the group.

The Vietnamese owned liquor store had attracted the not so loving attention of the ANB in the past. The owner had been warned to move out by his brother, a former ARVN Colonel who understood these things, but Minh Cao had his life savings invested in it and a daughter who would be going to college some day. She would need every penny he could raise at that time so he couldn't take the financial loss. He hoped he could maintain until these boys found someone else to pick on. LAPD had proven remarkably unhelpful in the situation.

Skins had been watching the owner's daughter (a pretty, delicate thing, just over the line into womanhood) for some time, stoking his mind with fantasies of her rape and humiliation. She would be humiliated, just as he had been humiliated by all the women who had found him repulsive when he wanted sex. (Actually they found him repulsive all the time but never bothered telling him about it until he got obnoxious.) The other guys liked to listen to the stories he would make up about all the things he was going to do to her. He'd been planning to move on her when the blackout and citywide paralysis gave him the opportunity to get his revenge and take out the little gook's parents and grandparents at the same time. Beside Ma gook looked pretty good too....

One should not be surprised that Skins was the happiest he'd been in his entire life as he began to drag the girl back inside to play out his humiliation of her, the humiliation he'd been fantasizing over for months. Or at least he was happy until he discovered the crook of a crow bar around his neck, choking his air off and pulling him away from his conquest. Away from the store window and face to face with a man whose eyes spoke only of death.

"Para las ninas, pindeho!" the face whispered, as a hand made of iron grasped Skins neck and broke it.

A quick look inside the store showed seven males all teens to early twenties. Two of them seemed preoccupied with not tripping over their dropped pants while forcing a naked middle aged woman to bend over the counter. One elderly male lay on the floor, blood puddling from his head. A second lay on the floor, face up, with a shotgun in his mouth and a foot on his throat. The other end of the foot and the gun belonged to a white tattooed male with short hair. A elderly woman cowered in a corner, shrieking in Vietnamese for help nobody expected to come. Five other males were systematically looting the shelves and cash register of everything valuable.

Death stepped into the doorway and nobody noticed.

The curved iron crashed down on a skull to Lance's left. Then in a sideways shift, it plunged into a chest to his right. The shotgun left its resting place in the proprietor's mouth, leveled at Lance and fired.

Except Lance wasn't there any more. Diving low, he tipped over the merchandise shelving, momentarily

pinning two more miscreants in the next aisle beneath it. One of them was attempting to reach for a knife. The hook end of the crowbar penetrated through the back of his hand and embedded itself so deeply into his thigh that Lance was unable to extract it quickly. The individual with the shotgun was now firing wildly at where ever Lance had been a split second earlier. One of those places was where the second gang banger had been pinned. The first looked like he had already lost consciousness either from shock or blood loss.

The two would be rapists tripped over each other in the effort to get their pants up and dive for cover. En route, they encountered Granny with a cast iron skillet. Unfortunately for them, the real danger lay behind them as the seemingly passive victim picked up a broken whiskey bottle and lost all her passivity. At the other end of the store, the last of the looters drew a pistol and emptied thirteen rounds in Lance's general vicinity. Forced to move or die, he leapt to the minimal cover of a parallel aisle and charged the shooter even as the shotgun followed him across the store. When he was close enough, Lance tipped over the aisle shelving into the pistol shooter, knocking him off balance as he was attempting to reload. A flying side kick to the pistolero's neck exposed him to the shotgun momentarily but resulted in a most satisfying crunch.

The shotgunner was now firing an empty gun. Whirling about and popping over the store shelves, Lance sent the Bowie directly into the center of his opponents chest.

The store was beginning to fill with very thick smoke. Lance signaled the two women, now covered in their assailants' blood, to get the elderly man with the head wound out of the store. Lance went to assist the younger Vietnamese man who had suffered a crushed wind pipe and was a frightening shade of blue. Grabbing a cheap pen knife and a disposable ink pen off the counter, he performed an emergency tracheotomy and dragged the victim out of the store as flames began to lick at the store's rear.

Only when he was well beyond the now fully involved building did it become apparent that he had been shot in at least three places. Upon noticing this, Lance promptly collapsed into unconsciousness.

The Odyssey

The long trip from Sacramento stretched endlessly ahead as the caravan made it's way slowly south along Interstate 5. As far south as Stockton, travel was often bumper to bumper taking almost 2 hours to cover the fifty five miles. The northbound lanes were even more crowded. The personal communications headsets Paul had purchased worked, but only barely. If the cars separated by more than a hundred feet, Ed ended up relaying messages between the ends. There wasn't much to say, just comments on some of the more dangerous drivers they encountered. South of Stockton, there were no more large communities until Bakersfield. The road opened up and the three were able to make good time.

After another hour and a half, Tom pulled over for a break. It was the middle of farming country, the heart of the San Joaquin Valley. Their windshields were spattered with bugs. The sun was setting behind

the mountains to the west.

"Time for a little R&R guys. Can't drive too long without a break. You get dull and lose concentration. Take the 180 exit." Tom had said over the headsets as they approached a lonely overpass. He pulled up the off ramp and a little ways down the road.

There was a distinct wince of pain from Paul as he exited his BMW. He wasn't used to driving for extended periods of time. Tom was soaked with sweat as he didn't have air conditioning. The air had been over 90 degrees and 90% humidity for most of the day. Only Ed did not seem much the worse for wear.

They'd made a hundred and fifty miles almost exactly. It would be the same distance again to Grapevine and the pass. The only city of any note would be Bakersfield. Tom and Ed decided they'd need three gallons of additional fuel each to make it to the next stop without refueling while Paul was certain he could make it all the way. After that it would be fifty more miles to Santa Clarita and then another ten to Tom's home

The three of them relieved themselves behind their vehicles. Nothing grew but short parched grass in that desolate area.

"Eat drink and be merry for now we shall drive." spoke Paul and he handed out cans of soda and salami sandwiches.

Glancing up from a map, Tom spoke, "If there are any military convoys out there, we'll see them when we intersect Highway 46. Any traffic from Camp Roberts or Hunter-Ligget to LA would either be going that way or down US-101 on the coast. The coast highway is easier to travel, but I-5 is quicker."

"How do you think the government is responding?" asked Ed.

"Well," began Paul, "I expect that most police are either sitting in the station, playing hooky or patrolling very close to home. Ditto most government officials."

"Most of our troops are either National Guard members or Reservists. This is a good thing, in that large standing armies are invariably bad for the budget, the economy and for liberty. But it's also a bad thing in that they aren't a militia in any sense of the word whatsoever. They are centrally commanded and centrally armed. It takes a long time for them to get their act together for combat missions and can't act on their own initiative."

"If you remember, during the '92 riots the Guard couldn't respond until after the Governor had officially called them out. Even then they showed up with empty rifles because they weren't allowed to keep their own ammunition at the local base. That was kept by the regular army at some arsenal and paperwork snafus held things up."

"Now with 99% of all communications down the Governor can't effectively call for anything. I'd bet a case of Kentucky bourbon that the President has nationalized the Guard so the Governor has nothing to work with at all except State Police, CHP and the state emergency management team. If he could get messages thru to them, he's probably ordered them into the large cities to quell looting. That is those who haven't split to take care of their own families."

Tom, who was still studying a map, spoke up. "Kick me for being a fool, but we didn't need to haul all this water with us. The freeway parallels the aqueduct almost the entire trip. We're never more than 10 miles from it at any point. Speaking of the aqueduct, how long do you think the water supply will last in LA?"

"Hard to say. As the water loses elevation from the mountains they use it to turn generators that power the pumps needed to pump it up the next set of hills. Pretty darned efficient and not a lot of sensitive components. Plus they've got some large reservoirs on hand. I would expect no critical water shortage for a long time."

"It's food I'm worried about. You'd be amazed at how totally dependent on computers and electricity the distribution system is. Any further jolts to the system and the city might not recover. There could be food riots."

This gloomy assessment left the men in silence. Watching the steady line of north bound vehicles, each privately confronting his own anxiety for the future.

Soon they were back on the road. There was very little traffic headed towards LA and they made good time. No convoys were encountered beyond the intersection with highway 46, so the military must be very slow in responding to the crisis. By 9 PM it was completely dark, an eerie darkness unbroken by the usual lights of residences and towns in the distance. Even Bakersfield was almost entirely dark.

Tom pulled over briefly for an unplanned break in order to look at the northern lights display. Paul said it was a confirmation of what he'd learned. Then they continued south and soon lights became visible in the distance.

It wasn't the CHP station just past the intersection of the 5 and the 99. Nothing there but the occasional flashlight or battery powered lantern. It wasn't the small community of Grapevine with its service stations, truck stops and restaurants. They were dark also.

Just beyond Grapevine, at the base of the long steep grade heading up to the Tejon pass was a military checkpoint and a small tent city. The three cars were brought to a halt by a barrier manned by several troops in camouflage, carrying M-16s and wearing arm bands emblazoned with "MP". Everything was brightly lit and the drone of large diesel generators could be heard.

"May I please see your ID sir?" spoke a young corporal.

Tom complied. Examining Tom's drivers license, the soldier said, "Sorry sir, The freeway is closed to all civilian traffic from Grapevine to points south. If you lived in the Fort Tejon/Frazier Park area we could arrange for a pass to let you thorough. For right now we need to keep all lanes open for emergency traffic."

"Excuse me soldier, but may I speak to your commanding officer about this? I am a State Senator and I believe I can be of greatest use in my district."

The soldier asked Tom to pull over to a hastily designated parking area. Tom complied again and soon found himself in a dusty field. Another soldier instructed Tom as to where exactly to park. Although the field already held hundreds of cars, only two and a half rows had been completed. It was clearly intended to hold many thousands. Tom decided to disregard the instructions and made sure to park at the extreme far end. Ed and Paul soon followed.

Ed spoke first. "I've got a real bad feeling about this." Looking at the other cars in the field, he continued. "They aren't planning on these folks leaving. They are parking them with no aisles between cars. Dense pack. Once somebody pulls in behind you, you're stuck."

"That's why I parked at the end. The boundary of the parking area is nothing but an orange tape. If I have to I can go right through it."

"Maybe being a state legislator will get you some special treatment." Paul speculated.

"Possibly. They'll need the cooperation of local governments to some degree. My hope is that I can swing my supposed VIP status to get Lynn and the kids out of town."

The parking lot guard approached the men. "Come this way to the Major's tent", he said and led them past many rows of tents, then past several tents being set up by teams of mixed soldiers and civilians. Beyond that was a hundreds of acres of empty land. Tents and tent poles were being unloaded from trucks with forklifts and by hand and were being carried out to thousands of presurveyed sites. The whole scene was illuminated by portable floodlights and accompanied by the distant roar of the generators.

The soldier escorted the three men to a tent with a large sign outside having "Camp Grapevine" hand painted on it. Inside was a group of very busy troops, typing reports, talking on radios and maintaining a large chart showing the status of all the tent sights. A balding, athletic man strode forth to greet them.

"Good evening gentleman. I'm Major Green of the 7th Relocation Squadron, California National Guard. How can I help you?"

"I'm Senator Tom McArthur from Grenada Hills and these are my associates, Mr. Paul Marlin and Mr. Ed Parsons. We are trying to get to my district, but it seems civilian traffic is not being allowed past here."

"Let's step into my office for a moment, if you don't mind." The major's "office" was a field desk at the rear of the tent with a field phone, a radio, a high intensity desk lamp and a folding chair. Three more folding chairs were quickly provided.

"Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. I know how busy you must be. And now you've got a politician wasting your time."

"You're right on one account. I am terribly busy. But I remember you and what you did for us. The governor wanted to cut funding for the Guard and entirely eliminate the State Military Reserve. The state legislature was ready to roll over and play dead when you read them the riot act, put some spine into them and saved us. After that Morden affair and your exposure of the corruption in the emergency preparedness budget, I think you had them a little scared."

"I was just doing the right thing, nothing special. I don't suppose we know yet who touched off that nuke this morning."

The Major raised his eyebrows. "How did you find out?"

"I used to be a grunt in a communications squadron, Air National Guard. I was the EW weenie. Didn't re-up after my six years because they were going to change my AFSC to forward observer, transfer me to something called the Levi project.

"This is not solar flares. I know EMP when I see the signs. Besides, we heard about it on short-wave. And you must've scrambled every jet in the country. Never seen so many con trails before in my life."

"Well, now I guess you know what's going on here. The plan is to evacuate as much of the city as we can in an orderly fashion and feed the ones we can't. They took whatever troops and equipment they could find on short notice and created an *ad hoc* relocation unit. I've got people under me from four different Guard units, two State Military Reserve units, some regulars who were on leave but couldn't get back to their units and some civilian volunteers. We're here mainly to pick up refugees and evacuees from LA coming north and to intercept people going south. They sent a regular army unit down to the Newhall pass and FEMA set up its HQ at Castaic and we're subordinate to them. There are several relocation camps between here and there."

"Want to re-enlist? I'm authorized to sign up people on the spot. For someone like you I could probably offer a field commission."

"If LA hasn't gone up in a cloud of smoke in the next few days, maybe I'll take you up on it. Right now I

just want to get to Grenada Hills. That, or get my family up here. We have a second home and wouldn't be refugees."

"I can't let civilian traffic past this point. As soon as the logistics get set up, we'll be trucking people north and food south just as fast as we can. Newhall Pass is already locked tight with refugees, so is the Santa Suzanna Pass, all the mountain roads and the 101 at Woodland Hills. It'll be everything we can do just to get those messes cleaned up. Until then you couldn't get into town on anything other than an aircraft or on foot no matter what I let you do. There's nothing I can do about giving anybody priority on evacuation and wouldn't if I could. It wouldn't be fair."

"I understand that completely. Can you at least get me down to Santa Clarita? If we had to, we could walk from there."

Major Green thought about it for a few seconds, then replied, "I can give you a pass as far as Gorman. From there you'll have to take the Gorman Post road to the Old Ridge Route to Templin Highway and then to the Old Road. It's pretty run down and I'm sure it was backed up as much as any other mountain road. Since they've choked off the northward flow from the San Fernando Valley it might have had time to empty out. The alternative is to hitch a ride with the next convoy coming through. You can take your gear, but you'd have to leave your vehicles here."

"I think we'll drive. I know that route."

Now Paul stepped into the conversation, "Have you been federalized?"

"We were federalized at 10:15 this morning."

"What kind of executive orders have been issued?"

"The President has assumed control of all transportation, including all commercial vehicles, all US, Interstate and most state highways, all airports and aircraft, all railroads and rolling stock, all navigable waterways and all commercial vessels. There have been other EOs regarding banking and finance. Private citizens are prohibited from carrying firearms in public. There is a curfew from 8 PM to 8 am. All commercial communications and electronics assets and all such retail merchandise now belong to the federal government. The same is true of all petrochemical, electrical generation and other energy assets and all bulk food supplies including grocery stores. Looters can be shot on sight, you can be arrested for almost any reason and *habeus corpus* has been suspended. FEMA has the authority to conscript private citizens for work crews or any other purpose deemed to be in the national interest. Other minor EOs, too numerous to mention"

"If you enlist right now you'll have immunity from being conscripted, for what it's worth."

Tom spoke, "I don't think they'd be stupid enough to conscript a state Senator and his legislative

assistants, would they?"

"Maybe not. But right now state officials are about as useful as teats on a boar hog. Hell, if you joined the SMR they'd make you a colonel on the spot and your two associates captains. Right now the SMR, the State Police and the CHP are about all the Governor has to work with. All those consultants and studies don't seem to be much use any more."

"I'll think about it, but my friends will have to speak for themselves. Right now I've got to get to my family."

"I understand. My family is safe and in an out of the way place. Or at least as safe as anyone can be right now. I can imagine how you feel. If you come back this way I'll have the wheels greased to get you into the Guard or the State Military Reserve. In the mean time be careful. Folks down south may be getting a mite desperate. Camp Pritchess may not be as friendly a place as this one is."

Major Green filled out a pass, signed it and sent the men on their way. Just in the five minutes they'd been speaking to him, several dozen cars had pulled into the lot. Most eventually turned around and left, a few stayed and were escorted to a tent signed "Processing" and a few were escorted to the CQ tent.

"You know Tom, I'm about out of gas I'm down to the dregs. I bet Paul is too."

"Not hardly. The 540i has an eighteen plus gallon tank. Driving at a constant speed of around sixty on level ground with a tail wind, I'm getting almost twenty four miles a gallon. Do the math."

"I'm jealous! All right, we had eleven gallons, used six and now have five. I'd be amazed if I had more than a gallon left. Tom, how about you?"

"I'm as low as you are. Drat these little fuel tanks. Only about ten gallons plus. It's still sixty miles to home. What we have is exactly enough to get us there with dregs to spare. I propose to leave one vehicle behind, Paul's, in order to have a comfortable surplus."

"Why leave *my* car?"

"I have four wheel drive in case things get rough. The back seat comes out, the top comes off, and I can carry quite a bit. Ed's car doesn't have four wheel drive, but still has a higher ground clearance than yours, better tires for off-road and can carry a whole lot more than yours. You've got about four gallons of gas left. We can siphon it out."

Paul was dubious, but acquiesced. They distributed the fuel evenly between the two other vehicles, giving each a half tank. The supplies from the BMW were likewise divided. They considered only taking one vehicle as that would give plenty of fuel to spare but decided against it as a breakdown would leave them stranded and they couldn't take all the gear that way. They moved the BMW to the opposite

edge of the parking area, closest to the lights and tents in the theory it would be less likely to get vandalized there. Paul decided to leave a set of car keys with the Major in case it needed to be moved, installed a Club on the steering wheel and set the alarm.

Ed asked, "Now why does your car radio and alarm both work and mine don't?"

"I was in underground parking. No radio reception down there at all. Anything that attenuates radio attenuates EMP. You were on the surface. Plus there is a lot of variability from car to car. Some are grounded better than others. When it hit, some cars had their on board computers destroyed instantly, some only had them damaged and most only suffered a reset. Some cars may eventually fail from timing or fuel mixture problems stemming from their damaged computer."

"It all depends on where you were, whether the car was running at the time, whether the device in question was turned on, how good the noise filtration is and a million other things. Shielding is important too. A box under the hood would survive much better than would a box in the passenger compartment of a convertible."

"Don't forget that we are on the extreme periphery of this. Somebody in Oklahoma might have received ten times the EMP we did. Back there, if it doesn't have a carburetor, I bet it's dead."

"How come the freeway had so few stalls along side of it? Once we got away from the city we hardly had to slow down. But in the city everything was jammed."

"When a road is at or near its maximum carrying capacity, a single stall can bring everything to a halt. A twenty percent stall rate, coupled with say a one percent outright failure rate and you have a one hundred percent stationary rate, probably for days. Interstate five from the Modesto exit to Bakersfield has almost no passenger traffic during the week. Those that did fail were still moving and able to coast to the shoulder of the road or maybe even able to struggle to an off ramp. You did see a lot of hitchhikers, remember?"

"We didn't see any stalled big rigs or buses. Diesel engines don't have spark timing problems, they ignite from compression, leaving them less vulnerable to EMP. As long as the fuel keeps coming, a diesel keeps running."

Tom broke in, "Hate to break up the seminar, but we've got to get moving. I'll take the lead, since I know the road. Lets stay within radio range. Next stop, Santa Clarita!" And the two heavily laden vehicles drove off.

Heading south they climbed up the Grapevine grade, the lights disappearing behind the mountains. The urgency of getting home began to gnaw away at Tom's composure, but there was little he could do about it. A Suzuki Samurai is not exactly built for speed. The first checkpoint they passed through was at the old Ft. Tejon Historical Park which was being filled with tents as the park HQ was being converted to

the camp HQ. The guard gave a cursory glance at the pass and waved them on.

Next there was a very large encampment with dozens of two and a half ton trucks and trailers occupying the roadside rest area at Lebec. The troops had done an impressive job of rigging the generators to operate the existing street lights instead of portable spots. Hundreds of porta potties were being lifted off dozens of large flatbed trailers by forklifts. There was no checkpoint here, just troops in bright reflective orange vests and carrying flashlights with green wands directing traffic. There were scattered vehicle headlights and flashlights in the fields adjacent to the freeway extending all the way to highway 138 and the nearly dry Quail Lake.

Gorman Post Road ran parallel to the freeway, then cut east and crossed 138, where it resumed as the Ridge Route. Progress was slow as the two vehicles frequently had to wait for trucks and heavy equipment to cross the road or to go around those that were stopped. At the highway they met a road guard, more concerned about making sure the flow of trucks and men was not interrupted than in checking passes.

"Hello there! Do you have any information about conditions on the Ridge Route? We're trying to get through to Camp Pritchess. Major Green at Camp Grapevine said that would be the only way for civilians to get through."

The soldier was haggard and unshaven and wore the stripes of an Air Force sergeant. "We ain't had no traffic up the Ridge Route for over an hour. It were never more than a steady stream. Everything got choked off in the Newhall Pass by the stampede o' the thunderin' herd. A couple of times we had to send a truck up it to rescue people with breakdowns, no reports of rock slides or serious accidents."

"Any other routes we could take?"

"Yeah, you could head up to Elizabeth Lake Road and use San Francisquito or Bouquet. Dunno know what kind of traffic is on them roads, they'll dump you out into Santa Clarita as well. Sierra Highway, highway 14 and Soledad have all been federalized. No civvy traffic."

"What's Santa Clarita like? Can we get into the San Fernando Valley?"

"Them FEMA boys sure been real active in rounding up the refugees. I doubt if more'n a few score people have made it up this way since they set up shop. Prolly won't let you go south neither. Heck we 'spected to have a hunnert thou city folks up here in these hills by now. Don't have but a tiny part of that so fer. At thirty to a tent, lessee, that's better'n 30 thou tents we gotta put up an I knows of at least 5 differe' camps, mebbe more so that's 'bout six thou per camp give or take a few, but who knows what we'll do if'n they decide to evacuate and then..." Yawn.

The sergeant appeared to be resting heavily against the Suzuki and was staring off into space, dropping of into a mumble, showing no sign of ending his lecture and appearing on the verge of sleep.

"THANK YOU SERGEANT FOR YOUR INFORMATION! WE HAVE TO BE ON OUR WAY NOW!"

Suddenly the soldier snapped to attention and saluted Tom, saying "Yes Sir!"

Tom saluted back and drove on.

The Ridge Route winds steeply up into the mountains, passing several small ranches en route. It was first graded in 1910 as a more direct way to California's central valley with an average speed of 25 miles per hour. Since then it has been superseded by highway 99 in 1936 and then by Interstate 5 in the sixties. Few people know about it and even fewer drive it, so it today remains in relatively good shape despite the occasional rock slide.

Tom had discovered it on a local map one day when waiting in an immense 30 mile traffic jam caused by a jack-knifed fuel tanker. He cut off the freeway at a gravel truck station, took a dirt road under the freeway and a mile east and then took the Ridge Route past the accident, getting home hours earlier than he would have otherwise. But in the middle of the darkness, each narrow hairpin curve had to be negotiated slowly. The 30 miles to Templin highway took well over an hour and on the way they passed several dozen cars broken down for unknown reasons.

It was now the wee hours of the morning and stress was beginning to play heavily on the three men, especially Tom. He called a break at the highway. Ed had packed thermoses of hot coffee and doughnuts which they all consumed happily. Suddenly their repast was interrupted by the sound of an approaching humvee.

Waiting patiently for its arrival, put away their communications gear and stood beside their vehicles. As the humvee rounded a bend, they waved at it in greeting. A brilliant spot light shone on them, blinding them temporarily. Troops could be heard disembarking from it and rifle actions being worked. A voice boomed from a megaphone or louspeaker, they couldn't tell which.

"Stay beside yur vehicles. Put your hands over your heads. Make no sudden moves."

"What the hell...?" Paul started to say but was cut off.

"Do not speak. There will be no discussion until you have been identified and searched."

Two men in desert cammoflauge, armed with M-16s approached them cautiously and stood to slightly to the front and each side of them, at about three paces. A third with a pistol stood directly in front.

"Turn around slowly, place your hand against the top of the vehicle and spread your legs."

"Better do as he says, boys." spoke Tom. "Never argue with the end of a gun where the bullet comes out."

The three complied and were frisked as a second vehicle, this one a military Blazer, pulled up. Another soldier did a thorough examination of the interior of the vehicles and removed the personal communication headsets.

"You are driving on a road that is prohibited to civilian traffic. You will be escorted to a processing facility for disposition. Return to your vehicles and follow the Blazer. We will follow behind you. Do not try anything as you will be searched again at our destination. Your identification indicates you are Edward Parsons of Sacramento, Paul Marlin of Encino and Thomas McArthur of Grenada Hills. Is this correct?"

The three spoke their assent to this. Tom added, "That's *Senator* McArthur to you. I expect to see your CO ASAP."

"That's up to him. Get in your vehicles and follow. We will keep your identification."

They got back in the cars and obeyed the nice man's orders. Soon they pulled through a check point just past Castaic. There was a complex of illuminated buildings with guard towers. Most of the complex was surrounded by a high fence topped with razor wire. Outside of the complex another huge tent city was going up. Troops could be seen bustling about in forest and desert cammo, and khaki outfits emblazoned with FEMA on the front and back. Occasionally there was a sheriff's deputy to be seen.

Following the Blazer they soon found themselves in another dense pack parking area, suitable for tens of thousands of autos, but they were not allowed to park anywhere except the next spaces in line. Other civilian vehicles were coming in from different directions at a steady rate.

As soon as they got out Tom spoke to Ed, "I have a very bad feeling about this. If you don't have a spare key hidden somewhere, take your key off the ring and stick it under your rear tire. In the dark they won't notice it's missing."

"It's ok." he replied, "Got everything covered."

"All that barbed wire belongs to the Peter Pritchess county jail. Used to be the Wayside Honor Rancho, where they sent nonviolent juvenile offenders who were on good behavior. Pretty soon it got converted to a maximum security jail for gang bangers and such. Lovely place for a refugee camp."

The next two vehicles were parked in line and their occupants got out. Both cars held families, now shocked and frightened. Ed began talking to the other adults, but an approaching sentry's voice boomed out. "There will be no discussion until you are processed. You will lock your doors and hand over your keys to the corporal. He will then escort you to the CQ desk for processing."

The corporal took the keys, then attached tags to the keys indicating the row and position the vehicles were parked in and noted the license plate numbers on them. He then walked the dozen people off the field and into a tent city in the process of being erected. In an open area was a long row of tables, brightly illuminated. The people were marched along them and handed clip boards with questionnaires.

Name. Age. Home address. Religion. Education. Occupation. Social security number. Military history. Medical conditions. Prescription medicines. Then a checklist of skills. A section to list other family members and their locations. Then they were led into a large tent with at least a hundred chairs and ordered to sit down. Through it all Tom smiled, said please and thank you and generally behaved in the most servile and ingratiating manner possible. At every opportunity he asked to see the commanding officer, but always got the brush off.

The moment they were out of earshot of any soldiers, Tom whispered to the other two men, "Some bastard is going to pay for this and I plan on taking great pleasure in exacting the price", all the while keeping the dumb and happy look on his face. They were kept waiting until all seats were filled by the people who trickled in. Then a man wearing a jacket emblazoned with FEMA and a pistol belt, escorted by a Marine sergeant major and an Army Reserve lance corporal and second lieutenant, stepped onto a small platform and began to address the group.

"Welcome to Camp Pritchess. For those of you who may not be fully aware of what is happening let me bring you up to date."

"About ten o'clock this morning an upper atmospheric event occurred, probably a severe solar flare. It damaged or destroyed most electronic components and shut down power throughout North America. In view of this crisis the president has enacted a number of executive orders. One of them placed all highways, railroads, aircraft landing strips and navigable waterways under control of the federal government. As of now, all civilian traffic is prohibited along critical stretches of the Interstate and National Defense Highway systems and many state and local roads. This currently includes all approaches to the greater Los Angeles area. No civilian traffic is being allowed into or out of Los Angeles in order to keep the roads free for relief convoys and to minimize the refugee problem."

There was a murmur of unhappiness from the crowd, despite the orders not to speak.

"Quiet down in back!" barked the senior NCO. This was emphasized by brandishing his M-16.

