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## **When Gods Fail**

By Nelson Lowhim

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### **Table of Contents:**

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

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I'd been stuck in the cave for weeks. Months perhaps. Wasn't my fault. I planned to spend a little more than a week in these caves, south of Portland, exploring new routes. Then the earthquakes hit.

Stalactites fell from the ceiling above me. One crushed my watch as I protected my head with my hands. Then the slide started. I thought of running back up the route I'd just come down, but dirt and rocks filled up my route up faster than I could think, and I watched as my only way out was blocked.

I screamed, prayed to be saved, but after a few hours I knew it was up to me to get out. Rationing out my food, I thanked the Lord that there was a running creek where I was trapped, and started to dig my way out.

I thought about what Carol would say if she found out what happened. She'd probably ban my hobby. She never did like it. I couldn't blame her. After a few days,

when the cup I'd been using to scoop dirt broke, I resorted to using my fingers. I dug until my forearms knotted up and my fingers couldn't move. My fingernails loosened. Failure seemed so close.

Food was running low when I finally felt the dirt and rocks give way. I punched through to the other side and widened the hole.

I came out in the mouth of the cave. It was a room-sized, ball-shaped hall that led up to the cave's entrance on the side of a hill. I expected Carol to be waiting for me. After all, I was late, by several weeks, and she usually overreacted to everything. But there was no one. I didn't think much of it, until I climbed out of the entrance.

At this point my stomach grumbled for food, and I felt weak. I looked forward to eating the energy bars on the dashboard of my car. That's why when I saw that all the trees were gone—nothing but a few stumps and a coat of ashes—I couldn't comprehend what lay before me. My guts twisted into a knot. I looked to where my car should have been parked, but there was nothing. I doubled checked the cave entrance. It was the right one. No doubt about that. The slope of the hill that tongued out of the cave entrance was the same shape and angle as I remembered. The outline of the hills and mountains around me also seemed right, except there wasn't a tree to be seen—though who really memorizes such things?

A forest fire?

Certainly conditions had been getting drier recently. That meant an accidental spark could have set this all off. How sad that such a magnificent forest had been destroyed. I shook my head. Carol might not be able to get out here, the place could be closed down, or worse yet, she could be mourning my death.

On my map, I made out the nearest town. I could make it there before nightfall and hopefully find a phone to call Carol. I thought of how she rested her head on my chest, how it hurt to see her cry. I shuddered.

I walked for what seemed to be hours. I couldn't tell where the sun was because of a thick coating of clouds, but it seemed to be midday when I started. Nevertheless, as I walked through the ashes I noticed there was no burned wood smell. There really wasn't a smell, just clean air. No insects either. And, though I was certain it couldn't have been past August at the latest, it was bone-chattering cold. You would think that having been in a damp cave would have prepared me, but I was shivering by the time I saw the shipping container. It was located in an odd place, but I welcomed the sign of humanity.

I prayed that there was someone here, because I didn't have the energy for another push over the small hill behind the container. I regretted leaving the cool waters of the cave. Never imagined I would want to go back there.

I leaned on the container catching my breath. I jerked back when I heard a voice. It was distant, as if the container had a belly somewhere beneath the ground. I rubbed my skin. It felt as if it had been burned in a full day of sun at the beach. I looked up, no way; it was dark and cold.

The voice tickled my ears again. It growled one more time. I heard the distinctive fricatives and vowels of a man. I examined the shipping container. The door to the container was not locked, so I considered walking in. Perhaps not. I wasn't certain of my precise location, but I was surely in rural Oregon. Which meant I could be infringing on someone's property without knowing it. Whatever had happened, however big the forest fire was, the people here probably wouldn't take too kindly to city folk. I would have to

be nice and polite.

I knocked. The voice stopped. I waited, but nothing moved. I knocked again, this time louder. There was some movement, steps and the door moved slightly. My heart started to beat faster; it would be good to see another human.

“Hey, shit head.”

I looked up and saw a man with a shotgun pointed at me. He was large, held the shotgun with one hand, and looked like he could fire it stiff-armed. His face was covered with an uneven bristle of dark brown hair, and his skin, though young, sagged with the signs of a man recently emaciated.