"Those of you who do not live in a major metropolitan area will be sent on your way with passes to allow you to go straight home and nowhere else. That would include residents in the northern parts of Los Angeles county."

"Now, I know the rest of you good people have relatives or homes or jobs you'd like to get back to. But that just isn't possible right now. You will not be allowed to leave until this is over. *Accept that and*

there will be no trouble. When the situation clears up, we will return your vehicles to you and you will be free to go home."

"The second executive order that effects you authorizes the creation of relocation camps for civilians who either cannot return to their homes or are evacuated. For right now that means right here, Camp Pritchess. If the state of emergency should persist, you will eventually be billeted in private residences to be shared with the owners.

"The third executive order authorizes the federal government to conscript able bodied adult citizens to do work necessary to the relief efforts. In the immediate future that will consist of helping to erect tents right here. Eventually we will find work that is commensurate with your current skills."

"And lastly, all commercial vehicles have been nationalized to include all trucks with more than two axles. We need to be able to direct which vehicles carry what supplies and where. Truckers, you won't be separated from your rigs. You'll just be taking your orders from the government until the crisis is over."

Unexpectedly, a beefy man in bib overalls and wearing a John Deere hat stood up in the middle of the crowd. "I got a wife and kids to get to. They need me now, not when you feel like letting me go."

"I sympathize with your situation. Every effort will be made to allow them to join you here as soon as possible. In the mean time there are aid stations being set up in the city to distribute food and water to those who need it. I'm sure your family isn't wanting for any necessities."

"Them to join me? Whadaya mean? This is some kind of prison camp?"

"Now calm down. There just isn't going to be any civilian traffic to Los Angeles. Since you can't go home, we can't have you wandering around homeless."

"The hell you say!" And the big man turned and began to make his way through the crowd and out of the tent.

"Stop that man!" blurted the FEMA agent. If he refuses to stop, shoot!"

"HALT or I will shoot!" boomed out the sergeant major.

The big man ignored him. The FEMA man began to grow visibly angry. The butterbar and the corporal looked extremely nervous.

"This is your last warning! Halt or I will shoot!"

He brought the M-16 to his shoulder. The FEMA agent drew his pistol, which he didn't appear to be too familiar with. The private began to back away. The butterbar looked like a deer in a car's headlights.

"Shoot him and I'll see you court-martialed sergeant! It is illegal to follow an illegal order. Shooting an unarmed, law abiding civilian in the back is murder."

The crowd suddenly gasped at what Tom had just said. But no one was quite as surprised as Tom. The rifle lowered slightly from the Marine's shoulder.

"No governmental agency has the authority to detain law abiding citizens indefinitely without trial. I don't give a damn what your executive orders say. Unless these camps are voluntary, they are a clear violation of the Constitution."

The Marine spoke over a walkie-talkie. The private and the lieutenant were frozen in indecision.

"The Constitution no longer applies. This is martial law!"

With that the man from FEMA drew a bead on the big man who was almost out of the tent. He pulled the trigger and nothing happened. Looking quizzically at the gun, he flipped off the safety and pointed again. This time a rock the size of an orange slammed into the side of his head, stunning him.

Tom looked to his left to see Ed looking exactly like a major league pitcher recovering from a pitch. Paul looked about, and seeing a power junction box on the floor near the edge of the tent, began sidling over to it. Two men wearing MP bands and carrying night sticks appeared at the tent exit and attempted to subdue the exiting person.

Suddenly the lights went out in the tent. Then a loud pop and the lights in that section of the camp went out. One of the MPs went flying through the air and crashed into the crowd. People screamed. People panicked. People fled. Pandemonium ruled.

"Ed, Paul, follow me!"

The three men crawled under the side of the tent. It was almost as black outside as inside. Orders were being shouted right and left. There were popping sounds and the smell of tear gas. The riot was spreading throughout the camp. They scurried behind and between tents where there were few people and limited line of sight. Passing near the dark CQ tent, Tom motioned them to stop.

"Paul, give me that lighter of yours."

"Can't, they took it. But they missed a book of matches."

There were only three matches left in it, but it would do. First, Tom gathered up an armload of brush and dried grass, which was plentiful in the area. Then he crept up to the side of the CQ tent against which the boxes of ID and questionnaires were stored. Placing the kindling tight against the tent wall, he lit it and ran away.

"They need light? Well, that should help them. Hey, where's Paul?"

"Right here. You'd be amazed the havoc a box of paper clips could wreak. There was a small table with some office supplies on it in the processing tent. Every junction box we find, we disconnect and use these paper clips to short hot to ground."

"Great! Lets head to the cars and see if we can get out of here."

En route they were able to short out three more sections of lights. Nobody was paying attention to them, everyone was either fighting or fleeing the fire at the CQ tent. Soon they were at the cars. There were guards at the road, but their attention was monopolized by the chaos in the camp. Military vehicles rushed down the road. A forest service fire truck arrived, lights flashing and siren wailing.

"I suppose I could start more fires, but in this dry brush it would get out of hand. Don't want a lot of dead people. Grab the packs and some food and water from the pickup. Everybody in the Suzuki."

Tom grabbed his spare key from its hiding place, started up the crowded little car and pulled out - thanking his lucky stars he hadn't been boxed in. Shifting into four wheel drive, he took off cross country as quietly as he could and with no lights but the moon. Fortunately vehicles had been all over this area earlier and the heavy brush had all been removed.

Up into the darkness and the chaparral covered mountains they drove.

Faced with the gravest crisis since the surrender of Fort Sumpter, the President did what every president in history has done when encountering difficulty. He took upon himself greater powers. By the time the proclamations and executive orders were done issuing, there was no part of the Constitution left intact. He was limited in scope only by how few resources were available to him to enforce them.

Total army strength was under a half million, with much of that scattered to the globe in assorted peace keeping operations. The Marines were well under a hundred thousand in strength and they too were heavily involved in foreign commitments. The Navy and Air Force were not in a position to provide soldiers either, particularly since they had been at DEFCON 4 since moments after the event. That left the president with Guard and Reserve units and the various civil law enforcement agencies.

Guard and Reserve units were only sporadically available. There was no way to communicate with

members to officially call them up. Many who did get the message on the Emergency Communication System ignored it or delayed responding until they had squared away their families. Units located in large metropolitan areas found the few members who did attempt to respond were defeated by the same grid lock as everyone else. Guard and Reserve total strength gradually climbed to about 25%, mainly from units in the more rural areas. Ad hoc units had to be assembled from whoever was available and whoever would volunteer.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is responsible for disaster planning and continuity of government. The President's executive orders effectively gave FEMA dictatorial control of the country. It, the other federal agencies and the Cabinet immediately relocated to a command center buried deep within [Mt. Weather](#) in Virginia. The dozens of other subordinate bunkers located in the central eastern states received an influx of people deemed by FEMA to be vital to national recovery. None of them were elected officials. The Pentagon relocated to its hidey hole at Raven Rock, Pennsylvania. The President himself chose to relocate to Air Force One for the duration. After all, the Russians know about Mt. Weather, even if most of the US did not.

The Greebriar Hotel facility which had once been the alternate headquarters for Congress was now a National Park asset. You could now buy tickets for a tour of the facility as a kind of post cold war museum. Congress was out of luck, at least temporarily. The Justices of the Supreme Court didn't go anywhere. The traffic was too dense to drive and nobody bothered sending a helicopter.

Over all this hung the deeper questions of who did this, why, what comes next and how we should respond. It did not look good for the government of the people, by the people and for the people.

Chapter 4

Organization

"I call to order this emergency meeting of the Shady Acres Neighborhood Watch and Vigilance Committee."

Lynn brought the meeting to order, with the six people sitting around a patio table in John's back yard. They were all sipping glasses of warm lemonade and sweating. It was barely past ten in the morning and already the temperature was approaching triple digits.

"I've taken the liberty of drawing up an agenda, if nobody objects." Lynn paused a moment, raising her right eyebrow in query. Nobody responded so she continued, "I have also created a list of officers and nominations for people to fill them. As to the agenda, first we'll get the positions filled. Then we'll analyze the situation and how it will affect us. I propose we generate a plan to respond to whatever threats we identify. Anybody can propose action items at any time. We will need to inventory our assets to see where we fall short of what we need. Then we will determine how to improve the weaknesses in our position and what we will need for long term survival".

"Todd, I nominate you as secretary. Since I'm your mother, you're going to accept. Here's a note pad and pencil.

"John, I nominate you as communications director, mainly because you have the only functional 2 way radios around. Anybody object?"

John spoke, "Yeah. Me."

"Overruled. There being no disinterested objections, John is our Communications King.

"Golda, since John is going to be very busy with his radios, and you have some military experience, you are nominated as Secretary of Defense."

Golda Laughed. "Could I have a title change with that?"

"Sure. Whatever you want."

"Minister of Peace."

"Angling for a job in the Simpson administration, are we? Miriam, you can be our Surgeon General."

"But *you're* the closest thing we have to a doctor."

"Yes but you've got the emergency room experience. All I ever see is rotting teeth. You got the gunshot wounds, the overdoses and the crash victims, all the fun stuff.

"I've got Supply Sergeant and Vice President of Human Resources left. Henry, June, who wants what?"

Henry and June hurriedly conferred. "We've decide to form an independent consulting firm." said June. "Logistical Nightmares Limited. We'll take on the jobs jointly."

"Fine by me."

"What about me? Don't I get a fancy title?" Todd was anxious not to get left behind.

"OK. Since we're all chiefs, you are hereby declared Indian."

Todd was crestfallen. "Just call me Tonto."

The group decided on which threats they would deal with first. The first priority was to get more people involved in the effort. That effort would be mostly door to door sales. Henry and June would be handling it with Lynn. They would concentrate on finding residents who were known to have particularly useful skills i.e. police, fire, medical, electronics, military and others.

Next they needed to establish some sort of communications between the different participants. Initially they decided to use Todd as a runner, doing daily rounds of the complex and special deliveries as needed. Some kind of instant communication would be needed if they were to respond to any crisis. That would be John's job.

"I have an idea of what we can do. But I'm going to need Todd to do it. Jennie and Ellie can help too. Right now I am approaching a problem. I need a source of power. That generator can't run forever. It eats about two gallons of gas every three hours. Between my van and the RV we have about 20 gallons. In 30 hours I'm down."

"Hmmm. Sounds like a logistics problem. We could cut back the hours of operation, say have you up and running every 4th hour." said June.

"If I have to, I'll do it. I'll miss a lot of what's happening. Sometimes I have to try that long just to get through to someone or to pick up something interesting. If we could find a small generator with lower rate of fuel consumption or a bigger fuel supply, that would help. A functioning transceiver that ran directly off 12 volts and a bank of solar cells would be good too. I'm also trying to maximize the usefulness of what we have by charging up all the batteries I can find. Let's make it an action item to send all the dead batteries and battery chargers you can find over here. Any battery can be recharged, standard, alkaline or nicad, if you know how to do it."

"From what you've learned on the radio, just what are we looking at?"

John let out a deep sigh. When Lynn was on a roll, resistance was futile. "It's bad. Real bad. It's not going to get good again soon, if ever.

"You all know about the high altitude nuclear explosion. I don't have a much better reading on what's happening around the country. I hear traffic from Hawaii and Alaska indicating those areas are untouched. Maine and points farther north and east took some damage but seem to be recovering. Everywhere else is still down.

"There was a lot of traffic last night on the HF and VHF bands. The military is moving in to the north of us. There are several refugee camps being set up along the 5, the 14 and all over the Antelope Valley. I'm getting this all second hand because without repeater stations, I'm limited to line of sight transmissions. Apparently one of them up by the Peter J. Pritchess Prison had a riot last night. Hundreds of people scattered to the hills and down into Santa Clarita. Someone started a fire. It's dry as old cork up there and several tents and most of their records burned before they could put it out...."

Lynn stepped onto his delivery, "Those damned prisoners are always rioting or escaping or whatever. They should never have turned an honor camp into a jail for murderers and gang bangers. It's just not built for it."

"Wasn't the jail inmates. It was the refugees, supposedly led by three unidentified mad anarchists. Must have been pretty bad in that camp for a riot to break out.

"Our friend in Washington has essentially suspended the Constitution. He doesn't have the legal authority to do it without a declaration of some sort from Congress, but I doubt if he asked them. FEMA has the power to forcibly evacuate you or forcibly prevent you from evacuating.

"Jubal, over in Sylmar says they've actually set up roadblocks in Newhall Pass with emplaced machine guns and they're patrolling all the mountain roads. Civilian traffic is currently prohibited on any and all roads leaving the city, supposedly for our own protection. You've heard all the things that have been nationalized and/or prohibited so I won't go over that again. Suffice it to say LA is now a large, very leaky federal prison.

"Per the Emergency Communications System, which I shall refer to henceforth as ECS, the military will be setting up food drops at Amtrak and Metrolink stations. They expect to maintain gas and water pressure indefinitely and restore limited power within a week. I'll believe that a week from now if it's still true, but right now, I'm skeptical.

"From what I have heard on the police bands the rioting and looting continues unabated. Parts of the eastern Valley have been heavily looted although the rioting still seems mostly restricted to south-central

LA. There does seem to be a lot of gang activity going on, mostly turf warfare.

"Here's what I think about all this:

"I'll bet my trousers that *The Powers That Be* don't know who did this or why. Our biggest threat is the possibility of this all going to hell in a mushroom cloud. Out here in Grenada Hills we aren't close to any military targets. And there's not much heavy industry up here, so we're not worth the effort to target. The west Valley has aerospace and the east Valley has a fair amount of light industry, so we might get bracketed. If you really want to survive regardless of what happens, practice your duck and cover drills and locate some kind of nearby underground shelter in case of fallout."

Henry said, "We have to assume that whatever happens we can survive and that survival is worthwhile. You can always change your mind later, after the fact."

"How true. I learned that the hard way"

Henry continued, "Barring nuclear war, the worst scenario I foresee is food and water shortage. The grocery stores depend on power for refrigeration. In a day or so they will all smell like charnel houses. The same is true of all our home refrigerators and freezers. As an action item, I recommend that everybody start cooking everything they can from their freezers before it spoils."

"I have some useful information." said June. "I've got some books on country living that go into detail on canning, jerking, smoking and so on. We can use barbecues, maybe even fireplaces if we have to, to speed the process."

Todd joined in. "That gives me an idea. Why don't we go to the grocery stores and pick up on all their spoiled meat? If we can preserve it before it get too bad, maybe we can't eat it but Spot and Blue sure will. I've seen them eat stuff that made me want to throw up, it smelled so bad."

June agreed, "Good point. The dogs have to eat too. And now they've become an important security asset. With everything all nationalized, the stores couldn't sell you food if they wanted to. That is, the ones that haven't been looted empty. But meat they already have to throw out? I bet they'd let you have it."

Henry picked up the thread. "I doubt if anybody here has enough food for more than a couple weeks on hand. Most don't have half that much. In just a few days there are going to be some very hungry people out there. Hungry people are desperate people. I'd hate to be lined up at those depots when the supply train arrives but we are going to have to. Which brings me to my next point. We are going to need to organize ourselves in getting and distributing our share of the incoming food. Never eat your own food when you can eat somebody else's, that's my motto."

"My biggest fear is roving gangs and solitary criminals." said John. "It's going to happen. There's never

been such a good opportunity for all the murderous loonies to come out of the closet. Junkies needing a fix, psychopaths needing to kill, perverts needing someone to molest. There's no police protection and not likely to be much any time soon. That idiot Simpson thinks he's doing a lot of good with his ban on public display of firearms. Precisely the kind of law good people try to obey and bad people ignore. We've got to set up some kind of security here and I don't believe the good people of Shady Acres are up to it."

"Let me be the judge of that." harumphed Golda. "Remember, I'm the Minister of Peace. You're the Commo King." Then she winked at him. "Stick to your tubes old man and get me some communications. If my kibbutz could stand off an assault by a company of Jordanian infantry and a platoon of tanks with nothing but rifles, we can discourage a few petty looters without bloodshed. Although we really could use more bodies. We need someone to act as early warning for each approach. Since we'll never get enough people to cooperate to mount a perimeter defense, we'll need a fast reaction team backed up by a sniper. Unless we are overrun by waves of looters, what we really need to worry about are your roving gangs. Your individual criminals have to be left up to the individual to look out for.

"I nominate June and Henry for the reaction team, since they've already got guns. I recognize those pieces too. We took them from the British in forty eight, then they gave them to us in fifty six. When I was in the IDF home defense auxiliary, all we ever got were British and French surplus."

John was staring quizzically at the huge revolvers in the Henderson's matching holsters. "Where'd you get those shootin' irons? Don't think I've seen anything like them. What are they?"

"There's a story behind these." Henry responded. They're 454 Webleys. They've been adapted to use 45 ACP in half moon clips

"Years ago we were in Tanzania, doing research for a book and movie on the illegal ivory trade. The game warden refused to take us out into the field unarmed and untrained. They had these Webleys they'd been issued for side arms. The warden and his assistant carried 9mm pistols they'd mostly confiscated from poachers and smugglers, so we got these as hand-me-downs. Of course we had to purchase the Webleys, the clips and the bullets we used.

"He had an interesting method of training us. He picked out a man sized stump for a target and every morning and every evening had us practice on it at seven paces. Present and fire the revolver in 2 seconds in a Weaver stance, fire two more shots at one second intervals, then drop prone and do the same thing. Then reload. Did this 5 times every morning and evening. That stump died a thousand deaths. We got real good at dropping in those clips, too. He said it was more important to be accurate than fast."

"So you know how to use those.... Did you see any action?"

"We watched plenty of action, but never had to draw our guns. He told us that just having two extra hands who looked competent reduced the chances of poachers actively resisting. Made the odds look worse."

"Have you kept in practice?"

"Not as much as we'd like. Every few months."

"How much ammo do you have on hand?" asked Golda.

"We checked that before we came over. One box of fifty lead round nose, cheap practice rounds. Box and a half of jacketed hollow point. Those were for personal protection, but we never actually felt the need to keep the guns loaded, or even accessible, until now. Six in each revolver, another 12 each in half moons in our pouches."

"We'll want to inventory the weapons we have available and the ammunition too. Surely there's some police or military people or even security guards we can get to help us."

Todd spoke up. "What about me?"

Lynn gave Todd a look that would have shriveled a Marine drill sergeant. "You, son of mine, will stay as far away from any shooting as I can get you. No way is my child going to be involved in gun play. There will be no discussion on this. Understand?"

"Yes Mom."

"Don't you go rolling your eyes at me, young man!"

"Calm down Lynn. It's not like he's going to run off and join the Marines." John spoke with irony as he looked at Lynn with one highly cocked eyebrow. "Let's get back to issues. Continue, Golda."

"Henry has a point. In his story, not on his head. If we look unappetizing enough, we don't need to be really tough. We can set Todd in charge of the kids and have them build barriers for our four entrances. We can flatten the tires of any vehicles trying to run through them with caltrops. If we could find a source of razor or barbed wire - Henry? June? Are you listening? This is an action item from the Minister of Peace. - we could make it unappetizing for pedestrians. Put up big nasty signs threatening death and destruction to any who pass without permission."

Lynn asked, "Cal-whats?"

"Just think of them as jacks with real sharp points. And Lynn, I nominate YOU as another member of

the response team until we find more bodies."

"But...!"

"But me no buts. You can't lead from the rear. Nobody will follow someone who is always behind them. I know Tom kept an armed house. Everybody has multiple roles to play here, including you. One additional body may be the difference between a firefight and the bad guys going somewhere else."

"Yes, I suppose I must. All I've got is a small pistol and a 12 gauge double and I haven't practiced in ages."

Todd started to say something, but stopped. Then smiled subtly. Lynn didn't notice. Maybe she should have.

"OK then, I'm on the team. Miriam, we haven't heard from you yet. If somebody here gets sick, the nearest clinic is an hour away on foot, probably overwhelmed, maybe impossible to get a seriously sick or injured person to."

"I'm afraid I don't have much to offer. I have some basics, like a stethoscope, betadine scrub and some first aid supplies, but aside from that I'm really not better off than anyone else."

"Action item: med-surg supplies for Miriam. We can loot my dental office. I have anesthetics, antibiotics and such in addition to all my dental tools. I've still got a dissection kit from college. Todd has a decent little microscope I think he'll lend you"

June added, "I'm sure you have resources you're not even thinking of. How about the *Merck Manual*? You've got to have some nursing books, maybe a *PDR*. I'll give you my copy of *Where there is no Doctor* to look at and my herbal medicine books and my copy of *Medicine for Mountaineering*. You can make your spare bedroom into a hospital of sorts."

"Thanks June. I guess I just don't feel very useful or competent. It would be a long way to the hospital and the doctors are likely to be overwhelmed. I feel a little guilty for not being there right now."

"Why don't you spend some time at the clinic up the street?" Todd suggested, looking for any excuse to get out and about. "It's not Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows, but I'm sure they need the help. I could take you there on my motorcycle. I get fifty miles per gallon and that's a lot of trips."

Lynn almost spoke against it, but Miriam said in her gentle voice, "Thank you Todd. I shall take you up on that. God would want me to help the most people I possibly can. Perhaps I can bring home outdated medical supplies or goods they've thrown out that could still be sterilized and reused."

June said, "That's a lovely sentiment. Makes me feel guilty for not having any really useful skills to offer

others. Is there any other help we can offer you?"

"No. Just remember those who are less fortunate than we in your prayers tonight. And let us also pray for Tom's safety and quick return."

The rest of the day was very busy for all of them. John devised three different communications plans. One he called the air raid siren plan. Many of the houses in the development had burglar alarms installed. While the computer brains in these units were almost certainly dysfunctional, the sirens and the gel cell batteries would still work. As a test he had Todd remove Miriam's burglar alarm siren, mount it on the peak of her roof and wired it directly to a simple switch and the battery. A flip of the switch resulted in a loud wailing that could be heard clearly outdoors for a block.

Jim said it should work as well for car alarms and when he explained it to the Hendersons, they mounted the car alarm siren on the roof of their Land Rover. Their daughter Rhiannon had painted some well done signs labeled *Emergency Response Team* and mounted them on the side and rear doors. They were dressed in their safari outfits all the time now. It was all a play to them and they were acting their parts to the hilt.

Todd took to wearing John's old uniform fatigues. (His father's were much too small.) They were short in the legs and tight across the chest, but nothing a bit of sewing wouldn't fix. Golda even trotted out her old IDF uniform. Upon discovering there was no way she was ever going to fit in it, she trotted it back into her cedar chest again. Her bolt action .303 Enfield and a 20 round box of full metal jacket came out of its case and she began to practice dry firing.

Jim's second idea for communications was to set up their own AM broadcast station. To do this he put Jennie to work doing what he called "bread boarding" and "plastic drawer engineering". After a couple hours of work they had a low power AM broadcast station running with a range of a couple hundred yards. It was powered by a single 9 volt radio battery. This was linked into the output from a walkman or alternately to a microphone, allowing the choice of live broadcast, recorded messages or rebroadcast from other stations. Jennie and Ellie alternated as DJs.

The third line of communications were some children's walkie talkies, also powered by 9 volt batteries. Golda and John agreed they were to be given to the response team, only to be turned on during "tactical" situations to preserve battery life. This could be signaled by any of the agreed communications modes: the alarm sirens, honking a car horn in bursts of three, notification by AM Radio or by runner.

In what time they could spare the committee were in and out of their houses cooking the spoilable contents of their refrigerators and freezers as quickly as possible. Their meals consisted of spoilable items that couldn't be cooked. Ice cream was very popular, as were popcicles. They also took time later in the day to walk the neighborhood and spread the word of all they had done and suggest that others follow suit.

The radio station was a big hit with everybody, especially the kids. It created a sense of a return to regular life. It broadcast food preparation tips, summaries of official broadcasts, music and requests for assistance. Soon several people had stepped up with equipment John had requested including a Honda generator that would put out 350 watts for only a tenth of a gallon per hour, a couple of bicycle generators and a couple of solar battery trickle chargers. Now Radio Free Shady Acres could run on solar during the day and use batteries only at night.

Nobody volunteered for the response team or as lookouts. However a plethora of scrap lumber, chains and building supplies were turned up. These were combined with trash containers to make reasonable barriers to vehicles at three of the four entrances. Todd took charge of this project and several other teen aged residents who were bored to tears and desperate for something to do.

The news from Santa Clarita continued to be grim. Troops were scouring the hills, looking for refugees to take back to the camp. It did not look like Tom would be making it back any time soon. Most of the country still appeared to be shut down although some small communities were getting limited power back. The rioting had abated in the south central areas, but had spread to new areas such as east LA, the central city, La Brea and Los Feliz. Pacoima, Sun Valley and San Fernando had reports of severe gang violence.

Almost no news from beyond LA was available except what the BBC was broadcasting. The world's financial markets were crashing. America was the single most important component of the world's fragile economy. Now that it was gone, most of the third world and much of the second world was facing starvation. The industrial powers of Europe and Asia were in crisis, lacking an export market and a source for many vital supplies.

America was also central to what little peace the world had experienced. NATO was already on it's highest level of alert. The whole bloody mess in the Balkans was in danger of eruption again. Suddenly the Arabs threatened to assault the Israelis with chemical and biological weapons, convincing themselves that the Great Satan America was the only reason Israel had prevailed in earlier conflicts. India and Pakistan immediately started rattling their nuclear sabers at each other. With starvation looming, Africa was ready to erupt into chaos and total war.

With nothing but gloom and doom on the international scene, the committee decided not to transmit much of this information to the rest of the community. They needed to concentrate on immediate survival and recovery, not on things over which there was no control.

That evening Lynn and the others fell into an exhausted sleep. They had accomplished much, yet much, much more was left to do. It was also the last night they would rest without a lookout on duty.

The Marines have landed...

The next day, after taking Miriam to the nearby clinic, Todd was set on his appointed rounds. Lynn's

daughters started up again as DJs for Radio Free Shady Acres. Soon there were a dozen young girls getting in John's way. Of course soon afterward there were a dozen boys to keep them company.

Lynn was set to go and pillage her dental office. The roads were still too backed up to get very far by car, but at least they were getting better. People were coming back to reclaim their abandoned vehicles. Each time another car made it home, the road got a little freer. Autos that were completely disabled were being pushed off the street into any available space by people who spontaneously formed work teams to get their own cars out.

Golda had insisted that most of the response team stay in place, so Lynn had charmed a middle aged Vietnamese gentleman by the name of Nguyen Cao into accompanying her on bicycle to her office. Even armed, she did not feel safe enough to go alone. She learned Mr. Cao had been a Colonel in the Army of Vietnam, something she had never known before, and she was curious as to why he was to reluctant to get involved with the committee.

"Your government will come and take you over. Sooner or later. You are not doing it their way. They do not want you to take care of your selves. They want sheep, not goats. High nails get hammered down first. I will be a very short nail."

"But don't you think we will get by better if we work together?"

"I have seen war. I have seen chaos. This is both. The more things seem to slip away, the harder government grabs. Better for us the government falls completely, no replacement. I fear secret police more than bombs, more than criminals. I can shelter from bombs. I can kill criminals. I can not kill the government or shelter from it.

"Already they tell us no guns. Next they tell us no radio. No storing too much food. Then they will force us out of our homes or force strangers into our homes. Committees like yours will be suspicious. The people they will make slave laborers. Even dentists."

"Then why are you helping me now?"

"You are a pretty lady with no husband to protect her. Maybe I protect you for a little while. Maybe I see too many ladies die...." he trailed off.

Lynn felt this to be extraordinarily chauvinistic, yet also very touching, although she couldn't share his paranoia about the government. It seemed that something very terrible had happened to this man. She wanted to find out what, but also didn't want to intrude.

Col. Cao pedaled his one speed Schwinn like he had been born on a bicycle and Lynn had to exert herself to keep up, even on her 15 speed. Soon they arrived where her van had been parked in a stranger's driveway. It did not appear to have been broken into or moved. The house it was in front of

looked empty, with drawn curtains, but one couldn't tell from this. Many people had simply pulled the curtains, locked the doors and kept their silence, as had Col. Cao.

"Let's get this thing out of their driveway and park it somewhere else."

Together they loaded the bicycles into the back of the Caravan. Lynn managed to drive a few blocks before her progress was halted. It was fortunate that they had stopped because she happened to look at the gas gauge and her tank was almost completely dry.

"There was a quarter tank in it when I left it there."

"Maybe someone need it more than you. Lucky you still have a battery."

They continued east, again on bicycle. The further they got, the more ominous the cloud of smoke ahead became. The burning must have spread to the east valley, to within a few of miles of her office. They began to see a trickle of refugees walking to the west. It was not a good sign.

"I see this a hundred times. Always refugees. Always smoke and death behind them. We must hurry. There are those who would kill for a bicycle."

The exterior door of the building had been smashed and a small pharmacy in the building front had been thoroughly looted as had a veterinary office by the rear entrance, both offices having glass doors. The damage looked recent enough that the looters might even still be in the building, so Nguyen urged extreme caution before entering. Lynn's office did not appear to have been looted yet. They quickly entered her suite, locking the door behind them. It was a solid core door in a metal frame, offering a small degree of security. Her note was still taped to it. Inside they quickly filled their packs with pain killers and antibiotics and dental instruments.

"Now we leave door open, tear the place up. Make it look looted. Looters may not look too close when they see that. If we need, we come back with your van and take big stuff when the roads clear."

This hadn't occurred to Lynn, but it seemed a really good idea. They grabbed the 12 volt gel cell battery from her alarm thinking that every additional battery they could get might be needed. The last thing she took was a large bowl of sugar-free suckers she handed out to the little children who were her clients. Lynn's pack was now heavy and hurt her shoulders to carry, just as it had two days earlier. The Colonel had a framed pack he called an "Alice" that looked infinitely more comfortable to wear.

On their way back they managed to park the van only about a half mile from home. The engine was already starting to choke from lack of fuel. While they were gone, something had gone down Chatsworth Boulevard and cleared a single continuous lane. Something very powerful with a blade had simply pushed obstructing vehicle to the side. Cao looked closely at the tire marks left on the street.

"It was a deuce. Probably big V-blade on it. Probably heavy load to give traction. Marines have landed."

For all their efforts, the van was still little closer to home than before. But at least now it was located on a passable road. Both Lynn and the Colonel were drenched in sweat in the 100 plus degree heat. In front of Lynn's house they were confronted by dozens of various cuts of meat spread out across the hot asphalt.

How not to jerk beef...

With his mother gone, Todd was more or less free to do as he wished. Traveling by bicycle, she'd not get back for at least two hours. Why she hadn't had him take her there on his motorcycle was a mystery, but it didn't take a genius to see she was just being over protective again. The girls were over at the radio shack, as John's place was becoming known, so there was no need to watch them. This day he walked a quarter of the development, with Henry, June and their daughter taking the rest. Maybe he didn't try very hard to raise those who didn't appear to be at home and maybe he didn't say very much to those who were, but he got the message out that they were organizing and had a radio station up and to tell their neighbors. He'd let the radio do the rest of the talking.

His first concern was the dogs. They would need food. Aside from having only about a week of kibble on hand, there wasn't much to feed them. So hauling the biggest back pack he could find he rode his motorcycle just a couple blocks up the street to a nearby supermarket. A civilian wearing a badge identifying him as the store manager and a young black police officer, both looking ragged and exhausted, were on the scene not doing much of anything.

"Mornin' sir."

"Can't help ya. We're closed. All our inventory belongs to the relief effort. No sales."

"What about your meat and frozen food? With refrigeration gone it will have become spoiled in this heat by now."

"What do you want with spoiled meat? If you eat it you might get sick."

"It's not for me. We have two dogs and they won't mind it a bit. Just adds a little flavor to it for them. You're just going to throw it out any how."

"If it was up to me I'd do it. But it's not. You may be planning on selling it as good meat to some unsuspecting person. How should I know? The orders say nothing leaves this store whatsoever without an official authorization. Now head on home."

Then the police officer stepped into the discussion. "You look real familiar. Where do you live?"

"Just up the street at Shady Acres."

"Thought I recognized you. I live there too. Or at least in theory. I haven't been home since the morning the power went down. Been living at the station. I see you've got some of the entrances blocked off. "

"They thought it would be a good idea. Didn't want a lot of cars wandering through. Might discourage gangs enough to look for easier pickings."

"Which "they" is that?"

"The neighborhood watch committee. My Mom's President."

"You must be Senator McArthur's son. Better tell your Mom that those roadblocks are illegal. If the military sees them, they'll tear them out. If it looks like someone is guarding the place, they'll get detained."

"But why?"

The officer let out a long exhausted sigh. "They don't want things to get out of hand. Militias forming up, challenging the governments hand. Vigilantes arresting and executing without trial. People hoarding food or profiteering while other people starve." Then he snorted derisively. "Too many grasshoppers, too few ants."

"So my dogs starve because you can't trust people with spoiled meat?"

The officer led Todd aside, closer to the street and out of the immediate earshot of the store manager. "Look son. What are your real plans for the meat?"

"Just what I said. I'm going to salt it down and then dry it in the sun. That's how you make jerky, you know."

The Coleman's next door had a deep freeze with a whole side of beef in it. When the power went down, they had sealed it shut with duct tape and piled all the blankets they could find over, around and under it to hopefully keep it cool as long as possible. In a newspaper article they had read that storing containers of water in the freezer would keep it cool longer in the event of power failure, so there were at least a dozen gallon jugs of frozen water in there along with the meat, along with a couple gallons of ice cream and two frozen turkeys. Unfortunately for them, they had an electric stove top and oven. The project of cooking it fell to their neighbors with gas cooking equipment and the McArthur's stove and barbecue were once again being pressed into service. Todd had asked June how to preserve meat without cooking it and she mentioned the jerking process.

"Ok, so I trust you because I know you're a good kid and you've got a good family. I'm not suggesting

anything, but the loading gate in the rear is unlocked. If someone were to sneak into the back, real quiet like, we'd never know it if they were to unload the refrigerator case of a few packages of beef. But if I were to catch someone coming out with preserved food or if I caught them trying to sell it later, they would end up in the detention camp regardless of who's son they were. Understand?"

Todd swallowed, "Yes sir." he said.

Soon Todd and 50 pounds of packaged beef appeared at the McArthur's. Each piece of meat was then liberally coated with salt and laid out in the sun on a piece of clear food wrap in the hottest place he could think of. Todd then stood guard to be sure nobody and nothing scavenged it. Then his mother came home.

"Todd McArthur, just what do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm jerking meat, just like June said to. Salt it heavily and let it dry in the sun."

"Where did you get all this meat?"

"I didn't steal it. It's stuff from the market that was unrefrigerated and was getting thrown out."

Slowly Lynn, who was exhausted and dehydrated from her office run, began to gain her composure. Shaking her head and massaging her temples she said, "Dear God, why do I have to have such precocious children? Why do I get blessed with such geniuses to cope with and not the genius to do it with?"

"Todd, if you want to jerk meat with the sun, you first have to cut the meat into thin slices. Then hang it or lay it on a rack in the sun with good all around air circulation. You can't jerk a whole roast that way, even if it is a hundred degrees. The best way is to heat it in a smoker. You can get higher temperatures that way, use larger pieces and the smoke will add some flavor." She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek to let him know she wasn't really angry with him. "Now get a sharp knife and a cutting board and *be careful*."

"Looks like at least the dogs will eat well, even if we starve."

While Col. Cao retreated to his home and Todd was set to slicing the meat into thin strips, Lynn reported to John about the success of their expedition and the refugees heading their way. She also reported the lane clearing process.

"Yeah we heard it. Made a helluva racket. Had a two and a half ton truck rigged with a blade up front. Maybe twenty fully armed troops, most riding, some walking. Never saw anything like it before in my life. They'd push a car straight ahead until they found a space to put it in. Then they'd push it sideways. Not very pretty, but effective."

"If the refugees make it out this far we'll have a problem."

"What will we do?" she asked.

"Make them feel unwelcome, I guess. That's about all we can do. We'll have to keep someone up all night on watch, need to talk to Golda. Refugees aren't confined to the daylight, you know. Pray that they decide to hang out around Amtrak stations. That's where the food shipments will arrive starting tomorrow according to the ECS."

"Did they give a schedule?"

"Ours will be at noon and at six."

"Todd said that according to Peter Gallagher - You know, that policeman who lives on the far side of Shady Acres on White Oak who wasn't home? - that our barricades were considered illegal and that we can't post armed guards."

"To hell with the government. If they decide the barricades must be torn down then *they'll* have to do it. June and Henry know not to "display" their weapons when the authorities are around and so do you and Golda. We can't just sit here helpless, after all. But alas, we now have a few more executive disorders to put up with."

"Hoarding is prohibited. Civilians are prohibited from keeping more than a week's food supply or a full tank of gas on hand."

"Militias and paramilitary groups are prohibited from forming or assembling. Civilians are prohibited from taking law enforcement into their own hands."

"Well, it sounds reasonable to me. I don't see how any of that applies to us. I mean, it's not like we're doing anything like that. I certainly don't think people should be hoarding food when others are going hungry. And we don't want people walking around with guns and acting like some kind of junior police corps, or worse yet, a lynch mob."

Jim could only roll his eyes and sigh.

An hour later, Lynn was in the kitchen with Miriam, tending to one of the Colemans' turkeys. "Do you smell wood smoke?"

"Yes, maybe it's the barbie?"

"I don't think so. This is different, it smells more like pine."

"Who would be running a wood fire on a day like today?"

"Maybe somebody is cooking over their fireplace."

There was indeed a fire kindling, and it was in the McArthur's fireplace. And Todd, who had climbed up a ladder to the top of the chimney, was lowering one of several long wires down it. Attached to each wire, using a paperclip inserted into knots tied in the wire for a hook, were a large number of strips of beef. *"This time,"* he thought to himself, *"She can't possibly get mad at me."*

Trial by fire

The day became the night and then the next day. The development gradually awoke to the long term nature of the situation and people became more cooperative. Families were found who agreed to watch the three blockaded entrances and sound a warning in the event of trouble. Likewise it was possible to convert their burglar alarms to exterior manually activated alarms. Since there were no alleys between rows of houses, these people were instructed to sound the alarm and evacuate by going over their back walls, preferably into the yard kitty corner behind them. None of these people were at all interested in armed defense.

A pickup truck shuttle was arranged to take people to and from the food distribution center. The center was heavily protected by armed troops and had literally thousands of refugees encamped around it. Many of these refugees were drafted into a labor pool for various relief efforts, but there remained a large pool of indigent and unhappy people to cause trouble. Flyers were distributed, outlining all the major executive orders. Ration cards were issued, initially by driver's license, then by recent copies of income tax filings. For folk with homes, the center was a place to get away from as quickly as possible.

Officer Gallagher was still living at the police station working 16 hour, shifts guarding unlooted grocery and electronics stores until the military could loot them. Col. Cao was gradually coaxed onto the committee, mostly by John, who he'd never known before. They would talk for hours about battles and places, long unmentioned but never forgotten. While John had lost the ability to walk during Tet, the Colonel had lost his wife and son during the evacuation. They were some of the boat people who's boats were machine gunned by the North Vietnamese on the high seas. Ever since he had lived in isolation.

Then Sam showed up, just after dawn. Miriam intercepted him staggering into the complex area. His eyes were bruised, his lips split and his wrists were abraded with rope burns. His clothing consisted of a pair of bloody briefs and there were bruises all over his body. He insisted on going to Todd's house, so she helped him there. Lynn was asleep from watching half the night, but Todd was up and the racket woke the girls up almost immediately.

"Oh my God! What happened to you?" exclaimed Todd.

"A gang. Bikers. Broke in, tore the house up. I was asleep. They beat me up. Tied me up. Wanted to know where all the money was. I didn't have any money, it was all in the bank."

"Todd, you know this boy?"

"Yes, Miriam. He a friend from school. His parents are in Hawaii, so he's alone."

"Oh the poor dear! Lets lay him down on the sofa. Ellie you get a sheet and some blankets. Jennie you get ... no your mother needs to sleep. He has nothing life threatening. Go get June"

They made a bed for him on the sofa and removed the bloody shorts. At first he resisted this, but relented when a towel was provided for his privacy. Miriam sent Ellie out again, when June arrived, to bring a wash basin, the first aid kit and some warm water and a clean wash cloth. Miriam performed a detailed examination of Sam to ensure that no broken bones, internal injuries or signs of concussion existed. They then washed the cuts and abrasions with antiseptic soap and bandaged them with an antibiotic ointment. Lastly they gave him a codeine & Tylenol pill for the pain.

June began to debrief the boy. "Did this gang just attack your house or was it hitting houses at random?"

"I think just mine."

"Any idea of why?" Sam suddenly became agitated and started to stammer. "Uhhh..."

"I know why." Todd said. "His parents are both doctors. I bet they wanted *drugs*. Todd stared intently at Sam. He knew the drugs they were after weren't prescription drugs.

"Yeah, that's it. They kept asking for the drugs. Valium. Codeine. Miltown." Sam began to shiver.

"He's going into shock, though I doubt it will be life threatening. Ellie, get me a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel. Two if you've got them. And we'll need more blankets to keep him warm. Jennie, I want some pillows to prop up his feet."

"Todd, can you describe these people? What were they wearing? How were they transported? How were they armed?"

"Bikers. Tattoos. Long hair. A few guns. Some had knives. Some girls too. The leader was a big guy, real big, like a weightlifter only real tall. "

"Can you tell me what kinds of guns?"

"Big guy had a shotgun. I think it was a pump. There were hand guns. I don't know. I don't know anything about guns."

"How did you get away?"

"They tied me up in the bedroom. They were - ah - going to - to - to 'do' me they said. Then they got into the liquor cabinet and started to party, kinda forgot about me. I managed to get untied and climbed out the window while they were drinking."

"Why come here?"

Sam was starting to sob in between shivering, "I don't have anybody. I don't have anywhere. I don't have nowhere to go."

"There, there. Everything is going to be ok. You're safe now. Close your eyes and get some rest and we'll talk some more later."

In moments Sam had drifted off to sleep, clutching the water bottle like a teddy bear.

Ellie and Jennie were sent off to RFSA early. Todd, June and Miriam stepped outside. Todd said, "There's more than he is saying. His parents were big in the drug scene. Street drugs as well as prescription. They were always off on some vacation, always left Sam behind, even left him drugs to do while they were gone. That's why they picked his house."

"What are you going to do, Todd?" asked June.

"Talk to Mom about it. Take care of him for now, I guess." Todd looked very troubled. "They didn't just talk about doing him. They *did* him. That's why his shorts were so bloody."

"Yes Todd, they did him." responded Miriam. "And no doubt made him do things as well. I've seen rape victims before, solo and gang rapes, male and female. ER nurses see it all. I know exactly what happened to him and I refuse to go into details. Let's keep this our little secret. Don't even talk to him about it unless he brings it up. In God's eye, this makes no difference and to us that is all that matters. But to Sam, he's lost his dignity. Maybe his masculinity. Not to mention the possibility of AIDS or some other venereal disease. Just as Christ has compassion for the sinner who is transgressed upon, we must also show our compassion for Sam.

"Of course."

June wondered aloud, "What does this means for our security plans?"

They wouldn't have long to wonder.

Two hours later, the first gunfire in their area since the beginning of the blackout had erupted. The sound came from up the street in the direction of the supermarket. Todd was just on his way to the clinic with Miriam and they didn't hear the sound over the motorcycle when Henry came leaping over the wall abutting the street and frantically flagged them down. The instant they halted they could hear it too. Everybody returned to the development and the "tactical" radios came on. As quickly as it began, the firing halted.

Golda ordered the team into their positions. Lynn had been relaxing in a tub of hot water, thanking her lucky stars that water and gas pressure had never been lost. That might change tomorrow. All she had cared about was soaking away her cares in a cloud of bubbles and trying to forget about her new houseguest. Now her life was pure adrenalin. When she heard the alarm, she threw on a t-shirt and shorts, took the shotgun and pistol and ran to Miriam's house at the north entrance, still dripping wet and soapy. This was most likely to be invaded as it was not barricaded and fronted the only opened street. She traversed the front lawns, hugging the houses, taking advantage of and being prepared to dive into a doorway or a gate to a yard if need be.

Henry and June took their Rover to a central location to wait for orders on where to respond as a mobile reserve unit. John began broadcasting distress signals on military and police frequencies and took out an Army issue Colt .45, while the girls sent out warnings on RFSA to the residents to stay inside and lock their doors. Nobody had assigned a job to Col. Cao, and nobody could seem to contact him. Golda climbed to an adjacent home's 2nd floor roof through a gable in the attic suitable for that purpose. With her Enfield, binoculars and radio, she took a position behind the peak that gave her complete command of the front entrance and a limited view of the other three. This took almost ten minutes to get into place with much confusion and disorganization.

Minutes later Col. Cao showed up at the comms center. "I hear shots. Go on recon. Many bikers are looting the supermarket. Pharmacy I think, they're not carrying out food or goods. Owner dead. Officer hurt very bad. Unconscious. I put him in dumpster until we can get him

"Maybe they come this way, maybe they not. I wait here."

"Here, take my .45. They may need you."

"Thank you no. Have my own."

"They need you up front. All we have is Golda and Lynn. Golda is using the Hendersons as a reserve."

"Front is secure."

"How do you know that?"

"Golda there."

"So?"

"I study war. All wars. 1967 Arab-Israel war too. Heard she was in it. Checked with my sources. She kill twenty five men with that rifle, including one tank. Got big medal. IDF sniper trainer afterwards. I go up there anyhow. Watch. Maybe help if needed."

"Holy cow. Who'd 'av guessed?"

"Not judge candy bar by wrapper."

Lynn was in Miriam's house, cursing herself for ever having gotten involved in this. She was no fighter, she was a mother and a dentist. Neither profession prepared her for what she was at least pretending to do now, to be a soldier. Every instinct told her to turn around and return home, to get her children together and lock the doors and pull the curtains and wait this thing out. *"Where the hell is Tom, dammit? This is his job. I shouldn't even be here. Why the hell did I let Golda talk me into this? I'm going to stay right here inside and not do a thing and this will all go away. Nothing will happen anyhow and I couldn't do anything about it if it did and it's not my responsibility and why aren't some of these other big brave husbands in the community out here and where the hell are the cops when you need them probably looting a doughnut shop...@#\$\$%^&*!!!"*

For the moment she was right. Nothing was happening....

Skag was a big man and a natural leader. The other bikers just looked at him and followed him out of fear or awe. At six and a half feet he was imposing. And the massive musculature sculpted (at tax payer expense) during years of imprisonment only added to the imposition. Plus he had a knack for sounding like he knew what he was talking about even if he rarely did. This weird power failure gave him an idea, he would become the next Tiburicio Vasquez, a famous 19th century bandit of California. Unfortunately being just out of prison, he still needed to assemble his army.

At first he didn't even have a bike. Despite an initial setback, which he blamed on his former partner Pedro, he managed to get a respectable looking hawg quickly enough. Then he set about collecting riff-raff and losers from the underground speed and coke economy for his staff. He had a strong fondness for crank and upon learning of a yuppie dealer in the north Valley decided to go take some.

He was disappointed. All he could find was small quantities of prescription drugs, less than an ounce of

pot, a little acid and some dust on a mirror. Instead he found some naked pretty boy in bed, tripping on some "ecstasy" his daddy had left for him. "Well, he's going to have one hell of a bad trip." thought Skag. "Never saw such a wimp before, a couple of belts across the face and he'd do anything you asked and say thank you for it."

Skag decided to let the gang have some fun with him, but soon they just lost interest and settled into some serious drinking. About half way through the well stocked liquor cabinet someone noticed the boy was gone. One of the guys saw him jogging down the street in his briefs and started to go get him, but Skag had a different idea. "Let him go." he said. "Keep an eye on him. Find out where he goes, then we'll hit that place. Maybe his friends have good crank."

And so it was that Skag had ID'd the McArthur house in Shady Acres as his next stop. Except that *en route* he found an unlooted supermarket with a pharmacy and only one worthless cop standing guard. And, well, he just couldn't resist the temptation....

Todd had plans of his own.

He was supposed to stay with Sam at home. Failing that he was supposed to bug out to the comm center. But the McArthur household had one more firearm that Lynn had forgotten about in the stress of the moment. Tom had given Todd a .22 rifle for his 13th birthday, a Winchester pump that had belonged to his father before him.

Todd loaded the tube magazine with 15 rounds of super hi velocity ammo, grabbed a box of fifty more, and set out to be a hero.

Lynn's radio crackled, "Miriam, are you there?"

"I'm here."

"John, do you read? How's the SOS going?"

"I read you clear. Still no response, still trying."

"Henry, June are you in position?"

"Roger that."

"Lynn, come in."

No response.

"Lynn...?"

Still no response.

"LYNN, DO YOU READ ME?"

Suddenly Lynn was jolted back to reality from her fulminations.

"Yes, I read you."

"Good. No sign of hostiles yet. If we are lucky they won't come. But to be safe, get the tire stoppers in place."

Lacking welding facilities to make the caltrops Golda had wanted, they had taken scrap plywood and boards and driven through long nails and spikes at various angles. This could be scattered about quickly, forcing anyone in a car or motorcycle to stop and move them before passage was possible. If enough area was covered and the nails spaced close enough together, even walking was a dangerous proposition. There weren't nearly enough tire stoppers to be that effective, but nobody was going to drive through any time soon. These had been permanently emplaced at the other three openings with road adhesive and spikes into the asphalt. Saw horses painted yellow and covered with reflective tape prevented the innocent from getting impaled upon them. But the ones at the front entrance had to be dragged into place and that was Lynn and Miriam's job.

"Ok, it's being done now."

In just a few seconds, a few dozen devices had been scattered about, sufficient numbers that nobody was riding through without losing their tires. They had run out of sawhorses so some bright yellow nylon rope was stretched across the width of the road with cardboard warning signs, hand lettered in fluorescent paint, hanging from it.

The entrance way to Shady Acres was pretty much standard for developments in the Valley. The north side faced Renfield, a major street, but all that was visible from the road was the rear walls of the back yards of the front row of houses and the peaks of some of the two story residences. The development was square, with a single road entering the center of each side. The first 40 feet of each road was faced with 6 foot block walls and a detached garage. This was the area obstructed by the tire stoppers and the rope barricade. From there on, until it ended in a T intersection, there was open lawn and shrubbery.

At this intersection, the stem of the "T" was Elm Grove Lane and the cross street was Oak. Golda was

perched in a prepared position atop a two story house, slightly to the west of Elm Grove on the south side of Oak. Miriam's house was the first house immediately west, on the north side of Oak. Her garage door was locked and bolted from the inside blocking that ingress. The garage door opposite had been nailed shut as the owner was not home.

The McArthur household was ten houses west of Miriam's on the same side of the street. Their back yard wall also faced Renfield.

Just as Lynn was about to relax and decide it was a false alarm, she heard the rumbling of motorcycles. It got louder, grew to a thunder. No fewer than a dozen bikes pulled up short at the tire flatteners on Elm Grove, the lead two bikes wiping out in their efforts to avoid puncture.

"What the hell is this?" roared Skag after they had all halted.

Lynn held her breath as the two women peered through the kitchen window at the unwelcome arrivals. Her heart pounded in her throat and fear clutched at her breast. To the right of her, Lynn could hear a faint "Hail Mary, full of grace..." If she had been a religious woman herself, the 23rd Psalm would have sounded pretty good right now.

Golda's voice crackled over the radio and Lynn fumbled to turn down the volume. "Don't do anything unless they actually try to enter your house or yard. I have a clear field of fire. They try anything, they are dead meat. Henry, June, hold your position until I give the word."

Grabbing a short, black man who was attempting to right his Harley, Skag roared again. "Why the hell didn't you mention this? It could've messed us *all* up!"

"It wasn't there this morning, I swear!"

Releasing the man, the big guy swore a blue streak and set one of the bikers to circumnavigate the development to check the other entrances. Momentarily he returned. "They're all this way, only worse. The others are all nailed down and have trash cans and crap chained across 'em."

"Don't see no reception committee." Something made Skag's hair stand up on the back of his neck and Skag always listened to his neck hair. "Hey Inky, which house did the kid go to?"

"A two story with a funny chimney. 'Bout ten houses that way."

"Snag one of these cars. Everybody follow me." The bikers roared off up the street, stopping behind the McArthur house.

Fear turned to horror, then rage. Miriam shouted, "Lynn, wait!" but it was too late. Lynn had grabbed the

shotgun and bolted, sprinting barefoot down the sidewalk to her house.

Golda's voice again crackled over the radio, "Henry, June, the McArthur house. Now! I've got to move. I don't have LOS there."

Somebody had obligingly left his keys in the ignition of their car when he had abandoned it. As Lynn reached the front door, she was screaming for Todd to bug out. On the street an engine revved. Tires squealed. And a Toyota sedan crashed through the rear block wall of the McArthur's yard, coming to rest in the swimming pool.

Nobody was on the sofa. Sam was gone. Where? She heard someone moving around upstairs. Shouting up the stairs, she yelled, "Take Sam into the attic! Pull up the ladder and cover the hole! Wait for the Hendersons!"

Through the sliding glass doors to the patio she could see bikers stepping through the hole in the wall. The short black one was climbing out of the pool. She had to stall to give Todd time to hide. Her still damp t-shirt gave Lynn an idea. She knew what kind of men these were. She poured a bottle of water over herself in the kitchen, soaking her shirt to near transparency. For good measure she undid the button on her shorts and unzipped them slightly.

Lynn had never considered herself an attractive woman. Only a couple of inches over 5 foot, her figure was much closer to Jane Mansfield, than to the athletic, youthful appearance in demand today. Frankly, she considered herself a cow with an excessive amount of curvature both top and bottom. Tom was always trying to coax her into what he called "figure modeling", but it wasn't prudishness that kept her back. It was insecurity about her appearance.

She would have no reason to feel insecure about her figure with these characters. Stepping quickly outside, quaking with anxiety, she would do what she had to in order to buy time.

Cradling the shotgun suggestively and striking what she hoped was a sexy pose, Lynn did her best to be a dizzy, stoned redhead.

"Wow man! Far out!"

The men stepping through the breach froze and stared at her. Jaws dropped.

"Don't stay-ah, it's not polite. Haven't y'all evah seen a woman before?" She pressed the stock of the shotgun suggestively between her thighs.

"Oh my God! I have died and gone to heaven." Skag raised his arm to hold the other men back. "Baby, are you for real?"

"Sho 'nuff sugah. Ah you? Y'all the biggest hunk of man ah *evah* did see!" The southern accent was getting slathered on thicker and thicker.

"There was a boy came by here earlier today. A little bit damaged. Where is he?"

"Why, I shipped *him* off to the clinic. He was *all* chewed up."

"Yeah, some of the boys do get a little rough." He arched his eyebrow then said, "Some of the girls too." Skag's hormones were getting the better of him. He stepped forward, casually twirling a short barreled shotgun as though it were a pistol and he a quickdraw artist. He shrugged his leather vest off, exposing a broad, hairy, muscular chest, deeply tanned.

Lynn did her best to pretend barely controlled lust, while thinking what an *excellent* target it made.

At about ten feet he stopped, flexed his muscles and spoke. His voice dropped from a loud baritone to a deep, yet intimate bass. "Why don't you just hand that popgun over to me? I got what you want and you know it."

"Ok, sugah. I'll let you have it."

And she did. With both barrels. Directly in that broad, muscular chest that made such an *excellent* target.

The shotgun very nearly tore itself out of her hand. Skag fell backwards onto the Toyota's not quite submerged front hood, head crashing into the windshield, arms splayed like some crucified Hercules. Stinging, acrid smoke filled the air. There was a moment of hesitation before the other bikers raised their weapons. Lynn took this opportunity to throw herself backwards into the dark house and dive for cover behind the stove in the kitchen. She was pursued by the sound of breaking glass and gunfire from many weapons at once.

Frantically she loaded two more shells in the shotgun's chambers. Then felt to make sure the small pistol was still in the back of her waist band.