“Uhhh, hi,” I said and raised my hands. “Don’t mean to be trespassing on your property, sir, but do you have a phone or some food and water—”

His face broke into a sneer.

“I didn’t mean to come here, on your property. I didn’t see any signs, and I haven’t eaten for days. So I...” I stopped. His face contorted into a half smile. I thought that perhaps I should have introduced myself. If I just got the chance to call Carol, my wife, I could get out of here. But I needed to get to a phone. “I’m Tom, I...”

He squinted at me, seemed to be looking over my body for something. Between his hard looks, I could sense a kind of kindness, kinship.

The man took another moment to stare at me, then jerked and looked all around him, as if he were expecting a horde to come at him. In fact he looked around for so long, his eyes piercing every rock in the distance, that I was certain he was scared for his life. Then I thought that they must have been moonshine men, or worse, meth cookers. That would explain why he was so jittery. And if that was the truth I was in trouble. I got light-headed. Was this going to end well?

"Please," I said, exasperated that he was just staring at me like an animal.

He seemed to sense my inner plea. “Bill,” he said and nodded his head, “pleased to meet you.” He placed the shotgun beside him and reached out his hand. I shook it.

“Tom. Pleased to meet you. Once again I’m sorry about trespassing on...”

“You really aren’t kiddin’ are you?” he asked with an odd expression on his face.

I looked at him. “About the trespassing?” He seemed nice, or at least willing to help.

“There is no trespassing nowadays.” He stopped to look at the horizon. “Maybe territories, but who knows?”

“Like gangs?” I asked. With meth raging the countryside it made sense.

He laughed at my insinuation. “Yeah, like gangs,” he said.

“Do you have a phone, some food, maybe water? Really, I haven’t eaten all that much for ages.”

Again he gave me that look. “No one has. You really aren’t kidding about the phone are you?”

I couldn’t see his point. Perhaps he was poor. If he didn’t have a phone what was I to do? “You don’t have a phone? Because if it’s money I’ll give my wife a call, and we’ll reimburse you. Really, I need...”

He raised his hand to indicate that he didn’t want to hear anymore. “Where does your wife live?”

“Portland, she can be here in an hour and we’ll give you some money.”

I stopped because he was shaking his head, not at me but at something else that seemed to be tearing through his mind.

"You certain this isn't a joke?" he asked, staring at my eyes like I would reveal something to him.

I glanced at him, some anger boiling up. "Am I kidding? Are you?" I tried to tone my voice down, but something inside me wanted to scream. I took a deep breath and took my eyes off him. Another look at the shipping container, and I noticed that all the paint had flaked off and settled on the ground. It must have been old. What was he doing living here? Meth might not have been the answer, though perhaps the chemicals did this to the container.

"Where have you been the last few months, buddy?" he said.

I hesitated, perhaps he would hate a hiker, but I'd no choice. "I was spelunking and man... some earthquakes started to shake up the ground, and wouldn't you know it but I got trapped." I shook my head, and could see Bill shaking his too. Then he started to laugh.

"So you've been under a rock huh?" He shook his head in amazement, leaned his head back, and roared out a laugh.

"Yeah," I said and smiled politely. "Luckily, I'd enough food to ration while I dug myself out, but I ran out a few days ago. I got out and I walked until I got here. I guess there was a forest fire here? How'd it start?"

"You really aren't kidding," he said and laughed again. At this point, I realized that I could smell him. Body odor, shit, old food. Smelled him very well. I also remembered that I hadn't been able to smell anything else. As if the air was a vacuum; no smell of ashes—which is what I should have smelled after a forest fire—just pure air. I looked around again and thought that it was odd that not a single plane in the sky had come over in a while. My eyes rested back on Bill. He looked at me with concern.

"You better come in buddy, you're not going to like what I tell you," he said and reached out his hand.

I wasn't certain if I should go with him.

"I can use your phone?"

He shook his head. "Sorry bud, there are no phones. Well, ones that work at least."