And then it suddenly stopped. There were no more bullets flying through her walls. Nobody crashing after her in pursuit. Feet running away. Then several motorcycles being started. Three distinct shots from outside with about two seconds between each. The cycles continued to idle but didn't sound like they were going anywhere.

As her hearing returned, Lynn heard people moving around upstairs. Todd was yelling. Henry was yelling. June was yelling. Almost simultaneously Todd came storming down the stairs and the Hendersons climbed through the smashed sliding doors. Miriam threw open the front door and ran in.

"Are you ok?" they all asked in such a confusion Lynn could hardly tell what they were saying.

"Yes, yes. I'm all right." then, "Todd, you're hurt!" Todd had a small patch of blood on his left shoulder. Lynn lept up at Todd, sending Henry crashing out of her way.

"It's nuthin. Cut myself on some broken glass, breaking out the window."

"Thank God you weren't hurt during the shooting." She turned to Henry, "What happened?"

"Things went like we planned. When we heard where the attack was, we rushed over here and entered the house to the east side of you. Golda went in on the west side because it was closer. She doesn't get around very fast anymore, especially after that rooftop climb. Your neighbors had bugged out in such a hurry when they heard the car go through your wall they left their doors wide open. We took up positions on the second floor to produce a cross fire. Without the delay you provided with your, er, display, we wouldn't have been set up in time. Even then we'd never have gotten them all, especially with revolvers at this range and Golda only having a bolt, if it weren't for your son and Col. Cao."

Henry pretended to leer at Lynn. Or maybe he wasn't pretending after all....

"My son?" Lynn's expression of motherly concern suddenly turned into something entirely different.

"Your son hero! Big hero! We make up medal for him!" Colonel Cao was walking down the stairs. Sam was next to him, leaning on him heavily for support.

"I came over here after commo center to watch fun. Took Sam upstairs to real bed instead of couch. Todd had his rifle loaded and ready to go. Was about to leave for the front to protect his mother. I talked him out of it. Lucky mother!"

"We heard you yelling when you got to the door. No way was Todd hiding when you in danger. We watch out rear window to see what is happening. Moved over bookcase for extra cover. I worried that someone would look up at us and see us, but nobody did. Now I know why.

"Todd aim and fire carefully at center of mass, just like I say. Not head shots on moving targets. Not get all crazy and shoot as fast as he can. Not run and hide. Fight for what is good! When shooting is all done run down to check on mother."

All the while he was saying this, Cao was watching the back yard intently. "Must check for survivors. Tell John to stop sending out SOS." Then he strode into the yard with his pistol at the ready and examined the casualties.

The Colonel exclaimed, "Where did the big guy go? He's not here!"

Miriam exclaimed, "Where is Golda?!"

In their rush to check on Lynn, nobody had watched the back yard while Col. Cao descended the stairs. Skag was gone. Golda had not shown up yet either.

"But you hit him with both barrels, square in the chest. I saw it. He couldn't be alive!" said Henry.

"I'm going next to door to check on Golda!" said June and Miriam simultaneously.

"Mom, let me see those shells you've got. What was loaded when you went out there?"

"One red one, one green one."

"Mom, the red ones are tear gas. The green ones are rock salt. What did you think you were doing?!"

"I know. But it's all I had. I'm going over to check on Golda too. Henry, Help Cao. Todd, come with me. We've got to help Golda."

They found Golda lying still behind an upstairs window, her hands still clutching the old Enfield.

Intermission

"This is a fine mess I've gotten us into."

The Suzuki was parked in a carport near the apartment of an acquaintance of Tom's in Santa Clarita. Presumably the person was not at home, his space being empty and nobody answering the door. Tom was debating the advisability of breaking into the apartment.

The previous night had been a wild ride. After fleeing the refugee camp, they had bounced across country with no lights on, in the general direction of the freeway. Then they turned south to parallel it, using dirt tracks and streets where possible. At one point they were forced to pull onto the freeway shoulder briefly to bypass a steep ridge in their path. A pair of linemen's dikes made short work of the freeway fence, later there was a bone jarring descent down a near vertical slope into the Santa Clara dry wash. Since the rear seat had been removed, Ed, who was packed in the rear with the rest of the luggage had to hold on for dear life.

Once in the wash Tom turned east and drove east on the soft sand. The wash was a popular, if illegal, site for off road vehicles and he hoped that his tracks would be lost in all the others, just in case someone was still trying to follow.

"Tom, do you have any idea where we are?"

"Sure do Paul. I know this country well. I used to go off-roading here all the time, back before I became successful.

"I wish sometimes I'd never gone into business for myself. It made me miss out on too many important things in life. I missed too much of my children growing up. I lost touch with my wife. It got me into politics. It got me four hundred miles from home when a national disaster hit with the whole goddamn US Army between me and mine.

"Success sucks. Duty sucks. My duty to my family should have come first. That is what's important in life. My family is a far more important legacy to leave to the world than any damn political victory."

Paul and Ed knew better than to argue with Tom when he was in this mood. And God help any fool who stood in Tom's way home.

As they were passing under a power line with an empty light industrial complex on the south river bank. Ed said, "It's getting light out. If we want to lay low for the day, we'll need a place to park"

"Right." Tom spun the wheel to the right and suddenly they were crashing up a barely visible track leading up the embankment. It emptied into the power line right of way. "We should be able to follow this right over the hills and into the Valley. We're almost there now."

"Uh, Tom, look at your gas gauge." Ed had noticed the needle was far below the empty line. All the recent four wheeling had drained the last of the tank very quickly.

"Oh shit! Can't *anything* go right?" Tom slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt on the dirt, killing the engine.

"Cool it Tom. We've been at this all day and all night, stressed out every step of the way. We need to go to ground, rest. They may be looking for us. If they are, they'd see us for sure on that trail during the day. You can't outrun a helicopter and we've heard a number of them, fortunately none directly overhead."

"I'm beat too." Ed was lifting a suitcase and a water carrier off his legs. For him, "beat" was meant literally.

"You're right. Can't make good decision when you're exhausted, sleepy and hungry. I have an employee who lives near here. We can probably hide out there." Soon they found themselves in the aforementioned carport.

"If he left when things started looking bad, maybe he won't mind us breaking in?"

"Ed you're a dreamer. More than likely he's off in his Jeep, looking for gas or supplies. We can only

hope. But I'm no burglar. I'll sleep in the car seat before I'll break and enter."

"That's all good and well for you to say but I don't have a seat.

"You and your penny pinching streak. On a state Senator's wages, why couldn't you have bought a Suburban. Or at least a Cherokee?"

"I was saving the money. Hoping to take a lo-o-o-o-ng vacation, pack the kids off to camp, have the second honeymoon to end all honeymoons. Something left over for retirement. Now it's all gone. Everything I have ever done is gone. One stinking flash and it's history."

Paul could see that this conversation was going nowhere but downhill. "Guys, lets just get out of the car and check around. If nothing else, we can go into the pool area or the laundry area and get cleaned up. Maybe your employee is just a heavy sleeper and we can try later in the morning. After we clean up, you guys can get some shuteye in the car while I walk around a bit."

A quick inspection of the area showed few signs of activity. The residents were still inside at 6 in the morning. With gas and water pressure thankfully still available, the men washed up and shaved in the laundry room. It was decided to be advisable to change clothes just in case someone *was* looking for them. It might make them just a little less recognizable. Now they looked like three businessmen, sans the ties. Tom and Ed put the front seats back and passed out in the small car almost instantly while Paul went for a long stroll.

It had seemed like only minutes, but it was really two hours later when Paul woke the two men up. "Wake up sleepy heads. Tom, your employee friend is home."

"Huh??"

"Saw him slip over from another apartment just few minutes ago. Big smile on his face. Must have a girl friend."

"Now-a-days could be a boy friend. His name is Wilcox, Joe Wilcox. He's my customer support guru. Let's go hit him up for sack space."

Joe Wilcox had indeed spent the night with a girl who had seemed rather in need of reassurance. He'd being trying to get close to her for months and had managed to build up a reasonably cordial relationship, but somehow had never gotten a spark going. This little power outage had generated just the spark he'd needed. When he heard the knock at the door, he had assumed it was Jennifer....

"Don't look so horrified. I'm not here to fire you."

"Hello Mr. McArthur. I thought you were someone else."

"I can imagine. Joe, I'd like you to meet Paul Marlin and Ed Parsons. We're on our way back to LA, but it doesn't seem to be practical right now. We were wondering if we could crash here a few hours."

"Uh..., yes sure, er, no problem."

Tom's eyes shot like a laser to a desk in the living area. "You have a PC running."

"Uh, yes..."

"How did it survive?"

"Uh..., survive?"

"You know that almost all the electronics plugged into the power grid, the phone lines or any significant conductor was fried when the power went. Even some cars with electronic ignitions have been affected."

"Uh, no...."

"Oh. I see. you have an uninterruptable power supply. That would insulate you from the EMP. And keep you up for quite a while after the power went down. It has a surge suppresser built in for the modem line too. Wouldn't know if the modem is zapped anyhow until we run a modem test on it 'cause the phone lines are down. At least if it is gone, it didn't take the PC with it."

"Uh...EMP???"

"Yeah. There was a high altitude nuclear explosion yesterday at about ten AM. Created the mother of all electromagnetic pulses. Don't know who did it. Maybe the Chinese. Maybe the Russians. Maybe we did it to ourselves...."

"Uh... *nuclear explosion?!'*" Joe was beginning to turn white.

"As bad we got it here, it must have been ten times worse in Texas. The worst EMP would be just south of surface zero. We might get hit any time now with a follow-up. This *might* be the beginning of World War Three and we could all be dead in a few minutes."

"*World War Three?!'*" Joe looked and sounded like he was going to need some reassurance himself.

"Yes, it could be the end of everything. We all need to be near the ones we love right now."

"Uh... excuse me. I gotta go. Make yourself at home." With that, Joe slipped out door and headed to

Jennifer's apartment.

"Poor kid. Didn't have the heart to tell him someone stole his jeep."

"You're cruel."

"Not so. He gets to have some more fun with his girl, this time in earnest. We get this place to ourselves for a while. You heard the man. Make yourself at home."

Within minutes they were all in a shallow and troubled sleep, on the sofa, on a recliner and on the floor. Nightmares plagued the three of them. Tom's were particularly gruesome and involved large numbers of chain saw wielding federal agents, each with a different random combination of three scarlet letters on his jacket. By noon it became too hot to sleep comfortably and Tom awoke first, still groggy.

Joe and his girlfriend sat at the table, looking at Tom for all the world like two lost puppies.

"What do we do now?" asked Joe.

What indeed! Tom had been puzzling over that very issue. Even if things got better, they would never be what they were. If things got worse, and they could get *much* worse, it could mean an end to civilization. A new dark ages. Just what does one do when faced by this?

You endure.

"For now you should wait. You can't know what the future holds in store. Hold on to those who are close to you. Friendship and love are worth more than all the money in the world. Right now they are in mighty short supply."

"Has either of you got any other place to go besides here, somewhere more rural, maybe with family or friends?"

"No my family is all in Los Angeles. Jennifer's is in New York. I don't have any real friends outside of LA."

Tom sighed. How many others had stories just as bad or worse? Millions? What would become of them? Internet support technicians were not likely to be terribly much in demand. Were this boy's skills, who had studied the arcane arts of computer networking and trouble shooting, now obsolete? Was Tom McArthur obsolete?

Maybe for now, but Tom had resources and connections. His wife had a skill that would always be in demand. While not primitive by any means, he had grown up in a world where mechanical and physical

skills were important and manual labor not something to be ashamed of. He was adaptable and could adjust to almost anything.

But what about Joe? He was in for the school of hard knocks. The most strenuous manual labor he'd ever done was a game of Nintendo. And Jennifer? Somehow she didn't quite seem a "take no prisoners" type, like Lynn. A pretty girl like her would seek and find someone strong in whatever new society emerged to look out for her. If she had valuable skills to trade, it would be so much the better for her.

"This won't last forever. Eventually we'll have a return to normalcy of sorts and you'll be able to contact your parents. Or it will all go to hell in a handbasket and life or death will be a coin toss. Either way is a kind of resolution."

Listening to himself, Tom could not believe how depressing he sounded.

The three men decided to spend the day near the apartment and do a little scouting around. The local radio station was playing the ECS messages and little else. Occasionally military vehicles would pass by. Nobody had any way to know whether there was an ongoing search for them or if it was just normal military traffic, so they decided to lay low until night time. Besides, it was difficult to get worked up with enthusiasm over a cross mountain trek in 105 degree heat.

Joe and his girl were useless as sources of information about the local situation. They lacked the essential curiosity that would have led them to investigate what was going on around them. When he learned his jeep was missing, Joe had gotten hysterical, even to the point of wondering if he had parked it somewhere else and walked home the previous day

Paul had twiddled with his portable short-wave and strung out a hundred feet of wire for an external antenna. (Tom didn't know where the wire had come from and wasn't about to ask.) As the apartments got hotter in the afternoon heat, people came outside to cool off as best they could next to the pool. They were drawn to the news on the BBC like a magnet, it being the first real information of the outside they'd gotten.

"It was China." Tom announced this suddenly, to nobody in particular. Faces turned to him questioningly.

Paul asked him, "What makes you so sure of that?"

"Our previous president crawled completely into bed with the Chinese. Cut them deals no president has a right to cut. Then Simpson takes office. First he reverses the policy on Taiwan. Then he kicks them out of Long Beach. The they lose "most favored" trade status. He was turning up the heat on them for their forced abortions, their discrimination against religion in general and Christianity in particular. Then he raked 'em over the coals in the UN on Tibet. Tried to get the Dali Lama a seat for Tibet.

"Even if he was a fascist and a wannabe dictator, he did have his good points.

"The Chinese leadership decided they were tired of waiting. It was easier to bring us down to their level than to catch up to us, so they did it. Probably the most rash act in the entire history of China. They may have only spent a decade planning it.

"What about Russia? Western Europe? India?"

Tom was almost in a trance as he continued to speak. "Russia secretly wants to become just like the West. There are too many Communists left to let reform happen but not enough to force something of this magnitude.

"Western Europe's economy is in shambles. Only England or France could have done it but they've nothing to gain from it. They are richer with us around than with us gone. Neither of them wants the flak that comes with being the world leader. None of them will take up the burden of western man. They are timid and just want to bask in the glory days of old.

"India needs our wheat. India will be starving soon. War with Pakistan may come very soon simply as a way of killing off the excess Indians.

"Of the other nuclear powers, the Pakis don't have the launch or the bomb technology and the Israelis could face an attempt at genocide again if the Arabs think we are too busy to respond. It won't succeed, but Israel may get scared badly enough to preempt with nukes any Arab countries stupid enough to rattle their sabers.

"It was China all right. Simpson will discover it soon enough. Then God help us all if he isn't as clever as he thinks he is."

At that moment several trucks and a humvee pulled up in front of the complex. Troops began disembarking.

Tom urgently whispered "Quick, Paul, hide the short-wave. Joe, get to your apartment. Hide your PC and UPS."

Paul unplugged the antenna and quickly stepped out of sight. Joe sat there with a confused look on his face.

"Quick. Get your PC and UPS and hide it. Unless you want it commandeered. Ninety nine percent of the computing power in the country is gone. Dead. The government will be seizing all the functioning assets it can find."

"Uh... I don't know what I should do."

Tom gritted his teeth and forced down the urge to throttle this idiot. This idiot represented a large portion of the population, most of whom probably voted against him in the election. If he and Ed had just slipped off with Paul instead of him trying to help this fool, then they might not have been seen. But now it was too late for that. A cammo clad man with an M-16 was looking right at them.

"Just stay here and do exactly as the man tells you."

"Okay."

A civilian, wearing khakis and a dark blue baseball cap with FEMA printed on the front and back, disembarked with the soldiers and strode towards the assembled people at the pool. For a heart stopping moment both Tom and Ed feared it was the same one from their earlier encounter, but this one was too short and skinny. Besides, he showed no visible damage on the left side of his head.

"Howdy folks. I'm Chris Avery, your local FEMA rep. In view of the emergency we're going to have to ask you folks to relocate, at least temporarily, up to Castaic Lake. It will be much easier for us to provide you food and water.

"Your property here will be watched and protected. We'll need a copy of your door key, please."

Tom decided to take a chance and did a little probing. "I'm not sure I want to go up there right now. I saw a heck of a cloud of smoke up that way this morning. A wildfire could be real dangerous. Everything is as dry as tinder."

A cloud passed momentarily over Chris' face, then lifted. "I assure you the fire has been put out. We had a little disorder up there, with people running away from the fire and all, but things are back to normal again."

As he spoke, troops were knocking on doors and looking through unlocked apartments. "Now, if you folks would be so kind as to put together an overnight bag, some spare clothes and grab any nonperishable food you might have on hand, we can get this under way."

There was some general discussion and a few protests, but the man from FEMA was polite, but adamant. The armed soldiers pounding on the apartment doors certainly lent a certain amount of psychological weight to his orders. After about an hour the residents were rounded up, put on the trucks and driven off to the camp. Tom encouraged everyone to remain calm and obey instructions. This was not a good time nor a good group to foment rebellion with. Paul was not to be found among the internees.

"If they ask us to go to the showers" said Tom to Ed, "I'm running like hell."

They were trucked to the same site as before. A new command tent had been set up in the middle of a burnt clearing. They were processed thru in a similar fashion as before, except there were fewer military clerks and more civilian clerks present. The clerks also seemed friendlier somehow. There were units of MPs and separate units of local police, mostly sheriff's deputies, with the MPs staying in the background and the deputies dealing with the civilian population. Tom mused about whether there had been a change of management.

After being handed numerous questionnaires to which neither man gave accurate answers, the group from the apartment complex was led to a cluster of recently erected tents and instructed to make themselves home. Tom and Ed had picked out two adjacent cots to rest on and were discussing the merits of Tom trying to play his Senatorhood in an effort to get out of there versus simply sneaking out. The front tent flap opened up and a voice called out, "Thomas McArthur? Senator Thomas J. McArthur?"

"I guess it's been decided for me." Tom muttered to Ed. "You stay here and look for a way out. If I don't come back by tomorrow morning, get out of here. Try to rendezvous with Paul if you can find him. Get to my family and help them."

Ed began to protest, but Tom shushed him.

"I am Senator McArthur and I am a little unhappy about how I have been treated down here." Maybe the offended, self important, governmental PooBah was the role to play here. Something FEMA would understand.

"Your presence is required at an inquiry into the origins of yesterday's disturbance." This was spoken by a female civilian of unknown stripe flanked by two MPs with sidearms. "Would you please accompany us to the commander's office."

"I'll be happy to. I have been trying to see the commander since late yesterday evening and I am tired of waiting!"

"Come this way, please." spoke the woman wearily.

She walked Tom perfunctorily across the compound to a portable building just having the finishing touches applied. An air conditioning unit hummed heartily. Stepping inside, the temperature dropped by 20 degrees and Tom felt comfortable for the first time since this morning. He was ushered into a large office in the rear of the building. Behind a metal desk sat an Army general. To his right was a man with "FEMA Regional Director" printed on a windbreaker. To his left was Major Green. Also seated in the room was the FEMA agent with a rather badly bruised left cheek as well as the sergeant and the butterbar from the previous evening.

"Go ahead and sit down, Senator McArthur. I hope this inquiry won't take too long." The general, Swift

by his name tag, jabbed a button on a tape recorder. "Let it be recorded that this Board of Inquiry is now back in session, General J. G. Swift presiding.

"Senator, I want you to understand that nobody is on trial here. There will be no oath administered prior to testimony. I understand that you were present when the disturbance began and may have had a small role to play regarding it. To the best of your recollection, what happened from the moment you entered the briefing tent to when you left the compound?"

Tom sensed he was treading on dangerous ground. Not "in session", rather *back in session*". Without knowledge of what went before, he could not craft the best possible answer. So he decided to play the offended politico some more.

"First of all, I was merely driving south to reach my family after this weird blackout. Then your storm troopers intercepted us at gun point and dragged us off to this gulag. I tried to speak directly with the Commander but was refused, something I am not used to and do not care for.

"Then after filling out your stupid questionnaire, I was herded into your lecture tent with everybody else. Your speaker very basically told us that we were all prisoners here and there would be no opportunity for families to reunite. When someone got unruly about this, rather than try to calm the person down, your FEMA guy got angry. When this person tried to leave, instead of using the minimum force necessary to detain the person, he lost his temper and ordered the sergeant here to shoot the man in the back in front of hundreds of people.

"I don't believe the good sergeant here would have shot, but I spoke out to remind him of the law, just in case. Then your boy here totally lost control of himself and drew on the man with intent to commit murder. Somebody chucked a rock at him, and a good thing too or he'd have splattered the man's brains all over us. A mighty fine PR gesture for a prison camp, but not for what you are trying to do here.

"Then the lights went out and people got scared and started to stampede. And then a fire got started somewhere and everyone went into a total panic. You know how bad wildfires can be out here. People have a real terror of fire when it's so dry. I decided the best thing to do was simply to leave and go visit an employee of mine who lives out here. Or lived, until he got relocated here."

The general leaned forward and spoke, "Lieutenant Prufrock, is that essentially what you remember happening?"

"Yes."

And Sergeant Doolittle, do you remember that as being more or less correct according to your best recollection?"

"Yes sir."

"Then that concludes this inquiry. Thank you for your assistance Senator. I'm sorry you had such a poor experience, but this are completely disorganized around here. There is no way we can get you through to your family, but we may be able to evacuate them up here. We should be able to arrange for better quarters for you, however."

"Thank you General. I appreciate any assistance you can provide me. I have my executive assistant here with me and I would consider it a favor if he could be billeted with me until we have some kind of return to normalcy?"

"That will be no problem. I think we can get you fixed up no later than tonight.

"Then good day General. For all our sakes I hope there are no more unpleasant disturbances in the future." Tom simply stood up and walked and nobody attempted to stop him.

"Lt. Prufrock, Sgt. Doolittle, Agent Smithers. You are all dismissed. Oh, and Smithers; Leave the gun and belt here. You won't be needing it any more." The three men left. General Swift stabbed at the stop button on the tape recorder three times before getting it right."

"For the first time, the FEMA regional rep spoke, "What do you think of our Senator, General?"

"My reports indicate the first time he was through here he was nothing but polite and cooperative until the incident, then he and his two associates vanished without a trace. That is until we picked him up today. Still no sign of his vehicle or the older man, Marlin, some kind of wealthy industrialist. Appeared to the FEMA agent on the scene that he helped calm the nerves of the people being relocated. Besides being a pompous fool, he would appear to be on the up and up."

"Major Green, you are a California native. What do you know of the Senator's politics?"

"I'd say middle of the road with a streak of conservatism. He supported money for disaster preparedness and the national guard. Honest, too. He single handedly brought down the Senate leadership in the Lobstergate scandal you know, and it was only his first term. Very popular man among the electorate."

"Thank you Major Green. You are dismissed to your duties."

Green cast a quick glance at General Swift, who nodded assent, and left. He didn't like taking orders from the FEMA rep, a man whose name he didn't even know and who had no military rank. As soon as his back was turned, he scowled and gritted his teeth. He could have done McArthur a lot of damage by saying what he really thought. The Senator didn't have a conservative streak. It was libertarian. And the buffoon he played today concealed a man of resourcefulness, intellect and integrity. Someone to be

reckoned with when this all settled out.

"I think we've bought ourselves a state Senator. A powerful one at that."

"You think he's that easily controlled? We've both seen his FEMA file. Powerful man with sources everywhere, sources we couldn't sniff out. Also independent. Most state politicians are begging to be allowed to join in the realignment. This one doesn't seem interested."

"He's a politician like all the rest. Pompous and self interested. Knows he's important. That's why he is playing hard to get. Had to have been bought and sold many times to get where he was. Billet him out in those apartments where we found him, along with the rest of the local bigwigs we evacuated.

"We have his coin. It's his family. As long as we have them bottled up in the Valley, he ours."

"What if he leaves to go after them?"

"Why should he? When we can pull them out in a heartbeat? He's nice and comfy right here. Besides, what's he going to do? Walk? Send me regular updates on the situation with him. I've got to get back to Mount Weather. I'm a Senator in the shadow Congress, you know."

Tom perused his assigned apartment. It was a luxury version of the one Joe had been in earlier. Paul had mysteriously appeared again. He had driven the car off road and hidden it in some brush before the place was completely cordoned off, then walked back.

"Paul, Ed I'm going to give them two days. If the family isn't out by then, I'm going in after them. Even if I have to walk."

A fine kettle of fish

Lance drifted in and out of consciousness. He was vaguely aware of being awakened to swallow pills and liquids.

During the phase between wakefulness and unconsciousness, he had a recurring dream of being nibbled to death. He was some kind of tropical fish in a tank. Two other fish with the faces of the assistant CIA station chief in Bogota and the Colombian Army liaison (betas by the look of them) kept taking bites out of him. As fast as they bit him, several Vietnamese angelfish would knit him together again and would shove pellets of fish food in his mouth. He wasn't sure how they were able to handle knitting needles with fins, and he wasn't in any shape to ask questions. He just knew he preferred being unconscious to these damn dreams.

Then there were occasional flashes of hot, searing pain. He was bundled into a vehicle and taken somewhere. A smell of antiseptic, a crowd of people. Then back into the car, a tortuous journey with many stops and starts and turns and bumps. The journey finally ended and he was removed from the car. There was much discussion in both Vietnamese and in English as he was carried into a dark room on a makeshift stretcher where he was able to at last drop back into a deep sleep.

To sleep...perchance to dream? Aye, there's the rub!

It's not easy to be the President of the United States. Particularly when an unknown adversary has just set us back fifty years in technology, ruined our economy, left our cities in flames and destroyed the social order. But one has to look on the bright side.

Congress won't be much of a problem any more. Not that they ever were in the past, but now I really have them over a barrel. The military has control over things now and the shadow government that FEMA has been maintaining as a backup for years will substitute for the real thing until Congress sees things my way. Except for the Speaker. He, no doubt, is hoping for something to take out the me and the VP so he can take over. Going to have to do something about him. Maybe the Senate majority leader too.

Those incompetent senile fools in black robes might be dead by now for all I know. Or care. They were now irrelevant.

With the Guard nationalized, the states will be in no position to object. Most of the state folks are trying to get on board with the emergency government realignment anyhow. Still, I'll need quite a few of them to lend legitimacy to my plans. The ones who oppose me will be easy to ship off to Leavenworth with the Speaker.

The people will follow, like good sheep. The minority who protest can be dealt with. There'll be occasional problems, like that dreadful California affair. But dissenters can be demonized to the point where the general populace will form lynch mobs to get rid of them.

FEMA has a list of 6,100 persons deemed essential to national survival. Most of those have been located and safely moved to the over 100 hardened regional FEMA centers for safekeeping. There is another list with about 13 million or so secondary personnel to be protected if possible. Those who live in major urban centers should be evacuated gradually to avoid suspicion and placed in commandeered housing.

Keep the suburbs under control with food and heating fuel. Can't allow the people to disperse into the countryside like locusts. When things recover enough, they'll be needed to send back to work. Not the frivolous work most of them had previously performed but organized work that the nation needed. I'd never get a handle on things with them ravaging the countryside. Otherwise, let the inner cities burn.

Nothing but a burden anyhow.

Now was it Russia or China? And how should I respond to either one? And should I throw an EMP round over Europe just to make sure they don't get too far ahead of us?

Chapter 5

Casualties

"No-o-o-o-o!" screamed Miriam as she looked into the upstairs bedroom. Golda's body lay beside the upstairs window, her pale skin a shade of blue. The old bolt action lay across her chest, still clasped in her hands.

Miriam went into action quickly. Pulling the rifle to the side, she immediately slammed her fist into Golda's sternum. She was not breathing, nor was there any recognizable pulse. Lynn showed up a few seconds later.

"Lynn! She's gone into vee-fib! Help me with CPR!"

Immediately Lynn began mouth to mouth as Miriam worked on cardiac resuscitation.

The first hint of trouble came as she was climbing down from her rooftop perch. As she was exerting herself, she had felt an unaccustomed pressure on her chest. Upon resting, it had retreated and so she had dismissed it.