He spoke with such a mournful voice that I felt bad for assuming he had one. Perhaps I was being too cocky. "Sorry, I didn't mean any offense. Then some food perhaps, and you can tell me where to get to a payphone?"

"Don't know about the food, but... you don't get it do you?" he said.

I didn't like this. "No, I *don't* get it."

He smiled. "There are no phones anywhere. Phones need a network to work; there are no more networks. Get it?"

"The networks? The cell phones?"

"Cell towers, satellites, land lines. All. Gone. Got it?"

"You mean in the area, from the fire?"

"Bud, that was no fire. Those weren't earthquakes you felt," he said and raised his eyebrows emphatically.

"No fire," I said. Perhaps I had come out the wrong hole, mistaken it for the place I had entered and come out near the desert area of Oregon. Perhaps that was what he meant. No, I had seen some burned stumps. I raised my hands, exasperated. "Okay I give up, what do you mean?"

"War, bud. They, we, everyone went to war. Your wife, if she was in Portland, she's

probably dead. All cities got nailed. Not that it mattered; every square inch of land on the planet was covered. The radiation fallout killed anyone who was left. Well most anyone," he looked back out over the land.

I felt everything spinning, and wondered if the hunger was finally getting to me. No way was I going to pass out to some stupid prank, but some part of my brain swallowed the story whole. The smell, the silence, in a part of Oregon that was never this quiet, all added up. I'd seen other forest fires before, and the beautiful thing about those was plants would start growing immediately after. There was nothing here, not a green weed to be seen, or an animal or insect alive. My heart dropped. Oh Carol. I started to dry heave.

"No bud." Bill's eyes softened up. "You're alive, be thank..." He seemed to choose his words, actions again. "Come." He grabbed my collar and hoisted me up. He was strong. "Besides you've been exposed enough." He led me down the trap door.

"Exposed?"

"Don't you feel your skin?"

"The burning," I said and touched my red skin. Then I remembered Carol touching me next to the fireplace, the heat from her skin, her sex. No, a nuclear war couldn't be real. Too many stops were in place to prevent it from happening. Right? This was a joke, and I'd get to the phone soon. Don't be a sucker.

"Yeah, radiation. It's gotten better, used to be you couldn't come out here without a suit. But best not to stay out too long," he said. "Though you made it so far."

I entered the container and realized it was a bar. Across from me stood a man who oiled a gun. He looked up with a sneer on his face. He was like a rat-faced, skinny version of Bill. He seemed much meaner.

"Who the hell is that?" he said.

Everything was still hazy; plus down here, away from the pure air of outside I was having problems absorbing all the smells. For certain there was Bill's unique body odor and liquor, but there was also burning flesh. I double-checked my skin to make certain that it wasn't me. I couldn't tell. There was something insidious about the smell.

"I'm Tom. Pleased to meet you."

The man didn't look at my hand. Instead, he sneered at Bill.

I put out my hand.

"Where'd you find this faggot?"

I took a deep breath. Not exactly a homophobe, but I understood the implications of his words. I was a skinny guy with a meek posture. He wouldn't respect me unless I said something.

"Who you calling a faggot?" I said.

He cocked his head, and as quick as lightning, he bounded across the cramped room and pushed a knife to my neck. "I'm callin' you a faggot, faggot. You got a problem with that?"

The knife was sharp and pushed dangerously into my jugular. One slip and I would open up to the floor, smile with my neck. And yet I still couldn't feel my heart race; it was steady. As if the news of the nukes was still combatting my hope and taking up too much of my energy for me to worry about a knife. Under the red light, I could see scars all over the man's face.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I said, and was surprised that not a tremor showed in my voice. This friend of Bill's had cold eyes. But as soon as I spoke he cocked his head

back and stepped back, removing the knife from my neck. He still held it pointed at me.

“Leave him be Paul. He’s cool,” Bill said. He rifled through a closet. “Besides, he doesn’t even know what’s happened the past few months. Tell him, tell him where you’ve been.”

I told him the story.

Paul tilted his head backwards and laughed. “Under a rock huh?” He looked at me with a little more respect, some warmth returned to his eyes. “Lucky you, you missed some horrible shit,” he shook his head.

“He’s looking for his wife... she was in Portland.”

“Oh...” Paul gave me a look of pity. “Sorry bud, she’s probably... The city's gone.”

Could this have been a joke? I hoped so, but why else would they live in such a dilapidated place? Wasn't anything to hunt here.

Again my mind started to walk without my permission. A nuclear war. The forest fire. The air too pure to be real. No smells out there. No life anywhere. It was too much evidence, but I prayed for another explanation. These two men were involved in some practical joke. And yet something about their body language—how there was no hesitation, how there was real sympathy—pulled on my intestines and I felt nauseous.

“Are you serious? This isn’t a joke?” I said.

They glanced at each other, again with a look of collaborative knowledge.

“Come on man, if it is a prank just tell me. I don’t wanna be rude, but I was hoping to see my wife soon,” I said again. My voice cracked.

The mention of my wife seemed to sadden them again.

“He’s not gonna believe us until we show some proof. I know I wouldn’t believe someone unless I saw it with my own eyes,” Paul said and gestured to Bill to open a case of ammunition.

Bill slowly meandered over to the case and opened the hinged lock. He pulled out a handful of newspaper clippings.

“We’re not joking bud. This is all that’s left of the world,” Bill thrust the clippings over to me.

I took them, some were old and yellow, others were a little newer. The first papers were that flimsy newspaper paper, and with the accompanying ads I was sure they couldn’t have created these with a normal printer. Though these days who really knew? Somewhere in the back of my conscious the realization that this was real hit me, and a lump formed in my throat. I flipped through a couple of them, read something about climate turning for the worse, major food shortages, famine, droughts, followed by floods that ripped off topsoil—a hopeless cycle. Like the news from when I went spelunking. This, however, was on a larger scale. Was there a tipping point where everything went out of control? Then something else about forest fires spreading. Then there were more clips about international summits breaking down. China and US blame each other for not doing enough about resource distribution. Typical I thought, part of the reason I was taking a break from the city, life was getting too stressful. Then the last one: dirty bomb goes off in Shanghai. China blames US, US blames terrorists. Then Miami hit by another dirty bomb. Then nothing else. I looked up. The ceiling looked like was going to cave in, and I sat down on the ground. The article was printed on normal paper; random blogs, that could've been written by anyone.

Bill shuffled around and came with a bottle of water and a piece of packaging.

“Here bud, drink and eat,” he said.

“No,” I said and shook my head. I couldn’t handle not knowing the entire story. “Tell me Bill, tell me what happened?” I felt a few tears trickle down my cheek, though I reminded myself that I had to stay strong. I had to find Carol. “Carol.” I shook my head, when I wanted to rip it out and end the hollow emaciation of my being. A numb feeling followed.

“You sure we can afford the food?” Paul mumbled, but seemed to quiet down when Bill shot him a look.

“Eat up bud,” Bill said and tore open the package.

I grabbed the spoon he handed me. I drank the water in a gulp.

“Fuck, we ain’t got much water left,” Paul said, giving me a deadly look.

Bill ignored him. “Well, that was the last major story. Then all rumors. Well...” he hesitated. “That last day no one was certain what would happen. Everyone was certain that the last nuke had been launched and people would resort to talking, you know? Within a few hours the world was dark. That’s what we do know. We’ve tried to contact some city that might have survived this, but no luck. The first few weeks you couldn’t go outside without dying of exposure. Even with a radiation suit. We lost quite a few people that way. My mother, she had to go see the world, didn’t want to stay here. Found her a week back. Suit burned, skin peeled off, eyes burned. Buried her.”

Bill stopped and looked at me. A vein in his forehead throbbed. “Portland is gone bud. Your wife probably...”

“Well how do you know that Portland's done? I mean there are no networks; maybe it’s just that the whole world’s cut off from each other and no one knows about the other, right? I mean have you guys left this area?” I stopped as they both remained silent, exchanged glares with each other. Suddenly, I felt unwelcome.

My words died; I finished my food and water, and stared into the red light that provided the illumination for the room.