Next, as she was trotting across the street as fast as her old bones would haul her, it returned a little worse. Slowing down to a walk, she took several deep breaths. The pressure receded again. She could see the Henderson piling out of their car and entering the house on the far side of the McArthur's. She entered the nearer house, grateful the rapidly exiting owners had left the door swinging in the wind. The pressure returned, severe, painful, almost crushing her. Her head began to swirl....

It was June on the kibbutz, her favorite time of the year. During the spring one could almost believe that this was indeed the land of milk and honey. Golda was a young idealist who had voluntarily transplanted herself from her Brooklyn roots to the land of Israel, the land of her faith and her heritage, hoping to participate in the building of the young nation. It was here that she had met and fallen in love with Avram.

Avram was strong and handsome and witty. Though almost twice her age, he had a youthful spirit and an infectious enthusiasm for life. When he danced the *Hava Nagila* he danced with his whole spirit and when he sang he sang with his whole soul. Upon meeting him, Golda was immediately charmed. When she asked him how he could be so unrelentingly joyful, he replied that when one has seen the bottom, one knew that every where else had to be up. He had learned this long ago as a young boy in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943.

War tension had been running high that spring. Egypt had amassed a tremendous force in the Sinai and blockaded the Straits of Tiran. Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq had hundreds of thousands of troops in Samaria and Judea while Syria and Lebanon had armies to the north. Israel launched it's preemptive strike at Egypt. The next day Jordan opened up with artillery on its Israeli border and advanced with troops and armor.

Golda's kibbutz was right in their path.

The shelling took them by surprise but everyone was able to make it to the shelters in time. Seconds after it stopped Avram was the first one out, rallying the kibbutzim to get their rifles and go to their defensive positions. If they could survive for just a few minutes, Israeli Defense Force reserve units would be on their way. Golda was right behind him, carrying the Enfield that was a leftover from the 1948 war of independence.

Avram had forcibly impressed on everyone, Golda especially, the need for everyone to be armed and trained. None of them had first line military equipment but Avram had taught them the lessons he'd learned the hard way and they were determined to hold on. Avram and Golda moved to their position on the roof of a two story building on the eastern edge of the kibbutz to survey the enemy. Only her love for her Avram could have induced her to follow him there.

Fanned out before them was a company of Jordanian infantry advancing across the fields followed by three old Russian surplus tanks. Golda's heart hammered in her ears and she feared she would faint or run away. Avram had said she was an exceptional student with the rifle but she had never faced physical danger before and she had her doubts. One never knew what one was capable of until one was put to the test. Having never been tested, she feared she would fail.

From the distance the AKs sounded like rapid popping. Occasionally a round would impact near them against the tile roof or the concrete walls of the structure with a loud WHACK and a cloud of flying chips and dust. But Avram kept methodically picking off the lead soldiers one by one at almost 300 meters. Golda was hiding, below the peak of the roof, unable to work up the courage to join him in shooting. The Jordanians began diving for cover in irrigation ditches.

Over 400 meters away, the commander of the lead tank popped open the hatch to examine the building with binoculars. The coaxial machine gun was brought to bear on the roof top and the number of bullets hitting it increased greatly. Then the 76 mm main gun opened up, hitting slightly to the left and in front of Avram. The concussion from the explosion alone almost blew Golda clean off the roof top. Scrambling to retain her purchase on the clay tiles, absolute fear gripped her for a moment. Gripped her, that is. until she looked back up to the peak.

Avram was dead. There was no need to examine him closely. His body was almost torn apart by shrapnel. His rifle slid down the roof and clattered to the ground.

The tanker, having achieved his first objective, now began to systematically shell other adjacent positions. With the sniper gone, the other commanders decided it was safe to unbutton as well.

In a matter of seconds fear turned to horror. Then grief. Then a cold rage.

He would have become her lover, her husband, the father of her children and they had taken him from her. In a matter of a minute Golda transformed from quaking in fear to no longer caring if she died. Dragging the Enfield rifle with her, and burdened with ammunition, she crawled back up to the peak to be next to him.

I'm so sorry, my love. If I had been worthy of you, I would have fought beside you. I would have died with you. You were taken from me because I didn't deserve you. Now I must become worthy of you that I may join you.

A deadly calm came over her as she wiped away the tears from her eyes. For what she had to do now, she needed to be able to see. Under the cover of the tanks, the infantry had advanced to within a hundred meters of the kibbutz outer defenses. The tanks had to go. Golda viewed the commander of the lead tank through the iron sites of her rifle. Calculated the windage and the elevation. Exhaled and waited for that golden instant between heartbeats that all good snipers reach for. And squeezed the trigger.

The commander's throat exploded in gore and he slipped into the tank, leaving the hatch open. Avram had told her once that if you could just slip a round through the open hatch of a tank, it would ricochet around inside, killing the crew. Dropping her aim point by two feet she squeezed again and then again. The tank stopped firing and started moving in a circle, almost crushing it's own support infantry. Then she drew a bead on a second tank commander. This one slumped over and was immediately pushed out of the tank by the crew inside. Someone reached up and pulled the hatch shut before she could fire at the opening. The third tank took the hint and buttoned up immediately.

One at a time she began to pick off the closest infantry. Buttoned up, the remaining tanks were far less accurate. Explosions roared around her and bullets hit the tile close enough to cut her face with flying chips. The infantry began to retreat in the face of this new sniper who was killing them off at the rate of ten per minute, with monotonous regularity. Oddly enough, some of them seemed have beards and tatoos and to be leaving by motorcycle, but she cut them down as well. Then suddenly it felt as though the building collapsed on top of her, crushing her chest and preventing her from breathing. It all went black.

There was a point of light. Then it grew larger. Soon everything was filled with glorious light. Out of this light stepped Avram. Suddenly Golda was happy. It seemed as though the firefight had been decades ago and she was happy for the first time in thirty years.

"I have come to join you in God's house, my love." she said to him.

"No, you must go back. There is still much yet for you to do. They need you and will not make it without you."

"But it has been so long! I do not wish to live without you. I wish that I had died with you. I wish that I had died when the house had collapsed. I'm old and tired now. I just want to rest with you."

"Do not fret my love. In the eyes of God a thousand years is but a minute. You are in the eyes of God right now. We will be together forever in but a few seconds. We will live a thousand lives together and do all the things we wanted to but couldn't. But for now you must go back."

And he was gone.

And she was no longer in the light. She was in darkness. Something was slamming into her chest, like bullets, taking her attention away from where she was, drawing her back into this world.

"I've got pulse!"

"She's breathing again!"

"Thank God! But... why is she smiling????"

Nguyen Cao saw the looks on Henry and June's faces as exactly what they had done and risked began to sink in. Although some kind of psychological letdown was inevitable, now was not the time to let them slump. "Mr. and Mrs. Henderson! There is a badly injured police officer hiding in the dumpster in front of the supermarket! Please take your truck there and bring him back to aid station. Won't last long in this heat. Is buried under trash and boxes."

Still flushed with the adrenaline rush of combat, they left immediately

Col. Cao finished his examination of the gang's casualties. There were no survivors among those who had not been able to escape. This was not surprising. As the gunfire from the attackers had ceased, the Colonel had carefully placed .45 slugs in anybody who was neither clearly dead, nor running away. Spot and Blue, who had scrambled to hide in the narrow walkway between house and side wall when the car had come crashing through the back yard wall, tentatively slunk back to see if things were clear. Nguyen led them into the house and shut then in.

Unfortunately the big guy had seemed clearly dead. Even with rock salt, at that range it must have had a

very light powder load to be survivable. Nguyen vowed not to be so stingy with ammunition in the future. In an environment as hazardous as he anticipated arising, it could result in the deaths of the innocent.

Now, what to do with all these bodies? Seven corpses riddled with bullet holes lie in the yard and another three were on the adjacent sidewalk. How would these civilians react to the sight of death, death they had caused, close up? Col. Cao had seen many men in their first combat experience lose all their self control. These civilians had no training, yet had handled themselves as well as could be expected. They had seen the elephant and not run. But what will happen when they hear the owl call their name?

Examining the bodies, he made a mental inventory of weapons, ammunition and accessories, plus he checked out the motorcycles for useful supplies. The big guy had certainly been tough. He'd kept the presence of mind to take his shotgun with him. There was a dearth of long arms, which was not surprising. The leader wouldn't have wanted to be outgunned by any of the pack members.

The corpses possessed a wide variety of handguns. No two were armed alike. One had a .45 Colt Commander. That gun, it's accessories and ammo were immediately cached away in the McArthur garage. Since the handguns possessed by the committee mostly shot .45 ACP, it was only reasonable. Several boxes of 12 gauge buckshot were appropriated from what must have been the big guy's saddlebags. He also took as much of the other types of ammunition, including .38, 9 millimeter, .357 magnum and .44 magnum as he could and still not have it appear suspicious. If the authorities did show up, it would not do to have them find ten slaughtered, unarmed bodies lying around. Or to find guns, but no ammunition.

He briefly considered taking a motorcycle, but decided against it. Everybody in the neighborhood who knew how to ride undoubtedly had a bike already. However he would get Todd to drain much of the gas out of them if there were time.

Next he examined the wounds on the bodies. The .303 had obviously been the end to six of the attackers, with small entrance wounds and large exit wounds. The three who had tried to flee were all head shots and lay in pools of blood by their stalled bikes. The back wall must have obscured her field of view to them. Nguyen was careful to put guns in their hands. The three she had dropped in the yard were center of mass shots. From memory he was able to quickly identify the three he had dropped with his .45. Many of the bodies also showed multiple non-lethal injuries from the fifteen second firefight. That meant the Hendersons weren't firing totally blindly and was a good sign.

Who had hit number ten? A single entry wound, less than a quarter inch across and slightly to the left of the sternum told the tale. The boy would be a good soldier some day. For now it was important that he not learn to take killing casually, but rather with extreme earnestness.

Now there was nothing to do but wait and perhaps get the car out of the pool and repair the wall. Wait to see if the authorities showed up. Wait for the Hendersons to return with the injured policeman. They and

Todd and also Lynn must view death close up. They would have to wait also - for the adrenaline to wear off and for the psychological shock to set in.

Officer Gallagher was relaxing on a chair in front of the supermarket with the owner. So far his day had consisted mostly of turning away people who had come in search of food and redirecting them to the aid station. When he heard the sound of a large group of motorcycles approaching he stood up and instructed the owner to enter the market for safety. Long past were the days when the owner of a business could be counted upon to help defend it himself. That job was entirely handed off to hired guns. Like him.

There had been reports of sporadic robbery, looting, arson, rape and murder by various established gangs operating in the area, by new ones that spontaneously formed and by lawless individuals. Not much he could do but pray against types like that. The twelve gauge he'd normally have in the cruiser trunk was still there. Unfortunately "there" was still back at the station.

A collection of about a dozen bikes cruised on down Renfield, a wide variety of motorcycle types and no particular colors, probably one of the new gangs comprised mostly of wannabes and losers. He knew he wasn't about to stand off any but the smallest and most timid of gangs by himself. His job was to keep the ordinary citizen from helping himself to the goodies. He breathed a sigh of relief as they passed on by with no sign of slowing. A few seconds later they had passed beyond earshot. Still concerned, he let several minutes go by before telling the owner he could come out.

Several minutes after that, a shotgun blast ripped into his chest. His body armor absorbed much of it but several pellets managed to enter though the uncovered area around his left arm and shoulder and he went down hard on his right side. The second blast removed most of the franchise owner's head. As he fell, he saw several of the outlaw bikers who had ridden by earlier climbing over a wall behind him. A puddle of blood was rapidly accumulating where he had fallen. The best plan of action seemed to be to lie very still.

The plan didn't work for too long. Most of the gang had entered the store almost immediately. One of them had stayed outside as a lookout. Soon, when he went to remove the officer's pistol belt, he noticed the officer breathing. "Oh ho! So you're not dead after all? I can fix that!"

Peter attempted to get up, but was too weak. Looking up he saw an evil looking character above him with a knife. Peter's eyes widened with fear and tried to draw his gun but found his arm wouldn't respond. Behind his attacker, the officer thought he saw a shadow move, heard the rustling of the wind. Then a *thunk*. His would-be executioner crumpled to the ground, a look of surprise barely registered on his face.

"Can you walk?" his rescuer whispered.

"Not much. I don't have much use of my arms, either."

"I will hide you, come back for you later."

Sgt. Gallagher found himself being lifted in a fireman's carry, then being dropped unceremoniously into a trash dumpster near the front of the store. The covered with boxes and newspapers. "Wait here. Be quiet. Come back soon with help."

He was in no position to argue.

Just as Golda been put to bed in the house neighboring the McArthur', Miriam and Lynn were jolted by the sound of the Hendersons' car siren.

"Good Lord! What can it be now?" exclaimed Miriam. "Lynn, you stay here and watch Golda. I'll go see what's up."

Miriam ran downstairs and was greeted by June and Henry easing a police officer onto an improvised stretcher. "He's been hit by a shotgun. He's lost some blood and he's still conscious, but only barely."

"Take him into Lynn's house, put him on the sofa. Help me get his clothes off."

A few minutes later, she finished her first cursory examination of the newest casualty. His right shoulder was dislocated and he had taken three pellets in his left shoulder and one in his neck, but nothing life threatening. Her thoughts were interrupted by the sudden wild honking of a horn outside. Seconds later, Colonel Cao came rushing through the front door.

"Medic! We need medic! Incoming!"

"June, Henry. Go out there and help the Colonel."

Almost immediately they returned with a man on a stretcher, followed by an elderly Vietnamese man with a bandaged head and another with a nasty looking scar on his throat.

"Oh good grief! We don't have another bed available. This man is lucky to be alive. We don't dare bounce him up the stairs. Todd! Get me another bed here, stat! Henry, escort these two gentlemen upstairs. June, get me sterile water and lots of clean bandages. Then take over for Lynn. I'm going to need her medical expertise here. Cao! Get the medical bag from my house."

Todd returned with the foam pad and cotton mat for a futon and draped blankets over them.

"Put him down, easy. Hmmm.... he's taken hits to the right shoulder blade and upper left lung, both on the ventral side. Also under the left collar bone, small entry in the back, slightly larger exit. Look a couple of days old, well clotted. Must have lost a massive amount of blood, he's pale as a ghost. Breathing slowly. Pulse - rapid, weak, but steady. Inflammation aplenty, but no sign of infection. I'm not the first medical help he's seen, else he'd be dead. Who helped this man?"

"We did. All of us." The woman who spoke was a slender Vietnamese woman of indeterminate age, yet indisputable refinement. She was accompanied by a pubescent girl who could only be her daughter and an elderly woman who could only be her mother.

"What happened?"

"We were being... ah, attacked. This man save us. All five of us be dead without him."

"What kind of treatment did you give him?"

"Stop bleeding with direct pressure. Remove bullets with sterilized needle nose pliers. Was very careful. Poultices over wounds. Echinacea - gotu kola. This also help prevent infection. Put into poultice, also by mouth."

She displayed a bottle, almost gone now, of tetracycline for fish.

"Why take him here? Why not a hospital?"

"The hospital say he going to die. Not take care of him. Not take care of husband or father. Say they not sick enough. They call it *triage*. So we keep him alive instead."

"Merciful heavens what a day! What can possibly happen next?"

As if in answer, the sound of a bull horn boomed from in front of the house. "This is the United States military acting in accord with executive orders. I am Lt. Carmichael of the California Army National Guard. You are ordered to exit this residence by the front door only. Leave any firearms or other weapons inside and come out with your hands over your heads."

Looking out the front window, they could see a military Blazer and six armed soldiers. One of them had detained Cao and was rummaging through the medical bag, scattering its contents across the sidewalk. Out the back they could see troops stepping through the gap in the wall, poking and prodding the corpses and covering the house.

Miriam became angry. Snatching up a blood soaked rag in a pair of forceps, she stomped out and

confronted the poor Lieutenant with the megaphone. Lightning flashed from her eyes and flames poured from her ears. Or at least that's what he thought he saw, as she advanced upon him waving, the bloody rag.

"What do you mean by this?! I have seven injured people inside two different houses. Three of them are life threatening and cannot be moved and must be watched closely. We are NOT coming out for your mass line up. If you wish to come inside, you may, provided you do not get in our way. If you happen to have a medic available, send him in ASAP. And tell that goon over there to stop littering the lawn with my medical supplies or I will stuff this bloody rag where he doesn't want it!"

"What's going on out there!" Lynn poked her head out of the 2nd floor window of the room they had moved Golda to. "I've got an elderly woman up here who had a heart attack when those SOBs attacked. Tell these SOBs to keep it down so she can rest!"

What was going on outside was not lost on Todd and Henry. The two of them conferred briefly and slipped up the stairs, pulled down the hatch to the attic, climbed up the ladder and pulled it up after them. Then in a fit of inspiration, Todd radioed a short message to John.

Back in the front of the house, the discussion between Miriam and the National Guard officer continued. Speaking to Miriam he asked, "Ma'am, are you in charge here?"

"What do you mean 'in charge'? What do you think we are? Some kind of militia? Nobody's in charge. We've just been brutally attacked by a horde of barbarians, rapists and murderers. If it weren't for that nice police man, who by the way, is lying at death's door RIGHT NOW, we'd all be dead."

Miriam's aggressive speaking had the officer on the defensive. "Look ma'am. I've got my orders." He took a step back to avoid the still glistening wet, red stained fabric only inches from his face. "I've been told to investigate reports of a major gunfight and confiscate the weapons involved. I'm also supposed to check on unauthorized use of radio frequencies and confiscate the equipment involved. We don't want any trouble, just cooperation." He took still another step backwards.

Miriam noted the wedding band on his finger. "Do you have children?"

"Why yes, but...?"

"Is *your* wife safe? How about *your* children? How would *you* feel if this happened to them? How would you feel if that were *your* mother lying at death's door up there?" She waved in Lynn's general direction, who was watching the proceedings with interest.

"Do you want your little girl to be gang raped by a dozen of those filthy bastards and then kept as a sex slave to them until she drops dead from exhaustion or some horrible disease? Or your wife or son?"

By now the officer had retreated behind the truck in a futile effort to keep away from that horrible rag. Miriam's words were beginning to have an effect on the rest of the troops as well. They were beginning to consider that their own families might be at risk. Suddenly they were swarmed by a half dozen teen age girls, all of them thanking the soldiers profusely for saving them from a fate worse than death. Following closely behind was John in his wheel chair, attempting to look as frightened and disheveled as he could.

"Look ma'am, I sympathize with you. But I have a report to do and I need to at least go inside and inspect. I have troops in back waiting for further orders. I wish I had a medic with us but they are all back at the aid station."

Ellie was clinging to him, shouting "You saved us!" over and over, substantially impeding any progress he attempted to make towards the house.

"Ellie, honey, let the nice man go. Okay, come inside. But first tell your man to put my things back in the medical bag!"

Col. Cao, who's usual posture was ramrod straight and who's speech patterns were normally laconic, to say the least, was hunched over submissively and babbling like a brook in Vietnamese to the soldier searching the bag. He'd also developed a severe limp for the occasion. The commander ordered his man to repack the bag and entered the McArthur house. Immediately he saw the two men, Lance and Peter, being cared for by June. Peter was still somewhat conscious.

"This is officer - er, ah - Gallagher." said Miriam glancing at the name pin displayed by the uniform lying in a heap on the floor. "He saved us from that horrible gang."

Lieutenant Carmichael looked around the room. There was not an able bodied male present nor was there a firearm visible. Bending over to speak to the police officer, he asked, "Are you Officer Gallagher of the LAPD?"

"Yes." came the hoarse reply.

"Were you injured by this biker gang?"

"Yes."

"I think that was enough questioning for now. Officer Gallagher is obviously too tired to talk any more." Miriam swooped in, grabbed Carmichael by the arm and led him to the back door. "Now if you would please help us clean up this mess in back and get the car out of the pool we would be ever so grateful."

The Lieutenant by now was thoroughly flustered. "Uh, at ease, men." he said as he stepped outside into the carnage of the back yard. "Collect the weapons and load these bodies onto the deuce."

"And get the car out of the swimming pool." coaxed Miriam.

"Get the chains and see if we can drag this car out of the pool. We'll come back later for the motorcycles"

"Thank you sir. Now you can be on your way.

"Oh and one more thing.... Could you possibly bring back some med-surg supplies when you return for the motorcycles? We're a little short here and we have injured to care for. I'll make up a list real quick. I knew you could. Thank you."

Carmichael asked for some kind of authorization and got her nursing license number. He then walked back through the house and exited the front. A staff sergeant was just shooing the last of the girls away. "What do we say in the report, sir?" he asked.

"Gunfire was an authorized use of force by Officer Peter Gallagher of the LAPD and civilians conscripted by him under authority of executive orders. Bodies and all unauthorized weapons recovered from scene, mitigation of damage to civilian assets undertaken. Supplies to augment civilian first aid efforts to be requisitioned for authorized civilian medical personnel on site."

"Yes sir. What about the unauthorized transmissions?"

"Unable to locate the source."

The Lieutenant did not speak again as they returned to the aid station. He was deep in thought about his own wife and child.

They began the arduous task of draining the pool, cleaning the shattered concrete blocks and automotive crud out of it and refilling it. They began the task of repairing the breach in the wall using what remained of the original blocks and some scrounged post hole cement for mortar. More importantly they began the process of psychological healing and adjustment.

Miriam and Nguyen Cao had been under life and death pressure many times before, she in the ER, he in combat. While they were both deeply affected by what had happened, they continued to carry on normally in their jobs. For Todd, Lynn, and the Hendersons, it was a time of silence, of introspection, of unexpected embracing. Even of brooding and silent weeping. They had seen the results of combat. They had killed or tried to kill and someone had tried to kill them. Someone close to them was very nearly dead and it could easily have been them.

They had seen the elephant and stood their ground. Now they were hearing the owl call their name.

Skag had heard more than just the owl calling his name. Not only did it scream his name, but it breathed fire upon him while the elephant stomped on him. Dozens of tiny holes had perforated his chest, each its own little prick of agony. Adding to his discomfort, he could barely breath or see. Staggering down the street on foot, he gulped huge wheezing breaths of air, wondering if at any second someone would pump a round into him, ending his misery. He had been spared while most of his compatriots lay dead. Perhaps when he stopped hurting so insanely much, he'd ponder why.

In the mean time, he needed to make it back to the hideout and rendezvous with the survivors. It was good that he had left Snail and Big Joe and the others behind with the booty, else he wouldn't have had any gang left.

There HAD to be an easier way to do this. Perhaps if he waited for the targets to come to him instead of going on raiding parties? Meanwhile he HAD to find a pool to wash the gas and salt away....

That evening, Nguyen and John and the two dogs kept vigil while everybody else rested. It seemed as good a time as any to start training Spot and Blue in the basics of sentry dog work, even if neither man had experience as a dog trainer. This night's lessons consisted of teaching them never to eat or drink out of anything but their specific bowls. Ordinarily it would be never to eat anything from anyone but their master, but too many people would have to be included in that description. Hopefully nobody could get close to their bowls without them alerting the world to the presence of intruders.

The pool was refilling gradually. Too gradually. The water pressure seemed to be on a steady decline as the night wore on. Natural gas pressure was declining as well.

Todd had managed to drain 20 gallons out of 12 bikes (while leaving about a quart in each one) before soldiers showed up to haul them away. This was more paranoia of Col. Cao's. He couldn't have the attackers look like they were riding motorcycles with completely dry tanks. Nobody had a guess why the military wanted to take the bikes away, except possibly to deny them to their former owners. It wasn't exactly as if the San Fernando Valley lacked motorcycle dealerships, unguarded and just waiting to be ripped off.

When the power had first gone down, the night sky had been clear and stars had shown down that had not been seen in decades. the next two days, the sky had gotten progressively smokier as riot caused fires had pour their smoke into the basin. Now it was even worse. Wild fires raged uncontrolled in the Hollywood Hills and the Santa Monica mountains to the south and the Verdugo Hills to the east. Tiny black and grey flakes of ash and soot were settling on everything as though a mournful mid-August

snow.

"My gawd! I'm glad we don't live near the hills. I bet thousands of homes have already gone up in smoke and dozens more are being lost by the minute. An object lesson of why you shouldn't have wood shake roofs or wooden siding in fire country. And why clearing the brush away from your house is something you should take *very* seriously."

"If mountains to the north go, we in danger."

"We're lucky. They burned just last year. Could burn again but it would not be very intense."

"Fires get bad, we will see many refugees come this way. Have to decide how to handle them."

"Yes. The loss of water pressure will make it much worse. We have a lot of water in local pools but it won't last forever. Then it's either leave or slurp at the government's trough. From what I can pick up on the short wave bands, the rest of the world is still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Maybe an EMP hit on Europe, maybe a nuclear war. I'm amazed it hasn't already started in the near East or between India and Pakistan by now.

"This information has got to be percolating through to the general public by now. If I can hear it so can hundreds, maybe thousands of other people. It's going to get really ugly before it gets better. When a critical mass of people figure out what is happening and enough people begin to panic, this whole city will go crazy."

In the background, the soft hiss of the 2 meter rig was briefly interrupted by a voice, "Santa Claus to Easter Bunny, Come in."

John changed the frequency and spoke a clipped, "Easter Bunny, over. Then changed it again.

The radio crackled back, "The King returns within 24. Done."

John did not respond to this.

Cao raised an eyebrow. "How you set up such good comsec?"

"Used to play fox and hound with Jubal before this all went down. He's a raven from way back. We *never* got caught. Didn't take much to let him know what I wanted to set up. It was a specific scenario we'd played out once. To avoid being picked up by any direction finders out there, we're both using highly directional antennas at minimum power.

"I could also have changed polarization, modulation types or even bounced the signal off several

different buildings while I was frequency hopping. With better equipment there are even more things I could try. But I'm not that paranoid yet."

"You may need to be. Your opsec is weak. He say 'King return'. Should not use a code that has a meaning related to the message."

"I know, but setting up an elaborate code system over the air and maintaining good DF discipline are incompatible. Takes too long. Would have to set it up well in advance"

"You probably right. Kids be very happy. Have daddy back. We need more combat manpower. I be happy."

"The question is whether Lynn will be happy. She likes being in charge and won't take kindly to a competing authority. He was gone so often, she lost interest in him. Then this crisis hits and she feels like she's been deserted at her time of greatest need."

"It not be pretty. I think I hide."

The Odyssey, Part Deux

"Okay, guys, we have certain advantages the Man from FEMA may not know about." Tom, Ed and Paul were all sitting around a kitchen table, air conditioning purring in the background.

"We have a four wheel drive vehicle with backpacks, food, canteens and other gear. Paul has a radio to get real news of what is happening in the world. I have a firearm and some ammunition. I know this area fairly well and can probably find a way to get into the Valley despite the blockade, though we may have to walk some.

"Paul, can you get me a message into the Valley? Is there a Ham operator up here you know?"

"I don't really know anybody here, but I think I can find a Ham. It's not too difficult to identify a household with a Ham radio by the antenna. It just takes a lot of trawling. Problem is the odds are heavily against their radio not being blown to flinders by EMP."

Ed's head jerked up from his thoughts. "Wait! Don't you have a transceiver squirreled away in your luggage? Fresh off the shelf and likely to still be functional?"

"Damn, I totally forgot! They took the personal communications headsets but didn't root through my underwear to find the radio. We're in business. I still have the wire I commandeered from the utility shed. I can make an antenna. If I can raise someone out here with line of sight into the Valley or get it ourselves, we can do it."

Then Tom spoke, "No way are you going to get line of sight. I know the terrain here. Of course we are also much too close for any chance of skip going to the Valley. Your best bet is to transmit north, probably on ten meters, and pray for good atmospheric. Then whoever you reach will be able to use the same atmospheric to go south."

"I'll get to work on it. Nice of them to set up a generator just to keep the bigwigs cool."

Tom was very anxious to get home. He didn't really expect the government to fulfill its promises. The next two days were spent in preparation, pouring over the Thomas Guide, his Delorme Atlas and marking out the trails they would be taking. They would start out just after sunset in the Suzuki, drive as far as they could, then walk the rest of the way. The whole exercise should not take more than a few hours.

Paul managed to contact someone near Fresno after many hours of trying. The operator agreed to try to get the message through to John in the San Fernando Valley. Ed drained a little gas from each of several cars for the Suzuki, which was running on fumes. The need to do this made Tom extremely unhappy, even though the total taken was hardly three gallons. His mind pictured desperate refugees dying along the highway because they had run out of gas only a few miles before reaching their destination. His intellect said the owners of these vehicles would never see them again since *they* were locked up in the relocation camp. His conscience still called him a thief.

There were also the other dignitaries to hobnob with. Every one was either a local politician, business executive or bureaucrat, with a couple of labor leaders tossed in. Many of them had their immediate families with them, Some of them even had their mistresses. Tom mused about what would happen if the common people were to discover their leaders were fleeing, while imprisoning them on the sinking ship *sans* lifeboats. Would it be citywide insurrection? Or placid resignation?

At every opportunity Tom made inquiries about his family, only to be met with vague reassurances and nothing more. It became painfully obvious to him that they were being used as insurance until "The Man from FEMA" decided he could be trusted. Tom decided that he would never lower himself enough to be trustworthy to such parasites. Now was the time to show just how untrustworthy he was.

In a pile of reports on various occurrences within his command, one report piqued General Beauregard T. Swift's interest. Of the many incident reports of violence to cross his desk, most resulted in death and rapine to the victims. This particular incident varied from the pattern in that a group of civilian women assisted by a police officer had almost wiped out a most troublesome group of outlaws. Even more interesting was where it had occurred; the house of Senator T. McArthur.

General Swift chuckled to himself and forwarded the report to the man from FEMA.

On the fourth evening after the "event", the three men set out quietly across the undeveloped central Santa Clara River valley. There was no shortage of trails through the dense chaparral covered slopes, which were partly land about to be developed and partly oil field. They progressed slowly, only a little faster than walking. The moon was not full and what shown was pale red from all the smoke in the atmosphere. They did not dare turn on the lights for fear of attracting the attention of possible patrols. On occasion they passed what looked like campsites in the dark, sometimes illuminated by flashlights or tiny campfires, but no one rose up to accost them. Those fires would almost certainly draw the wrath of the military, if seen. Out of control, the smallest camp fire could devastate most of the valley.

At one point they were almost forced to use Sierra Highway to cross Placerita Creek. That would have been nearly impossible to do undetected as a regular flow of trucks and military vehicles traversed it and the nearby Antelope Valley Freeway. A bit of creative off-roading, with Ed walking ahead to feel the way, got them past that choke point. Following the creek bed upstream, they found a likely path out in a poor residential neighborhood.

The next barrier was San Fernando Road, which had to be crossed. They elected to do this parallel to a railroad which, for the time, was going their way. For a mile, just across the tracks was Hart Park, the sight of what appeared to be another relocation camp full of lights and generators. Then they passed the park and came to a locked gate. Had the been able to read it, the sign on it read "Private Property - Keep Out". The locked gate was reassuring because it meant patrols didn't go down this road with any regularity. Getting around the gate was a major undertaking and involved straddling one side of the railroad tracks for a distance and then cutting back onto the dirt trail through a fence, all the while fearing that a train might show up too quickly for them to escape.

Taking a right turn onto another trail, they drove through an oil field towards their next obstacle, Interstate 5. It too was being heavily traveled. And while there were underpasses one could use to cross it, the parallel Old Road was carrying traffic and it was a surface street.

Nobody had any idea how much farther they could take the car. They had also badly underestimated how much time it would take to travel without running lights. It was beginning to get light. If they were to time it perfectly and find the best spot, they could simply drive onto the road exactly in between convoys and nobody would see them. Or they could just brazen their way thru, lights on, no attempt to conceal anything. Seeing nothing but lights, there would be no way to identify them as not being just another military vehicle unless someone got close. Then as soon as they got past the Interstate, it would be back onto the trails again. They chose the latter strategy and to their knowledge, it worked.

On the south side of the freeway, they cut back onto a trail marked clearly on the Thomas guide as the Saugus to the Sea Road. It would have taken them very close to the top of Oat Mountain, the last geographic barrier between them and the San Fernando Valley, except that about a thousand feet in, it was blocked by boulders. Boulders that had been placed there in a critical location to prevent vehicles

from getting past. Boulders that were probably part of FEMA's plan for choking off the flow of refugees in vehicles.

"I guess that's it. We walk. It getting too light out to take a chance on going back to pick another trail. That hill's too rugged to try going cross country." Tom was exhausted from driving all night. Ed had caught occasional cat naps between walking ahead of the car through hazardous terrain, but was still very tired. Paul had managed to fall asleep for a while in an incredibly uncomfortable position in the back.

"Let's get out and stretch our legs a bit. We'll need to put a couple of meals in those backpacks, plus all the water we can carry and not much else. What we can't take, but might be useful if we ever come back this way, we can wrap in trash bags and bury. I'm going to take the Suzuki off the trail and conceal it as best I can. Then I'll disable it. If we ever get back here the parts may all be stripped, but it's the best I can do. Don't forget your hats. They'll be the most important piece of clothing you'll have."

Paul eyed the mountain ahead dubiously. "Tom, I'm not sure I'll make it"

"I know what you mean. It's about three miles to the ridge and a three thousand foot elevation gain. Then we go back down, same drop over the same distance. After that another couple of miles on level streets and we'll be there. I hope we get the uphill part over before the heat sets in too bad. But I won't push you into a coronary or leave you behind. Now's the time to find out if that expensive fitness club was worth the money."

"Might have been, if I'd gone more often."

They packed their backpacks and concealed the car. Tom strapped on the gun belt he'd been hiding in his luggage. They buried the radio and a number of other items. And then they climbed the hill.

At first it was easy. Walk a half hour, break for ten minutes. To Ed and Paul, it didn't seem like they needed the breaks but Tom insisted. They encountered refugees walking the other direction, out of the city. Some were well equipped, some had nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Family groupings, couples, groups of males and individual males. No unaccompanied females, which was not a surprise. Pretty soon LA would be a bachelor's dream, full of single women unwilling or unable to hike out.

The trail got steeper. The air got warmer. The breaks grew longer. The trek took a terrible toll on Paul, with sweat dripping down his face and his face flushed a bright red. Eventually it was hike fifteen, rest fifteen. Three miles to the top had taken four hours and used up most of their water, but at last the hard part was over. The thinner air from the elevation and the growing amount of particulates in the air hadn't helped much.

Paul collapsed to the ground in the shade of an oil well pump. Panting heavily he said, "Gotta rest. I'm

not the man I was twenty years ago. Hell, I'm not the man I was twenty minutes ago!"

Tom was exhausted as well. Although a couple decades younger than Paul, he had no health club membership. What drove him on was adrenaline from the thought of getting home. Ed on the other hand was disgustingly healthy from youth and a regular diet of Sierra Club hikes. He had hardly broken a sweat. "

They rested for a half hour. They watched the passing of refugees become more frequent. At least all the smoke and haze was cutting the amount of heat from the sun somewhat. At ten in the morning it was only ninety degrees out.

After they crested the Santa Suzanna Mountains, the three climbed atop an outcropping of rocks for the best possible view and lay prone to present the least possible target. Nothing could have prepared them for the Dantesque scene spread out before them. The smoke, thick and visible for many miles had been a spur to movement and a source of anxiety, but still just an abstraction. The reality was a body blow as the Valley had sprouted thousands of fires of varying sizes, lined up in nice neat rows along the major thoroughfares. Tom raised the binoculars to see.

Immediately in front was a shut down oil field with scattered refugees on foot encamped there. Perhaps a couple miles ahead and several hundreds meters lower in elevation began the new construction of housing and beyond that the residences of Grenada Hills. He could just make out the dot of his own house, but nothing more. His heart leapt to see there were no fires in it's immediate vicinity. Looking farther, the smoke obscured visibility much beyond Sherman Way and the Santa Monicas were invisible. Far to the left one could make out the strand of abandoned vehicles that was the 405. Most of the lanes had been cleared. Busses and 18 wheelers and army trucks crawled both ways, the tiniest of ants at this distance. Overhead, helicopters and transport aircraft buzzed in and out of Van Nuys, Burbank and other airports, no doubt ferrying in supplies and troops and taking back the important people who hadn't yet gotten out of Dodge. To the right, the 118 freeway going west looked very similar

The occasional clump of refugees trudged past wearing packs and carrying luggage, pushing carts and pulling wagons full of possessions, with looks ranging from fear to grief, from sullen to predatory.

Tom grunted. "Where do these people think they're going? None of them are equipped for cross country travel. They'll descend on the next valley up like a flock of locusts, devour the resources and be stuck in the relocation camps, the ultimate welfare slaves.

If we lose this year's crop there could be famine. But that won't happen. Power won't be gone forever. I give it another week. In fact vital industries are probably coming back on line right now with manual controls. Never underestimate the ingenuity of American engineers. These people would be better off staying here as long as there are any supplies coming in at all.

Paul looked at Tom and started to recite:

*Things fall apart.
The center cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

He paused, thought and continued, "In the past we have always recovered from catastrophes because we were such a huge nation. One section gets damaged, the rest of the country fixes it up. Now everybody is hit at once. We don't have the technology any more to support our population. It's back to the turn of the century except we don't have enough horses and buggies to make it work. LA is dead. Before it's over she'll see 90% mortality.

Another pause. "Have you seen any trucks on this dirt trail?. Why isn't the military clearing out more freeway lanes? I bet this city is quarantined. All the refugees we've seen are ones who slipped past the patrols. The countryside can't sustain the influx of refugees. FEMA took out it's maps and said, 'Look, we can keep the outflow of refugees to a level that could be sustained by existing agriculture by controlling transport. That means most people don't get out. Pretty hard on them, but a hell of a lot better than have everybody die. The people around us are expected to die too. Of course the "important" people will get special dispensation."

"You can't keep this many people bottled up. It'll explode. There are more people just in the Valley than in all the armed forces combined. And there are a lot more cities than LA to worry about. Midwestern cities are a lot more porous."

"Many of them are also in areas of the countryside that can sustain more people. When the emigration hits it's limit, the convoys will shut down. Then I expect it will be a fast acting, very deadly disease that is only briefly contagious, easily treated and easily vaccinated for. That way the government won't get the blame, we keep the capital resources mostly intact and it won't destroy the rest of the country. We can always blame it on the Russians. But who knows, the survivors may be so happy to be alive they don't care. I would expect keeping family groups together would be a priority in the evacuation, as would selecting evacuees by occupation. Save the elite and give the survivors as little reason to hate you as practical."

"Oh shit, I hope you're wrong. There must be a better way."

"*You* could probably find one. And you'd definitely try. If it failed you'd at least have the people go down fighting. The people responsible for this are all holed up comfortably at the Greenbriar Hotel, or Mt. Weather or Air Force One. They lack your motivation, since their world is safe."

"No, the Greenbriar is a park now. Besides, those people would only be the proximal cause, not the ultimate cause."

"And who is that?"

"We, the people who put them there. I was one of those so-called leaders, once. "

"Technically, you still are."

Tom shook himself and stood. "America will bounce back, all of us." A pause, then, "Gotta get down there."

Paul commented on the refugees. "They're desperate. Most of them are carrying almost nothing. We'll have to watch our backs closely. *Desperate ends do desperate means devise..*"

Long silent, Ed Parsons stood up and dusted himself off. "I'm keeping my eyes peeled. There's just the smallest chance we might see Lynn and the kids coming out this way. And if Paul is right, there may be patrols. We'll have to avoid stumbling into them."

Tom handed him the binoculars, but knew inside the chances were slight of seeing his family. Lynn would never end up like these pathetic people. She'd stay with the house as long as it stood. Or she'd leave in front of an army. Her army.

"From here it's steep. We can follow Limekiln wash down to the park. According to the map it's about a mile. Then right into the new development and left on Reseda down to Grenada Hills." Then he laughed an evil laugh. "It's all downhill from here." They shouldered their packs and trudged onward through the desolate oil field and down a dirt access road. Now only the occasional walker was encountered, face white with shock and fear.

Near the top of the park in a clearing they found what looked like a couple of families standing and sitting in the shade of an oak. There was no hiding the terror at the sudden appearance of the three men, nor was there any disguising their grief. The women were weeping, the children in panic, the adult men clutched them protectively but you could see hopelessness on their faces. Almost everyone was bruised or bleeding somewhere.

Tom approached the older man. "What happened?"

It was a tale of banditry. A group of bandits had noticed the refugees funneling up through the park. It had looked like easy pickings. The jeep trail beyond had been blocked with one of those tamper proof gates, the kind where it was impossible to get at the padlocks with cutters or hacksaw. The gate itself was of 6 inch well casing, end posts anchored in and filled with concrete. Nothing short of a bulldozer or dynamite would dislodge it. Additionally the Army Corps of Engineers had thoughtfully rolled some huge boulders and dug some excavations so as to make the trail impassable to motorized transport should one be able to bypass or unlock the gate. Just beyond they had set up the ambush, knowing that the refugees would be on foot and extremely vulnerable. Occasionally they would hit vehicles that, having been repulsed by the gate, were attempting to turn around. They took food, weapons and

anything else that struck their fancy. The occasional fatality was quickly dragged off into the bushes. It wasn't known what happened to the vehicles.

Only with this group, they had fancied the teenage girls, 3 of them from 13 to 19. And laughed as they drove the families away with chains and rocks and guns.

"Thank God you're armed! Are you police? Rangers? Please help us!

"No, we're not police. But I am from the government. And I'm going to help you."

A loud groan of dismay erupted from Paul. Tom glared at him for it.

"How far up? How many? How are they armed?"

The man almost collapsed with relief. "Twelve of them. About fifty yards." The group of victims started buzzing. "Pistols, a couple rifles, a couple shotguns. That's how I got this...." His voice trailed off as he pointed to a large welt across his cheek.

Tom hushed everyone and spoke in a low voice. "Paul, do your thing with them. Remember all that focus group work you did in marketing? How you take many different recollections of the same thing and compare them to find the common denominators and then deduce the probable truth of the event? Now is the time to test your technique. I need the knowledge they don't know they have.

"Kind of interesting that the victims aren't simply being killed outright. Almost as though someone had set himself up as a toll booth operator."

"Ed, now's your chance to put all that Sierra Club 'tread softly in the wilderness' crap to work. We're going on recon. Leave the packs here. It's been twenty years since I've stalked a deer. Let's hope I haven't forgotten."

"Please be careful you two. Be back soon. Don't try and play Rambo."

Flatly, "We'll be back." And then they were gone.

The two men climbed high up the steep canyon side to just below the crest and stayed low in the chaparral for cover. Soon they were in a position to survey the canyon.

The bandits were encamped in a small clearing, perhaps a dozen men and eight women. It took no effort at all to identify the 3 recent captives. Against all odds they had managed to get their choppers up the boulder strewn stream bed and had parked them in a nice neat row and the north edge of the clearing. Tom pointed this out to Ed. "Looks like they're a might concerned about a threat from the south. The

bikes would offer quick escape up the trail from any attack from the south. Maybe there are some kind of patrols out there."

One of the bikers snoozed next to the bikes, a sawed off shotgun in his lap. There were no tents, indicating no intent to spend the night. A tarp was suspended from the trees and beneath it was a large gray haired man holding a twelve gauge pump across his lap. His face was bruised and his bare chest appeared covered with red spots, as though he had the measles. He was talking to a couple of other rather hairy individuals, one who was carrying a small caliber battle rifle and wore bandoleers of ammo instead of a shirt and another who carried a pistol on his hip. On the ground were three very unhappy looking young girls who had been hog-tied. The rest of the men lounged about, smoking, talking and playing grab ass with their women.

Of more immediate concern was the lookout positioned at the gate. He appeared to be armed with a pistol of some sort and was well hidden from any frontal approach by the boulders and the brush.

"They're not planning to stay." whispered Ed.

"Nope. Likely they just hit and move, here today, tomorrow somewhere else. We'll have to move fast."

"Move fast with what? I'm no soldier. You've got the only gun. They're hardened killers."

"We'll have more guns soon enough. They may be hardened killers, but they're stupid hardened killers, else we couldn't be up here. Sufficient brains, properly applied, beat brawn every time. But I'm going to need some help doing it. Are you with me?"

"Yeah, but I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Trust me." then, after a pause, "They can't hide the vehicles at the entrance, that would be a danger flag to anyone who approached. Bodies can be drug off into the brush but a vehicle has to be parked somewhere that a vehicle can go and yet won't be seen. Now on the other side of this ridge I remember an empty housing development, just west of the park entrance."

With that he began to very carefully belly crawl up to the ridge and looked over. Ed followed. "Looky there. The end house." Through the binoculars they observed several very nice trucks parked in the back yard of the nearest house. The back yard wall had been knocked down in one spot to allow vehicles in. They would be invisible from the road.

"Looks like someone plans to bug out in style. I bet there's a couple of guards there, probably stoned or drunk. Probably also some guns and supplies." What Tom didn't say was that the ridge would muffle the sound of any shots on the other side. "First I've got to clear out whoever is in there. Then maybe we can provide our hairy friends another vehicle to steal. That way we can take out the driver in ambush. Three down, nine to go, they don't even realize what happened and we'll have at least three more guns and still

have the element of surprise."

"Right. Sounds too simple to work."

"Trust me."

As quietly as they could, they returned to Paul and the two families.

"Paul, what have you found out?"

"Well, the leader's name is Skag. Big gray hairy fellow, amphetamine dealer cum bandit. Fancies himself a new Tiburicio Vasquez. Older fart but strong as an ox. He's brutal with his men, but they are the kind who only follow someone they fear. They have five women with them. Classic biker babes, right out of the movies. Skag keeps the best girl to himself but can stake a temporary claim on any women in the group.

"The spoke about three guys, Joe, Snail and Coyote as though they weren't present. Hence they were probably absent. That leaves nine in camp and three or more unaccounted for.

"That agrees closely with our recon. Anything else?"

"Lots of signs of drug use, needle tracks and so on. The only thing visibly used during this group's unfortunate stay was tobacco and white powder. No over sexual activity either, but lots of grabbing and flashing. My thinking is that Skag is not totally stupid. He's keeping his troops focused on the task at hand. They'll party tonight and move on to different pickings tomorrow."

"Why keep women in the field with them? Why not store them with the trucks?"

"Afraid to let them out of their sight, more than likely. These people don't look into self restraint. The drug stash is probably back at the HQ these guys spoke of. Leave the girls there and the stash would be gone, up the nose, into the veins, into the lungs and down the hatch. The ladies also do the scut work."

"Any communications?"

"I asked about that. None. If they'd had CBs the EMP would have taken them out."

"We've got to move fast. We don't know how long they plan to stay here. If they go home, they'll be a lot tougher nut to crack. We have to take out the HQ first. If we have time, we'll lure them out with a truck to steal. That'll take out three. We'll have their guns and be ready for phase two. Then we hit the lookout and maybe the guy snoozing by the bikes and all hell breaks loose..."

"Who do you mean by we, Kimosabe? You've taken to giving orders instead of holding council. I'm too old to play Rambo. My body can't take much more of this. Plus I'm too stubborn to be ordered around."

This brought Tom up short. "I'm sorry if I'm all wired over this, Paul. I know I'm pushing the envelope here. But I think I'll have enough volunteers to pull it off. Look at those men." He gestured to the nearby families. "They have hope now, even if it seems impossible. You can help out here if you wish and I'll not hold it against you."

"That could have been my family. It could yet be my family. There's too much hell in this world to just let it pass. Paul, there's something pushing me. Pushing me to... I don't know what. I've fought it. Didn't matter. I still ended up in positions of power. If I hadn't fought it, instead embraced it, who knows how far I'd have gone? Maybe I could have prevented all this somehow. I just don't know. But all my life I've avoided political authority because I've always hated those who embraced it so strongly. Power corrupts, so I assumed that all who had power were corrupted." Tom paused.

"I was wrong. Or rather just unready for the job. Good people still need leaders. I guess for now that means me." Then another pause. "But not for one goddamn second longer than I have to!"

Paul smiled. "When I first met you, I knew you were a diamond in the rough. With all this abuse, you are starting to develop your facets. I may be big, but I'm not cut out for this. Too old and no wind. I'd slow you down or have a heart attack for sure. I'll stay with the noncombatants. Maybe a little reading from the Torah will soothe some nerves."

"Take them off the path, up the hill and cover the trail. There may be fleeing savages coming this way." Turning to the refugees who had been watching the discussion uneasily he said, "Anybody here have any firearms experience?" Silence. "I was afraid of that. You may be about to get some. I'm going to get your daughters back, but I'll need help." All the adults volunteered. Tom told the women to stay with the children. "You three men, follow me. Paul will stay with the women and children. Be quiet and stick together. I'll move slowly. Ed, wanna take up the rear?"

Ed nodded enthusiastically and answered in a loud stage whisper, "Yes sir!"

"Fine. You bring up the rear. Now, all of you follow me and be as quiet as you can."

It was a long, slow trip. They backtracked up the hill and went up and over a saddle and into an adjacent dry wash. The hillside was steep and covered with chaparral initially but widened out into a broad debris plain. Taking advantage of what cover was available they crept to within a hundred yards of the house.

"Everybody down. I'm going in first. You may hear a couple of gun shots. If I don't signal you within ten minutes, Ed will take you and the others around these people and to my home. Otherwise when you see me waving from the back yard come running. Check your watches."

At that, Tom took off at a crouched run, zigging and zagging to take advantage of the sparse vegetation for cover. His best hope was that the residents were fixated on the front approach to the house, waiting for vehicles. Then the plain ended in an area that had been graded and filled. Water from the wash was channeled into a concrete slit about three feet wide and as deep which fortunately ran immediately past the end house. This provided excellent cover which Tom took full advantage of.

The final approach to the house was easy. The back yard was surrounded by a 6 ft. block wall. Ordinarily there would have been no access to the yard, but a gap had been knocked into the wall wide enough to get vehicles in. Now the dangerous part began. There might be a guard in back with the vehicles. Tom cautiously climbed out of the slit and moved as silently as he could to the opening with his gun drawn. No visible guard, no loud and aggressive dog, not even a tin can to kick. There was the muffled sound of conversation from the front of the house, probably the garage or drive way.

Was it really going to be this easy? A sliding glass door beckoned. Surely it would be locked! Then there was the attached garage. Were they in it or in front of it? Was there anybody inside? Nobody was visible in the dark interior as he looked in each of the rear facing windows. More to the point, the place stank of human excrement that had ripened in the midday heat. It wafted vaguely out of the various windows but was almost overpowering out of the bathroom window. Nobody would want to stay inside. Must not have any water pressure, which could be the result of a city wide pressure loss or just the incomplete stage of construction of this project. Seventeen people could generate a lot of body waste in a real short time frame.

The door slid open silently. The place was littered with trash. The odor of sewage was strong enough to be unpleasant and the interior was silent. A large table in the dining room showed signs of various types of drugs and their usage. Boxes of canned food and containers of various alcoholic beverages were stacked in corners in the kitchen, dining and living areas. *These boys looked like they had provisioned themselves well.* Tom grimly wondered how many dead storekeepers had been left behind. The area immediately in front of the garage was not visible from inside. The other rooms of the house bore similar signs. Satisfied the place was empty, Tom left.

As silently as he could manage, Tom left the house and the yard and dropped back into the drain. In a crouch, he cautiously moved on until he could see the area in front of the garage. The voices became clearer and he saw the front legs of someone seated in a lawn chair. Another step and there they were, sitting in the afternoon shade just outside the open garage door and drinking warm beer. Talking about their bikes and the hot weather. Just two ordinary looking guys, a little hairy, a little unkempt. Suddenly Tom felt unsure, weak. He'd never killed before, never seen a person who'd been shot. Hadn't hunted in many years and putting a bullet in even a game animal now seemed distasteful. His hand shook and an unnatural sweat dripped from his brow. The thought of gunning down two people in cold blood brought bile to his throat.

Maybe he could find a way to avoid this.

Then they started talking about Skag and those little pieces of ass he'd grabbed. Wondered if he'd let them have sloppy seconds. The shaking stopped and silent fury took over. Tom knew exactly what to do. Taking one more silent step, he brought up the revolver in a Weaver stance, just like target practice. Lined up the targets and squeezed the trigger. The hollowpoint round entered the closer man's throat and ripped out his wind pipe and some major blood vessels before exiting. Because Tom was low in the drain channel, the bullet had an upwards angle. It entered the second man's head near the temple and exited out the top on the far side, taking some of his brains with it.

Tom dropped back into the cover of the drain. And choked back the urge to vomit. In a minute he recovered. There was no sign of response from anywhere. The one with the throat wound had twitched and bled and gasped for a long minute before laying still, the other was gone instantly. A huge pool of blood stained the driveway and ran down to the street. Both men were armed, one with a carbine, the other with a pump shotgun and a pistol. Tom moved these aside and went into the back yard where he climbed atop the tallest vehicle and started signaling.

And continued signaling. Yelled. Jumped up and down. Checked his watch and saw that fifteen minutes had passed. Then cursed. In frustration he fired a round into the air. This time he saw a response. Someone's head popped up over the saddle. Then three someones. They scrambled down the slope and ran toward him, puffing with the unfamiliar exertion. With Tom's attention focused on the approaching men, Ed suddenly spoke to him from directly behind.

"Hi."

Tom jumped with surprise and spun around to meet this new presence in his rear. Attempting this, he managed to lose his footing and fall off the roof of the truck he was on, landing on his butt with a solid thud and accidentally discharging the gun in the process. Ed dove for cover as the round hit the wall by his head and sprayed him with concrete fragments. Seconds later the three men entered the yard.

"We thought you were dead." said the elder male. "We only heard one shot."

"Sorry I surprised you, " spoke Ed. "These guys ducked down after hearing the first shot. Then I saw you waving and came up to the house just like you did."

Tom, wounded in pride more than body, dusted himself off and glowered at the four.

"Ok, you three search the house. Look for guns and ammo, but remember anything else you see that might be useful. Ed, you come with me. We have a mess to clean up. It's around front."

After Ed was done vomiting, they put the loose pieces in a plastic bag. Then they dragged the bodies into some nearby brush and deposited them and the bag where they wouldn't be noticed right away. The two dead men had been well armed. One carried an M-1 carbine and had a 9mm pistol in his waist band, the other a 12 gauge pump shotgun and a .38 sub nose in a belly holster. Except for some loose .38s in

one dead man's pocket there was no ammunition visible aside from what was already in the weapons.

"Well, I guess it's better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick." said Tom perusing their newfound firepower. "Let's scatter some sand on this blood. Don't want to be too obvious if the bad guys show up unexpectedly." Ed was still looking rather green from his encounter with the messiness of death, so Tom scooped up soil from the unplanted lawn and tried to spread it on the blood inconspicuously. Then they rendezvoused with the other three men behind the house.

To the eldest, "What'd you find?"

"Drugs. Lots of it. White powder all over the place in there. Marijuana. Booze, all kinds of it. Some boxes of ammunition. These guns."

There were several small pistols and revolvers in minor calibers and a .22 bolt action rifle. The ammunition included a wide variety of various rifle, shotgun and handgun loads, including (thankfully) ammo for the newly found guns. Unfortunately no additional carbine or 9mm magazines were to be seen.

"There was one room in particular, full of booty. TVs, VCRs that sort of thing. Piles of money. When the water pressure went, they must have started using the bathtub for a toilet."

"Ok. We'll search more thoroughly later." He looked at the three men intently. "You know, I don't even have your names. In all the excitement I didn't even bother to ask."

The elder man, in his fifties, was named Bruce Armstrong. James, his brother was in his late forties. Bruce Junior was 20. The two older men were mid-level corporate managers, the younger a business major.

"Fine, now I'm setting up some rules. You want your girls back, you'll follow them. Otherwise I'm outta here."

There was muttered assent.

"Ok. I know you're not soldiers. But until we get your girls back we'll have to be pretty military about this." Tom struck his best Jack Webb pose.

"I'll give you instructions and I need to have them obeyed exactly, even if the reason is not apparent. I'll always try to explain the whys and hows. But during the heat of battle, I won't have time. You'll just have to trust that I have the safety of you and your kin first in mind."

"From here on in, you are to consider Ed here as your second in command. And I am number one. As soon as the fighting is over, you are free to go as you wish."

Bruce Senior shifted his stance, looked at Tom and said, "Before we follow you any further, just who are you and why are you helping us?"

"I am your state Senator. This is my district. Ed is my legislative assistant. I am here to perform constituent service."

Back on the home front

The news that Tom would be home soon cheered up the McArthur family. At least the younger members. Lynn felt nothing at all. She would have felt more emotion if a neighbor's cat had showed up at the pound. Although he had always come home on weekends and when the legislature was not in session, she had simply written him out of the script of her life.

Peter Gallagher was awake the next day and mobile, if incredibly sore. Miriam had given him a heavy dose of muscle relaxant from the clinic. After carefully plucking out the pieces of embedded buck shot from one shoulder, she and Henry had relocated the other. Then he had slept for 16 hours straight.

Lance had been attended continually by the family he had rescued. After four days of semiconsciousness, his eyes finally opened. The first thing he had been really aware of since the incident was the eyes of the young Vietnamese girl smiling back at him. Now that he was awake and able to take liquids regularly, Miriam pronounced him out of danger.

Lynn was also taking a strong interest in Lance. He was handsome despite his newly acquired scars and five days growth of beard. And young. Lean and blonde and muscular, but not bulky. Reminded her a lot of Robert Redford. And if she lingered over bathing him or took extra time in changing his bandages, nobody took notice. Especially not Lynn.

With the water and gas pressure gone, sanitation, cooking and drinking were going to be far more difficult. No more cold showers or hot baths. No more boiling for sterilization. Dish and clothes washing was no longer an option so they went to paper and plastic. Even the basic sanitation involved with washing one's hands was problematic. Water that was used for washing had to be saved, reused and then later used for flushing.

The responsibility for killing other human beings, even those intent on raping or robbing them, weighed especially heavily on the Hendersons and Todd, none of whom had ever killed anything before.

Todd, in his heart, feared that the next time the need to fight arose he would panic and run. Over and over again he envisioned himself as he had seen their assailants through his rifle's sights: Screaming, scrambling, being hit relentlessly, blood and organs spraying out of exit wounds. Men fighting for life as hard as they could yet still being slaughtered, helplessly. He had been one of the one's doing the killing. Had things gone differently he would have been on the receiving end of the carnage.

Seventeen was a difficult age to be informed of one's mortality. Especially in such a brutal manner.

The Hendersons spent the next day in what they called "cleansing and healing rituals". Neither Lynn nor anyone else was about to ask them what that meant.

Golda was resting comfortably. There was no way to know if her heart had suffered permanent damage, but the pain was completely gone. Even more puzzling was the look on her face. June said the last time she'd seen a look like that on a woman it was in the middle of her honeymoon. June wrote it off as an after effect of oxygen deprivation. Golda wasn't saying.

No further violent threats arose the day after the attack. But refugees began to march past the development in a continual stream. They were attempting to hike or drive over the mountains to the north. John was extremely pessimistic about their chances. Other refugees streamed southward towards the aid station. Lacking potable water, dehydration and death would come quickly in the hundred degree heat and the station was the only reliable source. If the aid stations were to prove inadequate, millions could die.

Skag had come up with a brilliant idea. He'd take the rest of the gang and set up shop at the extreme north end of the valley. There were hordes of people trying to escape the city on foot since all the roads were blocked off. Hordes of helpless and unprepared folks carrying whatever they thought most valuable. He would extract a toll from those who passed and magnanimously send them on their way. Most importantly, he would get a list of addresses where people no longer lived. Houses he could loot at will with no risk.

He'd even tried to avoid firefights whenever possible, figuring the less shooting the better. Gunplay could be dangerous. He was right about that....

Old movies never die...

Tom parceled out the weapons. He took the carbine and its ammunition for himself. It fitted the plan beginning to emerge from the murk in his brain. The shotgun and the 9 millimeter he gave to Ed. At least Ed had done some recreational shooting with his friends as a teenager and know which end of a gun not to stand in front of. The remaining odd weapons he unloaded and gave to the Armstrongs. The next half hour he spent explaining what a sight picture was, how to load them, how to work the action and safeties and how to insert and eject the clips for the two small caliber semi-autos they'd found. They practiced dry firing until Tom was somewhat confident they wouldn't kill themselves

Stepping inside the house to muffle the crack of the shot, Tom fired one round from the carbine down the hallway. It appeared to be zeroed reasonably well for windage. He could only hope the elevation

would be close on at a hundred yards. One shot down a thirty foot hallway wasn't really enough to be sure. As far away as he was and with the ridge between them the sound from his revolver would still almost certainly have carried to the bikers if they were paying the slightest attention. He couldn't take any more chances of alerting them. Then they returned to the women and children.

"Listen up, here's the plan. I'm going to position you to the north of them, just out of sight from their position. I will go back up the ridge, drop down on the far side just far enough they can't see me and move to the south side of them. Then I cross back over and advance down as far as I can, taking advantage of rocks and chaparral for cover. At exactly ten minutes from when I leave, you will crawl through the gully and up to the edge of the trail, just around the bend. On Ed's command, open fire. Your job is to make as much commotion as you can, keep them busy. I don't expect you to hit anyone, but if you hit a bad guy there are bonus points. Needless to say if you hit a girl there will be no replay. So don't shoot anywhere you can't see and don't shoot anywhere near the girls. Your safest bet is to shoot at the base of those rocks next to the motorcycles and at the motorcycles themselves. That will surely draw their ire and they will probably return fire. I will be coming up from behind to rescue the girls any way I can.

"You are all businessmen. You know how important it is to stick to a business plan. Think of this as a business plan and me as a temporary CEO. Your job is purely diversionary, mine is to actually get the girls out while they are distracted. Right?"

The three men gave weak affirmatives.

Taking Ed to the side, Tom said, "I'm counting on you. Get them into position, keep them as low behind cover as possible, just like in a war movie. Then get them shooting as fast as they can, anywhere but where their girls are. You had a good look at how the camp was set up. If any of the women return your fire back, treat them just like the men."

"What are you going to do? Untie the girls and lead them away?"

"Not immediately. I'm going to take them from the rear. They'll never know what hit 'em." Now get those guys into the gully. Check your watch. Ten minutes from right...*now*."

Tom moved quickly up the side of the hill, retracing his earlier path. The last he saw of the rest of his team, Ed was coaxing them into the gully. Just beyond the crest of the ridge he then turned south, traveling until he judged himself to be adjacent from the lookout, then back up to the ridge. It was perhaps fifty yards to the lookout straight ahead and a hundred yards diagonal to the encampment. With the sun above and behind him, they were illuminated brilliantly. He would appear like just another boulder in its glare. Glancing at his watch, there were still five minutes to go. and dove for the shelter of the gully. Of course that was when he heard a single shot, something sounding like a small caliber pistol. The bikers were instantly brought to attention. Shouldering the carbine, Tom drew a bead on the lookout, who seemed frozen into immobility. Seconds later the shotgun opened up with a roar, dropping

the man who had been dozing by the bikes, then seconds later another smaller gun began firing rapidly. Tom squeezed the trigger just as the lookout began to move. He took the round through his arm and started fleeing the sound of the gunfire behind him.

The other bikers were at a loss for what to do and at last more guns started popping at them. Tom aimed at the chest of the nearest man but hit him in the belly. Dead or not, that was two down. The big guy rallied his men and ordered them to the cover of the rocks near the bike to return fire, unaware of the danger from on high. They could see where the fire from the ravine was coming from but bushes obscured whoever was doing it. The prone men made perfect targets for Tom from his elevation. Gritting his teeth, Tom picked off the stationary targets one at a time. Three down, four down, five down. The big guy kept moving all the time from cover to cover, firing at the unseen attackers from the north, else Tom would happily have dropped him. Suddenly the survivors twigged to what was happening. Realizing they were vulnerable, they broke and dove for the shelter of the gully.

The women weren't interested in cover, even though several of them were carrying firearms. They retreated to where the prisoners were kept. Tom couldn't allow this. Aiming at the most heavily armed woman, the only one with a long arm, he squeezed, she dropped. Another shot missed entirely, but ricocheted off a nearby rock. The women followed their men into the gully and the retreat became a general rout. Tom sent more bullets flying into the gully to encourage their swift departure from the scene if not the earth.

"Damn!" thought Tom. "Have to reload the magazine." But he didn't have time for that.

Skag was not leaving without protection. As his men abandoned their positions in panic, he kept his head about him. Whoever it was up on the hill wasn't going to shoot those girls. So dodging and weaving he ran for the smallest prisoner, snatched her up and tossing her over his shoulder, headed for the denser foliage of the gully.

Half scrambling, half sliding, Tom dropped the carbine and came crashing down the hill, heedless of cover or noise or the damage he was doing to himself, on an intercept course for Skag. Skag leapt into the dry stream bed and zigzagged from bush to rock to tree in an effort to put as much distance between him and the sniper while remaining a difficult target, unaware that he was being pursued. Tom momentarily lost his quarry, as he too plunged into the dense brush. That is until the two men crashed into each other at full tilt.

Skag stopped dead in his tracks, winded.

Tom hit Skag and bounced, like a cornerback off a tackle.

Skag brought around the shotgun in his free hand, slightly impeded by a Juniper branch.

Tom lay flat on his back, about ten feet away. The revolver came smoothly forward from the break front

holster and he fired at the one vital area least likely to endanger the girl.

Skag's shotgun roared, more out of reflex than plan, barely missing Tom to his right. Then he dropped the shotgun. Then he dropped the girl. Then, clutching the rapidly spreading bright red stain in his crotch, he fell to his knees. Tom fired a second shot to Skag's head and the big guy went down for the count.

The first shot had been when the elder Armstrong had dropped the cheap pistol he had during loading. It had taken Ed several seconds to regain his composure before he realized the jig was up and started firing the shotgun.

The three Armstrong men were frozen in fear and indecision. Paul had seen what was happening, and leaving the noncombatants behind, crawled to the ravine and joined the men there. With a withering look of scorn, he took the elder man's pistol and pointing it in the general direction of the motorcycles, fired it until empty. It took him a few seconds to figure out how to eject the clip, a few more to figure out how to reload and insert it and work the action. (All this was from what he had seen on television and the movies. He'd never touched a gun before in his life.) He began firing again just as Ed had to stop to reload. The younger brother and the son finally got up enough nerve to begin firing wildly. Then the elder got finally his act together and started with the turnbolt .22.

None of them had heard Tom firing. Or even realized it was he who was dropping the bandits. Which was exactly as Tom had planned. After Tom had emerged safely with the young girl and all the surviving bandits were fled, the men had emerged cautiously from their cover, then ran to the other two girls. Minutes afterwards the rest of the Armstrong family joined them

"Those guys were useless!" hissed Ed. "They were scared shitless. They were lucky not to shoot themselves, couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. That one idiot dropped his gun and almost blew the whole thing. If Paul hadn't joined in, it wouldn't have worked."

"Let it go, Ed. They're not soldiers. Like ninety percent of the population they've no mental preparation whatsoever. They've never even *seen* a fist fight, let alone a gun fight. Never mind engage in one. You did pretty damn good for yourself, so did Paul. And if they ever get in another gunfight, these three will do better. Besides, all I wanted from you was noise and distraction so I could take them from behind. Saw it in a Gary Cooper movie once.

Paul was standing over one of the fallen bandits. This one was not dead. His abdomen had an evil looking wound, which he clutched, moaning. Tears streamed down his face. Tears streamed down Paul's face as well. Tom spoke to him gently.

"Hello stranger. Didn't expect you to join the fracas."

" I couldn't stand by and see my friends die without helping.

" I did this." Paul motioned as he knelt to the injured man. " I am responsible."

"No, Paul, I am. I shot him from the top of the hill. Except for the very first man that Ed shot, I killed every man here."

"You're wrong there. We all *tried* to kill. People died. Who shot which bullet doesn't matter. Sometimes it is necessary to take life, to cause suffering, pain. But it should always sadden us to have done it. Not to feel remorse is to start down the path to becoming the very evil you oppose. Remember this also if you go back into politics:

*When you go fighting monsters, take care that you do not become one.
And remember, when you stare into the Abyss, it stares into you"*

Tom led Paul off to the side, out of earshot of the injured man. "Paul, we may be able to save him. The question is: Do we want to? The man is a robber, a rapist and a murderer. Or at least ran with them. Saving him may consume resources that could have saved someone else. Turn him over to the authorities and it's a fifteen minute hearing and a summary execution. Keep him alive and turn him loose and he'll just go back to his old ways. Keep him with us? We'd be harboring a criminal and could never trust him."

"In a few days, this place will swim with death. I'd prefer not to contribute any more to it than I have to."

Bruce Armstrong had been listening to the conversation and broke in. "Why? Let him die!" the elder man hissed. The other two Armstrongs nodded in agreement. "I *want* him to suffer and die. That's what he'd do to you."

Tom, who had been wavering on what exactly to do, found his thoughts suddenly crystallized. "Maybe I'm better than they were, than he is. Maybe I've done enough killing for one day."

Tom turned to the young girl he had just saved. She was now considerably calmer. "Child, do you want this man dead? You were the victim, after all. It should be your decision."

Her father glared at Tom and began to interrupt, but Tom silenced him with a gesture. The girl spoke in a tiny, quivering voice, "No, please don't kill him Daddy. He was never mean to me."

The point was moot. During the argument, the injured man had bled to death.

And that was the end of it. Bruce Armstrong was thoroughly enraged. Most of his life he had been in charge of other people. Now he had been humiliated in front of his own children. There would be no

coexisting with these strangers.

Tom set them to inventorying weapons. There was the big guy's shotgun and another sawed off double with a shortened stock. The man with the bandoleers around his body was carrying a civilian version of the M-16 called the AR-15. The woman with the rifle had been carrying a Mini-14. There were pistols and revolvers in common calibers, more weapons and ammunition than the entire group could easily carry. There was also food, jewelry, cash and other items looted from other refugees unfortunate enough to have fallen victim to the gang. Tom would touch none of it but the food. Of the weapons, Tom took the M-16 and Paul took the Mini 14 and the .380 pistol he'd been popping away with. Ed stuck with the same shotgun and pistol he'd been using. All the rest of the firearms were given to the Armstrongs to choose what they wished.

Sending Ed ahead as scout, Tom led them around the ridge to the development.

"It's decision time folks. You can come with me, which means you'll have to accept my decisions as long as you stay with me. I'm going to my family in Grenada Hills and don't plan on leaving immediately. Or you can go your own way. Either way you get to take one of these fine vehicles for your very own. Heck, take two if you want."

The Armstrongs discussed the issue, while Tom discretely stepped away. Moments later they came back with the decision that they were going it on their own. There were five sport utility vehicles in the yard and the elder brother insisted on the two newest, a brand new Suburban and a brand new Blazer. Soon the trucks were running and the family headed off to God knows where to accomplish God knows what.

"Great. You let them take the two best and newest trucks." sniffed Ed.

Tom picked out an older model Bronco. Climbing in to turn the ignition, it started up easily.

"You know, these older trucks really are better for our purpose. Although the EMP didn't seem to stop most vehicles, given recent experience I'd just as soon have vehicles that were immune to it. Let's load up any food we can find in there and do a real thorough search for anything of value we might have missed. Like medical supplies, stolen prescription medications or guns and ammo."

"After what you risked they acted like you had the plague or something."

"As a businessman I meet their type all the time. These are people who have spent their entire lives in positions of power or being groomed for them. Both of the fathers were successful businessmen who grew to think that he was important because of his position in life, not because of what kind of person he was inside. I'll bet they got that from their father, who was also likely a successful business man. I'll also bet that the son was going to become exactly the same type of person. It's a kind of arrogance.

"I'll make some predictions: Never got their hands dirty in their lives. Their offices are as far from their

workers as possible. Their management style is strictly command and control and they'd throw a thousand people out of work to make one more penny today and to hell with the future. "Demming" is a dirty word to them. They are big government Republicans, favoring industrial policy over the market place and social engineering over freedom. The Man from FEMA would probably give them a place of honor at his dinner table.

"Their world has been shaken. They aren't in charge any more but they haven't figured it out. For that matter, neither the President, nor the man from FEMA are in charge any more. But they are afraid and that makes them duplicitous. I'm glad they are gone from us, even if it does hurt those girls' chances of survival.

"Let's get this stuff loaded. We'll come back later to drain any gas remaining from the motorcycles and the other two trucks. Home is only a few minutes away and I can't wait any longer!

The break came when a white paper issued years earlier by two unknown State Department analysts, Lockett and Elliard, was uncovered after frantic research. In it they pointed out a whole series of Chinese communications satellite launches in which the postulated payloads rated only a tiny fraction of the launcher's capacity. Since NORAD had only reported one object orbiting from each launch either that object was ten times heavier than it needed to be to achieve its stated purpose or there were one or more undiscovered stealthy objects sharing the same orbits. The authors had suggested the logical missing mass was some type of weapon system, perhaps orbiting nuclear weapons. In the pro-China glow of the time, such speculation was considered injurious to campaign finances and was quickly buried.

Now that he was confident that China had launched the attack, he couldn't allow it to go unanswered. If at all possible, he had to devise a way to retaliate without seeming to have retaliated.

The President had a brilliant idea. He was assisted in this by China's relative lack of a sophisticated ballistic missile defense system. The United States was the only country still in possession of functional space based launch detection assets. The Chinese did possess substantial ground based radar assets, but they were mostly pointed north. A surprise strike from the south should be able to knock out most of their strategic punch.

Of course there was the problem of India being in the way. They would surely note any ballistic missile launched from the area south of China. Even if they didn't have any ballistic missile warning systems worth mentioning, you could *see* the silly things for hundreds of miles on the ground. But if he could get India to do the launching, not only would China take it on the chin but the US would appear blameless. Now all he had to do was incite an Indian first strike. That might just take a while, but he was confident he could swing it.

Meanwhile, he had to get a better grip on domestic affairs. The Speaker, the Supreme Court and a fair number of other Congress Critters had shown up at, of all places, the Greenbriar Hotel. One of them was using his personal helicopter to ferry people directly from Capitol Hill to the resort and actually had a technical team working on getting the systems on line again. Worse than that, there were rumblings of protest in some of the more rural states, rumblings he couldn't spare the men to put down.

For the next few days, the president could be in for stormy weather.

Gentle Reader:

Okay folks, here's the sales pitch! For a few bucks, you can find out what happens to our heroes and have the conclusion in your hot little hands. Think about it. How much time have you spent reading this work? Has it entertained? Did the characters engage you? Did you learn something? Did it make you think?

Has what you've gotten already been worth \$6?

Chapters 6 thru 10 await you. You can order it from Amazon.com. Or you can order it from Barnes & Noble

You can also order it from iUniverse.com as [hard copy](#), or an e-book in [Adobe](#) or [MS Reader](#) formats. Hard copy is \$18.95 and e-book is \$6.00

Thank you for all your support!

In Liberty,
Fred Heiser

Thoughts on being prepared...

Welcome to my emergency preparedness web site.

There's quite a bit here and I am adding stuff all the time, so come on back every so often. If people request pages on particular subjects, suggest links that are really good or turn me on to other resources, I'll be happy to put them in. Likewise, if you e-mail me something you'd like published, I might just include that as well if it fits with my philosophy.

[Click Here!!!](#)

[A novel of survival and death, good and evil, now in search of an agent or publisher](#)

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And don't forget to hit the links embedded in the text...



Take time to give blood to the Red Cross. Disasters don't give advance warning.



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Something Personal

One of my interests in life has always been emergency preparedness. Long ago and far away I was the Electronic Warfare instructor for my Air National Guard unit and on my squadron's disaster preparedness team. More recently I've been a disaster preparedness instructor for my community and on the emergency preparedness committee at work. Given the earthquakes I've lived through in California, it only seemed reasonable. But it goes much deeper than that...

One of my earliest memories is of a severe wind storm - possibly an F2 tornado - that struck my home in rural northern Michigan. I must have been in kindergarten since I was at home with my mother, my older sister was not there and my father was at work. My mother and I watched it through the basement windows, though there was little to see. Afterward, I saw fallen power lines and trees both uprooted and broken off at the stump. The house, which was built before balloon frame construction, suffered not a bit. Must've really impressed me because I remember drawing pictures of the destruction long afterward.

I remember the tension that grew at home every time a severe weather advisory was broadcast and looking for funnel clouds. I remember duck and cover drills at school and being sent home early for tornado watches. I devoured coverage of hurricanes down south. Severe weather became a life long fascination. I could've been a very happy storm chaser given the opportunity.

I remember blizzards with sub zero temperatures and high winds that blocked the roads with ten foot snow drifts and shut down school for weeks at a time.

Then there were the '67 riots. We had relatives in Detroit and Flint. A very tense time for us. The violence may have been a couple hundred miles away, but our family's rifles were kept loaded. Decades later I felt the echo of those times during the LA riots.

I was also a child of the arms race, the atomic age. I don't remember the events, but the Cuban missile crisis must have affected me deeply. My family watched the news religiously and my parents were hard core anticommunists. I do remember civil defense literature scattered about and the day they looked at our house for the National Fallout Shelter Survey. I remember reading articles in *American Legion Magazine* and *Consumer Reports* on [bomb shelters](#) and in *The Plain Truth* predicting impending nuclear war. I read *Alas Babylon* by Pat Frank and *Tomorrow* by Philip Wylie, two classics of nuclear survival and watched *Panic in the Year Zero* on television.

By the time I was a teenager, I was reading [more technical stuff](#) as well. *Strategy for Survival* by Martin and Latham, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons* edited by Glasstone and Dolan and *On Thermonuclear War* by Herman Kahn. I had every possible military and civilian target within 200 miles designated on a map in my bedroom. We were self reliant country folk. Our basement was deep and we had plenty of canned goods and left over concrete blocks.

I was a teenage survivalist. In a very dangerous world, it only seemed reasonable.

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Surviving Life

As a survivalist myself, it seems to me to be quite obvious your most immediate preparations should be in surviving in the absence of disaster.

How often do you get hit by tornadoes? How about hurricanes? Life threatening earthquakes or floods? The threat of nuclear war has been with us since the Soviets got the bomb in '47. It hasn't happened yet and looks less likely than ever. Gotten caught in the middle of a riot lately? How about stranded in the deep wilderness? No obvious and unavoidable economic collapses are on the horizon - yet.

Many people will experience one of these disasters. An unlucky few may get more than one. A few will never come close to any of them. Unless you put dilligent effort into avoiding the more common causes of middle aged adult death it may not be worth the effort to prepare for lesser probability events.

I want to live to a ripe old age in as healthy a body as I can preserve with a satisfactory level of material comfort. These are the personal catastrophes (VERY roughly in order of probability) I intend to try to avoid - they are the most common causes of premature death in middle age. Most are disgustingly simple to avoid and all are at least partially under your control.

[Accidents](#)

[HIV](#)

[Cancer](#)

[Heart Disease](#)

[Suicide](#)

[Homicide](#)

[Stroke](#)

[Liver Disease](#) ([Cirrhosis](#), [Hepatitis](#) and others)

[Diabetes](#)

[Obstructive lung disease](#) (Asthma, emphysema, etc.)

[Respiratory infection](#) (Influenza, Pneumonia, etc.)

Wear your darn seat belt. Wear a good helmet on a bike AND leathers on a motorcycle. Drive/ride defensively. As a pedestrian, WALK defensively.

Have working smoke detectors in your home. Check them often.

Don't have unprotected sex (unless in a long term monogamous relationship) - or high risk sex even with protection. Donate your own blood in advance of any operation. Don't do IV drugs and be careful about other peoples blood and/or bodily fluids.

Don't smoke. Don't smoke. Don't smoke. Don't smoke. Don't smoke!

Excercise moderately and reguarly. Watch your weight, watch your diet, your cholesterol, your blood pressure. Take your vitamins. Drink in moderation. If you absolutely insist, use other recreational drugs in moderation and with extreme caution. Use a sun screen.

Avoid dangerous groups, people, areas. Lock your doors, alarm your cars and house. Be cautious about personal security. Treat firearms with caution and respect. Get trained and proficient if you do keep them around. Keep them hidden and locked up when you are not home. Keep them hidden and locked up if you have young children or if other children visit.

See a doctor regularly and get all appropriate tests at the appropriate times. Don't hesitate to go to the doctor for anything out of the ordinary. Get a second opinion if you've the slightest doubt. When your doctors say to do something, DO IT! Be up to date with your immunizations, including flu and pneumonia shots. Keep abreast with the current thinking in physical and mental health. Learn [Red Cross](#) CPR and First Aid.

Get married and have children. If you are the prospective mother, breast feed them.

Get religion.

Be a wealthy white female.

That was simple, now wasn't it?

Except we can't all be wealthy. Sometimes we are forced to live in less than desirable neighborhoods. We may be single. We may have to work late at night or in a risky occupation. The job may not include medical coverage or we can't afford the medication. What's more, you can do everything right and still die from cancer at 30. You can still get flattened by a big rig with a sleepy driver or shot in a random drive by in Beverly Hills.

Some of us are naturally depressive. Others are naturally happy. More brain chemistry than anything else, I suspect.

None of this eliminates the obligation to do the best you can with what you've got. There are no assurances in life. It's all a crap shoot. But by living sensibly and intelligently you can load the dice, change the odds. And that's something worth working for.

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Be Prepared

Having gotten the easy and obvious out of the way, it's time to look at emergency preparedness.

Emergency preparedness is the process of preparing for localized disasters like tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes and such. As an ongoing process it never ends, you just get closer to your ideal. Unless you can see the storm clouds (or their metaphorical equivalent) gathering, it shouldn't dominate your life. If you REALLY enjoy it or make a career out of it that's different. Activities you don't enjoy will tend to not get performed, so turn it into a hobby and get the family involved.

Disasters can happen at any time, anywhere. But except for a few high risk areas, most people have never really experienced one and do not expect to. This leads to a cost/benefit analysis indicating that preparing for disaster isn't worth the effort. Most people who experience tornadoes and hurricanes and earthquakes survive without having made any preparations at all, so why should they waste the time and spend the money?

Another factor leading people into not preparing is confidence in the government's ability to rescue and recover. They don't need emergency supplies or skills. [FEMA](#) and other relief agencies will feed them, clothe them, house them and make it all OK.

Still another factor is unwillingness to deal with unpleasant possibilities. I've been told any number of times that preparing for disaster is morbid. Only someone who actually wanted such a thing to happen would spend so much time thinking about it.

Since you are still reading this, I'm going to assume that you are neither lazy nor unrealistic nor psychologically incapable of dealing with the issue. I don't know what to say to those who do a cost/benefit analysis and find that preparedness comes up short. From my perspective you must either be over estimating the costs or under estimating the benefits. Maybe if you live through a serious disaster, you'll reevaluate.

There are a few universal steps in preparing for anything:

- 1) Analyse the threat
- 2) Generate a plan
- 3) Inventory your assets
- 4) Optimize/reconfigure/improvise/work around
- 5) Acquire new assets
- 6) Practice
- 7) Return to step one

1) Analyze the threat...

First we operate under the assumption that whatever difficulties we encounter, survival is possible and desirable and our behavior can have a major affect on our chances.

The nature of the threat can be assessed by looking at existing threat assessments by organizations dedicated to this. FEMA, the local disaster preparedness committee, the local Red Cross chapter are excellent sources. Another source is common sense. Doesn't take a genius to figure that nearby [military bases](#), [atomic plants](#), [chemical plants](#) and oil refineries are potential threats. Any major city has the potential for riot and looting. Carry this process out to 200 miles if you can get the data.

Explore the geological and meteorological history of your home area. This could be done with your kids as a science project for school. [Hurricanes](#), [tornadoes](#), [severe thunderstorms](#), [blizzards](#), [earthquakes](#), [heat waves](#), [wildfires](#), [volcanoes](#), [tsunamis](#), [floods and flash floods](#) should all be on your list of things to check on. Go back a hundred years, more if good records are available. Become knowledgeable in the environmental threats you may face.

If you are concerned about [The End Of The World As We Know It](#), you'll probably want to move on to more serious stuff - survivalism.

You should now have a good list of things to prepare for. For each threat, make a list of how you might be impacted by them, how you might be warned, how much warning you could expect. Now consider how the parents being at two different locations and the kids being at two different schools at 3 in the afternoon, or everybody being asleep at 3 in the morning, will complicate the situation.

Get a regional map and plot the threats on the map that can be pinned down to one location. (I like the colored dots that come on rolls for this. I color code by type of threat.) Draw circles at 20 and 200 miles. Plot the locations of school, work, vacation homes, shelters, and relatives and friends who might take you in. Get a local map, draw circles at 2 and 20 miles and do the same thing.

Learn everything you can about your perceived threats. Determine how they cause their damage and how to protect against it. There is enough info in my links regarding this to fill many books. Supplement this from the local library.

How will you receive warning of danger? [NOAA](#) weather radio? The evening news? Ugly looking clouds in the sky? Maybe no warning at all....

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2) *Generate the plans...*

Now its time to plan. For most eventualities you'll want a plan A (at home) and a plan B (bug out). Both of these will include variants by time of day, colocation of family members and the amount of warning. If the local atomic plant goes up in a [lethal cloud of radioactive smoke](#) that's heading your way, you don't have the option of staying put. If at 3 in the morning you wake up to the sound of wind shattering your windows, you don't have to option to evacuate. Otherwise always keep both options open. [Children](#) have special needs during emergencies that adults may not appreciate. It is also very important to [train the kiddies](#) to be disaster safe on a level they can understand. You must also plan for [pets and animals](#).

Your first step in any plan is to decide how to gather the family together at different times for different emrgencies. Good luck...!

Suppose you are hit by an [F5](#) tornado. Will your house withstand it? For all but underground homes the answer is a definitive NO. The recent tragic tornado at [Jarrell](#), TX stripped everything off down to the concrete slab. *Even stripped pavement off the roads*. An F3? Probably, but with serious damage. How about a hurricane? If it's another [Camille](#), ([catagory five](#), 210 mph winds, 26.5 ft. surge) probably not. Other hurricanes? Yes, but with damage. Earthquake? Single story wood frame houses on slabs are the safest, older masonry apartment buildings are death traps. Floods? Tsunamis? [Storm surge](#)? Forget it. Just get the heck out of there.

How long do you plan to be on your own? Three days, three weeks or three years? Do you have enough consumables to last that long with some to spare? What if all those glass jars break during the quake? If you lose power, you'll lose all your refrigerated food and your oil furnace won't work. Neither will the electric water pump. If your pipes freeze, you won't have any liquid water for a while. Could you fix it? How will the disaster affect your supplies?

How will you react if the disaster happens to you when you are away from home? Getting caught far from your home during a blizzard/earthquake/tornado will not be fun. Do you have a repair kit in your car that can handle most minor difficulties and can you use it? How about first aid kit, communications, food, water, flashlights, clothing and blankets for the car?

How about if you are away and the disaster happens TO your home? Did you leave it in a safe condition?

Rather than give a laundry list of precise things to do for a wide variety of situations, in my links section I'll list other sites that either have or can direct you to that info. No need for me to do what so many others have done better. Instead I'll offer some general principles.

Planning is a family function. It includes every member old enough to think. It affects anybody you might move in with in an evacuation. It affects those who might have to move in with you. It affects those who you might worry about enough to try to rescue. Coordinate your plans with those of work and school.

Stay low in profile about your preparations. No need to alarm the neighbors or invite looters.

Use local maps to plan multiple evacuation routes. I have a [Thomas Guide](#) and/or [AAA](#) county level maps for the whole state, forest service maps for every [National Forest](#) I might be near and a [DeLorme Southern California Atlas and Gazetteer](#) of 1:62,000 topo maps for my half of the state. Obviously you don't want your escape route to pass 5 miles east of the nuclear plant, discover a locked gate across your trail of choice or to go into areas of traffic congestion.

After the Northridge earthquake we were without power for a week and pure water for 2 weeks. Many people were without gas or had their homes condemned. (Hmmm...no home, no gas, no power, e-coli in the water, stores closed; they were reduced to handouts in an instant.) Some were simply burned out when their gas pipes broke. (Flexible fittings or an automatic earthquake cut off valve could have prevented that.) Bottled water and batteries vanished instantly off store shelves for 50 miles in all directions. This was just a small quake and life went to heck in a handbasket for those who were unprepared. I understand the aftermath of Andrew was much worse. The aftermath of the BIG ONE will be beyond imagining.

If you are fleeing a threat that is moving along a discernable line (fallout or gas plume, rioters coming down the street, visible tornado in the distance) travel at right angles to it's path. Get out of it's way, don't try to out run it.

Fear is not the enemy. Panic is the enemy. Panic is fear without preparation. Fear is your friend because it can get you off your butt and doing something useful. Harness that adrenalin, don't waste it!

There is no place like home. You know your home, your neighborhood intimately. Your friends are likely to be nearby and will help you if they can. Being on home turf gives a psychological boost while being an intruder in unfamiliar terrain puts one at a distinct psychological disadvantage. Whenever possible stay at or close to home. Don't be a refugee.

The most dangerous weapon is a loaded brain. A gun is a specialized tool for a specialized situation. If you aren't comfortable with one, you are probably better off in most emergencies without. Regardless of your choice, always seek to avoid combat rather than to engage in it.

If you elect to include firearms in your plans, make sure that every member of the family who is allowed to use them is proficient and everybody else has at least had [NRA](#) gun safety training. The ones who are too young for this should at least be made aware that guns are dangerous. Keep the guns locked and hidden when nobody is home. Keep the guns locked if you have [children](#). Keep the guns locked and hidden if you ever have minors as visitors. Don't hang out with people who seem a little "unstable" around guns, either.

I'm not trying to suggest everything you'll need to think about. I'm trying to get your creative juices

flowing so you'll do the thinking. Nobody can predict what you'll need to think about better than you. It's time to get that brain loaded and ready.

The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. That's why you need to keep your brain loaded and the home court advantage on your side. Improvise and be creative. Try to think of complications you may encounter. As you go through your planning process you'll discover that planning for one disaster plans for them all.

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3) *Inventory your assets...*

It's time to inventory your assets to see what you have and what you need to get.

Organize them by the following categories:

Structures and real estate:

Home sweet home, your vacation cabin, a travel trailer, 5 acres in the hinterlands, that tool shed out back, your time share condo, the swimming pool, etc.

Transportation:

Autos, motor homes, boats, bicycles, motorcycles, aircraft, horses, nearby bus and rail, etc.

Consumables:

Food on hand, water, toilet paper, gasoline, oil, Coleman fuel, batteries, prescription and nonprescription medications, birth control, feminine hygiene, vitamins, toothpaste, ammunition, animal feed, spare tires, spare parts, firewood & charcoal, first aid supplies, etc.

Tools and equipment:

Electric generator (gas, solar wind), radios, computer, shovels, hand saws, prybars, cutting and welding equipment, firearms and firearms care equipment, automotive tools, farm equipment, block and tackle, rope.

Misc. gear:

Money, family pets, camping/backpacking gear, fishing gear, heavy duty work clothes, bug out kits, gas mask. bar-b-ques/hibachis, med-surg. kit, maps & flashlights

Knowledge:

Any special skills you and your family possess that might be useful in a catastrophic environment. Books, advance warning systems.

Networking:

Relatives/friends who've agreed to let you visit if you must evacuate. Relatives/friends who may show up on your doorstep. Governmental connections, neighborhood watch, disaster preparedness group.

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4) *Optimize existing assets and devise work arounds...*

Lots of deficiencies can be overcome with a little ingenuity.

Take your house, for instance. It is possible to [retrofit](#) a typical house for earthquake safety. It is possible to [harden](#) a house (especially an interior bathroom or a closet under a staircase) to resist high winds. Functional storm shutters should be ready to cover every window in both hurricane and tornado country. You could build a tornado shelter in your crawl space or tunnel under your slab. [Mobile homes](#) that are properly skirted in and strapped and bolted down are much more resistant to wind than those that are not permanently emplaced. (Although in tornado & hurricane country you'd still really need an external storm cellar.) Remember that nothing beats a shelter in a good, deep basement.

Check your landscaping. Are you vulnerable to fire? Keep that yard green and absent of brush. Do you have one of those accursed wood shake roofs that goes up in flames if you look at it wrong? Get rid of it. Are fire extinguishers and smoke detectors in key locations? Any exterior wood should be covered with fire resistant paint. Ice plant makes absolutely the best fire break around.

Speaking of roofs, it was below code roofing that allowed many homes to be destroyed during Andrew that would otherwise have survived. Did you have the roof inspected at the time you bought your place?

Don't forget to include items of sentimental and entertainment value in your bug out kit. My family photos have about the highest value to me of anything other than food, water and clothing. Include something to keep the kids from getting bored and onto your already frazzled nerves.

Another thing you should do is to strap down any furniture that might tip over in a quake, especially top heavy stuff and the water heater - your favorite 30 gallon water supply station. If you still have gas or electricity and water pressure to it, but the water is biologically contaminated, cranking the heater up to max temperature will kill the beasties if you let it set for an hour between water drawings and keep the drawings small.

Are your vehicles in good repair? You don't have to run out and buy a Jeep or a Land Rover, the car you've got is fine as long as it is kept up and gassed up. Understanding how your vehicle handles under a wide variety of conditions and driving intelligently will get you through all kinds of inclement conditions. Nobody had 4WD vehicles where I grew up. We got snow like you wouldn't believe and the rest of the year those dirt roads could get real muddy. It was all older model sedans, wagons and pickups. We used oversized (studded in the winter) snow tires and carried chains and bags of salt or sand in the back. Off road and deep snow performance was fairly good. Modified VW Beetles made the best ORVs, and we used snowmobiles a lot.

Once, when traveling in Baja Mexico to see the solar eclipse, we used the carpeting from my Suzuki to get a 40 ft. motor home unstuck from beach sand in the middle of the night, but that's another story....

Keep extra parts like fuel pumps, water pumps, thermostats, hoses and belts in the car in case of

breakdown, along with the tools to do the job. Make sure to have a real, properly inflated spare tire (with a jack and a lug wrench) and not just one of those stupid emergency mini-spares. A tire repair kit and a tire pump is a good idea too, as is coolant, wire, fuses, oil and a gas can if you have room. Think about snow chains, a tow strap, a carrier for bikes, a folding shovel, maybe a hand winch and a hitch for a trailer. *The best car in the world is the one you've got.*

I'll take another step out on a limb and suggest NOT spending money on *defensive* (as opposed to hunting) firearms unless you are VERY serious about it. It's not as simple as tossing a loaded cheap pistol in the dresser drawer "just in case". Gun ownership carries with it heavy responsibilities to keep the firearm safe from intruders, from children too young to know better, children who should know better but don't (or forgot) and your kid's friend who may not think twice about snooping in your closet for stuff to get into when your kid is busy with something else. It carries a moral obligation to be proficient enough to be effective and [knowledgable in the laws of self defense](#). And cautious enough to be safe at 3 am in the morning when you are still half asleep and bleary eyed and someone is entering through the living room window who looks like they are carrying a gun and it turns out to be your teen aged son sneaking back into the house after sneaking out earlier to do something with the guys....

If you already own a gun or are serious about getting one, please check out some equally serious [gun safety and handling training](#). While you are at it, [teach the kids gun safety](#). My own personal philosophy is *the best gun in the world is the gun you are best with*. That's almost certainly the gun you've got now, not the one you're going to get after you save up four hundred bucks.

Now is the time to augment your knowledge as well. Everything you really need to know can be found on the internet, public libraries and in free brochures. The only tomes I would even consider purchasing are reference texts for medical care, drug references, detailed technical information and the like. Read, practice and take notes. When the emergency happens, you are unlikely to have the text book handy.

I'll bet your personal *network* is not up to snuff.

"Network, shnetwork. What do I need a network for?" you may ask. A network is your human resources. It can also extend your knowledge base and your physical assets. Who is your emergency preparedness manager locally? Find that person. Talk to that person. Volunteer for that person. If you don't have one, become that person. If nothing else it will give you access to information, training and specialized emergency equipment. FEMA will give you all the free training you need. Do you have a neighborhood watch? If not, can you form one? Are you interested in ham radio? If so, it's easy to get your "no code" licence. There's a little group called [Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service](#) you should check out. Have you contacted the relatives and friends you might have to evacuate to? Prepositioned gear there? How about people who might relocate to your location?

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5) *Acquire new equipment...*

Don't go into massive debt or raid your 401K over this. You are preparing for a low probability event. You've decided to make do with what you have, optimize or work around limitations on the high ticket items, so this is easy. Take it slow. Purchase a few dollars worth of stuff a week, whatever your budget will allow. Make purchases dual purpose, eg. serve a preparedness objective while being more generally used for recreation, personal defense, automobile maint. or whatever.

If your target is 3 days of food, you may be there already. Even 3 weeks of food isn't that expensive if you buy in bulk. ([3 months or 3 years](#) is a different matter.) Get only food you'll like and is very easy to cook. Stuff in glass containers will likely get broken so stick to cans, boxes and sacks. Use this food on a regular basis so it doesn't get old and be sure to replace it as it is consumed.

The local earthquake preparedness people in California are recommending a 2 week supply of food and water at 2 gallons of water per person per day. I'd store it in 5 gallon heavy duty water carriers and distribute it around various locations or keep it outside if it doesn't freeze that hard.

Swimming pool water generally shouldn't be drunk because of all the chemicals in it. (Especially the chlorine. It'll kill your dog after a few thirsty days.) There are also sometimes added algicides and other chemicals that aren't exactly healthy and remain even after the chlorine has largely evaporated. It can be used to flush toilets, wash things, take baths in and so on. You could store a lot of water in an unchlorinated pool but not for long before it has to be boiled or treated (ironically, with chlorine or iodine). Eventually it'll get covered with algae and become a health menace on it's own. A covered (opaque to discourage algae) above ground pool could be filled up, used for swimming, then irrigation and then filled up again. Or you could purchase cheap 55 ga. plastic drums for mass water storage.

There's too much to say about food for me to even begin to say it all here. Some of my links have a lot to say about it though so I'll refer you to them. Just a few more points I want to make here. Don't purchase or store food or water in easily broken containers. Store your consumables in a location safe from whatever you are preparing for. Bury them in a sealed 55 ga. plastic drum if you must. Your supply of freeze dried veggies won't do you any good blown all the way to [Oz](#) and broken water containers won't store much water.

Short term survival rations only need to be calorie rich. More than a couple of weeks and vitamins and minerals become important. Food may lose its nutrition over time, but still keep most of its caloric value. Only spoilage will ruin it completely, so stock up on multivitamins. Long term storage of food (one year plus) is an entirely different matter. We're talking home canned, freeze dried or nitrogen packed for that eventuality. Maybe even a separate store of seed for later agriculture.

Don't forget to include personal hygiene. Antibacterial hand soap and laundry detergent are important. So are feminine needs. Go beyond a few weeks of isolation and your needs become more complex. For long term survival there may not be any dentists around. Perhaps a supply of tooth brushes, floss, fluoride tooth paste, oil of cloves and even a field dentistry kit aren't out of order. May not be many [doctors](#)

around either so perhaps you "long termers" should link up with a medical type AND do some [studying](#) on your own.

Prescription drugs are a peculiar issue. Do your best to talk your doctor into a substantial supply and keep it in the freezer, rotating as you use it. Antibiotics are even more difficult. Doctors are afraid you'll use them carelessly or cause resistant strains of bacteria to develop. The doctors are right. To use prescription antibiotics correctly requires a little study. Quiz your doctor on which antibiotic to use for what disease and do some research at the library. Make sure you understand the limitations, dosages and risks associated with them. Understand the vital importance of not creating antibiotic resistant strains through unnecessary use and underuse. Only a survivalist doctor would help you to procure a large or long term supply of most drugs. Otherwise buy what you can legally in [veterinary supplies](#) and keep it in the freezer. (They won't last forever when the power goes down.) Do not buy anything you do not know exactly how to use or that you are not sure whether or not you or your loved ones are allergic to. There are herbal alternatives to some prescription drugs that one might want to look into.

You can just about kiss off any hope of prescription pain killers. The DEA has made sure of that - and after any disaster the pharmacies get looted right after the liquor stores. Lay in a supply of over the counter pain killers of every type. While you're at it, pick up antibiotic ointment, betadine antiseptic, antihistamines, decongestants, cough medication, laxatives, anti-diarhea agents, anti-nausea agents, topical anesthetics, lots of high SPF sun screen and so on. How much you get will depend on how long to expect to be on your own.

Gasoline dies with time, so rotate your supply frequently. Long term gasoline storage needs special preservatives. Batteries age and leak. Store them in a cool, dry place, but not in the freezer or in any device you don't use regularly

If you don't have one, definitely consider a portable NOAA weather radio with the alarm feature. It has become the de jure national warning system for all types of emergencies. Something like 80% of the population is within range of a NOAA weather transmitter, their target is 95%

Camping gear should be no problem. Take up camping as a recreational activity and the preparedness aspect comes free. Ditto hunting and fishing. If you own a firearm, keep enough ammo on hand to be useful, say a couple hundred rounds. If you want to purchase a firearm, fine. I suggest something that also has a sporting/recreational application and doesn't cost much. (Pump shotguns are great.) If you want to get deeper into the gun thing, fine. I've got a couple of links. If not, fine. You've saved a lot of money and done what was right for you. Public shelters will not allow guns in them and the police are likely to get very nervous if they see you carrying one.

Hit the flea markets, swap meets, classified ads and yard sales for most of your purchasing. There are specialized swap meets in some cities for electronics or home/garden - and then of course there are gun shows. About the only thing you should pay full retail for is medical supplies. Most people do not have a well stocked [first aid kit](#), let alone one in each car, at work and at home. Almost nobody has a "[bug out](#)"

kit at all. You should assemble and keep one "bug out" kit per person at home plus a more generalized emergency kit in each car.

You might want to get a dog (or dogs) for their protective value. I sleep better at night knowing my children each has a very loud, protective and territorial canine in their room. (That means keeping a supply of dog food on hand as well.) But then, public shelters won't allow pets....

6) Practice...

This is important, but brief. Every good plan needs practice or it is no plan. Things will go wrong. Things will be forgotten. At least once a year pretend you have a catastrophe and you are forced to live at home with no power, water pressure and the stores are closed. At least once a year pretend you have been forced to bug out with no warning and go camping. At least once a year review your fire/ earthquake/tornado/whatever drills. Practice skills like first aid and firearms handling on a regular basis. In an emergency you're overloaded brain and body will do what you've trained for, not what you've just thought of. Practice makes perfect. Ok. You've done everything you can for now. It's time to go...

7) Back to step one...

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Fear

A long time ago a president said during a time of great difficulty, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

In a sense he just missed the mark. To be truthful, he might have said instead, "Let's not panic about this. A lot of people are going to get badly hurt by this but most of us will get by." But then, what Mr. Roosevelt actually said was much more reassuring. It sounds deep, almost religious in its faith that everything will work out in the end. The rhythm and rhyme of that noble sentence is more poetic than prosaic. People heard and took solace.

Maybe that's why he got to be president.

OK. You decided not to evacuate. Or the hurricane took a sudden, unexpected turn and you can't. Storm surge is up 20 ft. and huge waves are crashing into now beach front property that used to be a quarter mile inland. Maybe you're in your reinforced bathroom. (You did think to remove the glass mirror and that glass shower enclosure, didn't you? Oops....) Maybe you're lying in the tub or crouching under your slab or huddled in a nearby public shelter.

Those stupid, stubborn parents of yours refused to evacuate like you suggested and are now hiding in their bathroom or a public shelter waiting for the worst. Your wife is 9 months pregnant and/or your three children are hysterical about Buffy, the beagle, who is tethered inside your car in a nearby parking structure. The wind climbs above a hundred miles an hour, sustained, and the exterior of the building you're in is starting to disintegrate.

Do you say, "Let's not panic"? Or do you do a Roosevelt?

If you are religious, it is time to bring forth your faith in God. If you are not, it is time to bring forth your faith in life. Having done the best you could to prepare, it will be much easier to offer hope and reassurance. You know that even if the rest of the structure is blown to flinders, your little corner will endure because you have chosen it - or made it - to endure.

Planning reduces fear and panic by increasing confidence. It also reduces the shock of the unexpected. If you know to expect the shingles on your roof to be blown off, or a huge storm surge, it'll be a lot less scary when it happens.

There is comfort to be taken in song at such a time. By playing *Nearer My God to Thee*, the band on the Titanic saved many lives because it brought comfort and thereby reduced panic. Singing also requires just enough concentration to distract from what's going on outside. Happy songs may seem out of place, but they are not. Celebrating life keeps the spirits up. It is the best way to face danger.

There are prayers and literary passages that help one retain control in the face of stress. The [23rd Psalms](#) and the [Lord's Prayer](#) are good religious choices. I also like the [Litany Against Fear](#) from *Dune* and a variety of poetry.

Controlled fear is a powerful ally. It brings on adrenalin, crystalizes the thoughts and prepares you for fight or flight. Uncontrolled fear becomes panic. Panic is your worst enemy.

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The next level: Survivalism

Survivalism is just one step beyond emergency preparedness.

Where most well prepared individuals are ready for the high propensity emergencies, the survivalist applies the same thinking to less likely eventualities. Catastrophes that might affect the entire country, leaving no section unscathed. In addition the the normal emergencies of meteorology, geology or short term unrest they might include general economic and social collapse, a plague, a major meteor impact, a nuclear exchange or severe climatological change.

When some people would stock 3 days or 3 weeks of food, the survivalist goes for 3 months or 3 years. The survivalist prepares for situations where there are no medical facilities at all or they are totally overwhelmed for the foreseeable future. He or she plans with the assumption that the transportation system may be crippled, money may lose its value, social disorder may become severe and that things may not soon return to normal.

Some survivalists plan to go it alone. Others have formed very tightly knit groups. Many will be defending the homestead while some may have retreats in varying degrees of preparation. Most are *not* militia members or cammo clad Rambo wanna-bes, they're ordinary people with an extraordinary survival sense and very little faith in the government's ability to assist in a national catastrophe. Still, the main difference between preparedness and survivalism is just the probability, time frame and extent of what is being prepared for. The underlying assumptions are the same: That you can survive, survival is worthwhile and your own actions have a major impact on your survival.

Along with survivalism comes self sufficiency and a revival of that hardy pioneer spirit that made this country great. It lies just beneath the surface of most of us, untapped because we are not used to thinking in that way. But it is still there. Prepredness serves to keep you alive long enough for it to reemerge. Survivalism keeps you alive long enough for it to do you some good.

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Links/Books:

Outdoors/Wilderness:

[Hood's Woods](#)

Good resource for outdoor/wilderness survival.

[Buckshot's Trapping Pages](#)

While some may go hungry, the trapper always feeds his family.

[Simply Survival](#)

Wilderness survival, adventures, classes

Emergency Preparedness:

[Emergency Essentials Insight](#)

Articles and ideas

[American Red Cross](#)

Disaster preparedness, risk assessment, emergency response, first aid/cpr, other training. A great place to volunteer.

[The Epicenter](#)

Especially check out the "Tip oda Week" section.

[The Survival Equipment and Techniques Web Site](#)

Survival equipment, techniques

Weather:

[The Weather Channel](#)

Up to the minute local weather, nationwide. Weather alerts, disaster preparedness (Operation Safeside).

[The Tornado Project](#)

[Hurricane Weather Center](#)

Maps:

[USGS](#)

United States Geological Survey

[MapQuest](#)

[MapBlast](#)

Good non-fiction (try Amazon.com):

[On Line Survival Magazine](#)

Really good source of general survivalism info

[Backwoods Home Magazine](#)

Encyclopedia of Country Living

by Carla Emory

Self sufficient living

From the Shepherd's Purse

by Max G. Barlow

Herbal medicine

Medicine for Mountaineering

James A. Wilkerson, ed.

Most excellent!

Mountaineering First Aid

pub. by The Mountaineers

First aid in difficult or isolated conditions.

Life After Doomsday

by Bruce Clayton, PhD

Emergency preparedness and survivalism for all occasions. The best general purpose book out there!

Strategy for Survival

by Martin and Latham

Long out of print, a discussion of the hows, whys and

Hurricanes and tropical depressions

[National Hurricane Center and Tropical Prediction Center](#)

[National Weather Service](#)

[SkyWarn](#)

Volunteer severe weather spotters for the National Severe Storms Laboratory.

Mostly Government:

[Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#)

Disaster preparedness, training, and response. Also near infinite red tape....

[FEMA for kids](#)

Activities to get your children involved and aware.

[Chemical Safety Board](#)

[U.S.Fire Safety Administration](#)

[Center for Disease Control](#)

[Canada's equivalent to FEMA](#)

Civil Defense:

[The American Civil Defense Association](#)

Association of civil defense professionals

[Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine](#)

Click on Civil Defence, Civil Defence Perspectives

[Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service \(RACES\)](#)

Emergency communications

whats of nuclear war. Extremely good discussions of missile targeting strategy and of blast and fallout shelter design. (Good luck finding it. I've only seen it in fairly extensive libraries.)

The Effects of Nuclear Weapons

pub. by Department of Defense

Samuel Glasstone and Phillip J. Dolan, ed.

Extremely technical discussion of weapons effects, including fallout path prediction methods

Interesting survival fiction (try Amazon.com):

Things fall apart...

Thrill to the struggles of the McArthur family as they attempt to survive and maintain their humanity in the face of nuclear destruction and a renegade plot to seize control of the nation. On-line only.

Alas Babylon

by Pat Frank

Survival in the aftermath of nuclear war in a relatively uncontaminated area

Tomorrow

by Philip Wylie

Survival in the aftermath of nuclear war on the outskirts of a target city

Pulling Through

by Dean Ing

Survival in the aftermath of nuclear war in an area of heavy fallout contamination

Lucifer's Hammer

by Jerry Pournel and Larry Niven

Survival in the aftermath of a hit by a large comet

Patriots

by James Wesley, Rawles

A novel about survivalism and patriotism.

Good Movies:

Misc. stuff:

[Solar cooking](#)

[Solar water sterilization](#)

[Urban legends, Hoaxes and Internet Misinformation](#)

[Do it yourself Field Phone](#)

[Fish Farming](#)

[Hardening your home against crime](#)

[Disaster Mental Health](#)

[Home Brew Generator](#)

[Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Nuke Notes](#)

[Chemical and Biological Weapons](#)

Panic in the Year Zero

1962, Orion Pictures

Starring Ray Milland, Jean Hagen and Frankie Avalon

The Baldwin family has just left on a fishing vacation when LA goes up in a mushroom cloud behind them. How will they survive as civilization crumbles? The only serious movie about nuclear war survival I've found. VERY good.

Tremors

Starring Fred Ward and Kevin Bacon, the REAL treat is Reba McIntyre and Michael Gross as a survivalist couple fighting the graboid monsters in their rec room. Great combination of tension and humor. A "must see"!

Personal protection:

[Assault and Rape Prevention](#)

Self defense and crime avoidance

[American Self Defense](#)

Education, training and legal assistance concerning self-defense

[Self Protection](#)

Tips from Metro Nashville Police Department w/ RealAudio

Firearms:

[RecGuns.com FAQ](#)

[Handguns and Women](#)

[National Rifle Association \(NRA\)](#)

[Armed and Female](#)

Paxton Quigley

Emergency Medicine

[First Aid On Line](#)

[NBC Warfare Medicine](#)

Other Survivalist Links:

[Captain Dave's Survival Center](#)

Preparedness and survivalism outlined in loving detail. Excellent bulletin board. Survival supplies. Must see.

[misc.survivalism](#) - USENET FAQ

[Frugal Squirrel's Homepage for Patriots, Survivalists, and Gun Owners](#)

Just what it says...

[The Gentle Survivalist](#)

[Jeff's Double Ought](#)

Survivalism, self reliance, shooting, food, etc.

[Loki's Page for Survivalists](#)

Please send comments and suggestions to [Fred Heiser](#)

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