“Electricity? How do you get it if there is no grid, right?” I was now looking for something, something to show these men that their pessimism was misguided. There couldn’t be nothing else out there. There just couldn’t. Seven billion people at my last count. So what if there had been a nuclear war? That still left a lot of survivors. A lot of places that wouldn’t be hit by a nuke. There had to be. I looked at them both, hoping that with all the gray matter in the room we would figure this out. I was a computer nerd. Loved programming. Thought if you put enough brains behind any problem you could find a solution. Innovation was the saving grace of humans. Made us more than a bunch of chimps with tools. We were Created and thus could create. I searched each of their faces for a sign of what I was going for. They seemed saddened by my line of questioning.

“We have solar panels and mechanically rechargeable batteries. That’s all. Ain’t no grid,” said Paul.

No grid. The words hit me. Again I felt weak, alone, floating in a sea of nothing. Like when I was a child and my father gave me a pea to represent the earth then walked me many blocks to tell me where the sun was, and then told me we couldn’t even walk to the first star—I cried then and almost cried now.

“Then couldn’t we hook the battery to a satellite phone or radio frequency and keep trying to reach some people?” I said.

“Listen,” he said and jerked his finger towards me, his other hand still holding the knife. “You’re lucky I didn’t finish you off. The last thing we need is another mouth to feed. You better learn to earn your keep around here, and it sure as hell ain’t gonna be done with smart ass questions. You think we haven’t thought of all that? You think we’re a buncha dumb rednecks? Dontcha?” He raised his knife. “You better learn.” He looked at Bill, walked behind the bar, lifted up a trap door in the floor, and stepped down into it.

Now that I could see how easily he flared up, I wondered how I could tip toe around him. If I was allowed to stay. His last comment hit me. I couldn’t expect the same things as when I was back in Portland. I was in *their* house. I would have to listen to them. And I had to earn their respect. Show them I was worth something. But what the fuck would a computer programmer be worth out here? I looked at Bill, hoping for some sympathy. Maybe I should mention my wife, but it seemed that the time for pity was over. Bill was staring at me with a stern aggression that I did not like.

“You guys low on water?”

“Yeah, not much left. We have a machine that purifies our urine, but it gets less and less each time. Besides,” he said and licked his lips, troubling me again.

The others, what happened to all the others?

“Besides what?” I said.

“Besides, I’m just sick and tired of tasting piss, you can taste it... once you notice it there’s no going back.”

“The cave I was in, there was plenty of water. Clean too, I’m sure. I was drinking it for too long for it to be contaminated.”

Bill’s demeanor changed. He smiled once. “Nice, that’s just what we need. I’ll tell Paul,” and without any more words he walked down the small trap door.

Something about his smile was off, but I reminded myself that there were bigger issues at hand.

I tried to sleep, but all I could think of was my wife, her pretty lips, and how much I missed being in her arms, her belly slowly swelling in those weeks before my spelunking trip. I loved everything about her; she was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. My chest shrank. I shouldn’t have gone on that trip alone. I could’ve picked a pastime that even she would’ve liked. I could have been with her.

I stared at the red light hanging from the ceiling. This was real. Everything I had seen: the burned landscape, no one around, not even a plane in the sky. This was real.

The thought of all those people and all those dreams gone, evaporated, filled me with a dread. It started in my extremities, spread to my heart, rushed to my head and paralyzed me. I wished I could have seen all those people just one more time. Seen Carol instead of trying to get away for another trip to be alone.

I sat there thinking about Carol. Her touch. Her laugh. I would have to go back to our house and see if Carol was dead. Even a shadow on a wall, like the ones in Hiroshima, would help.

I picked up the newspapers that lay before me. All alone; billions dead. Tears should have been forming, but they didn’t. Inside, a piece of me was glad that I had gone into a cave. Survived. I ground my teeth and got angry with myself for ever thinking that. But perhaps in this new world things would be better. Now, people would be forced to rely on one another. They would care for each other. That would make it a better place.



Bill and Paul had taken me in like good Samaritans and given me a place to sleep. In the old world I would have just been kicked off their property. Perhaps this was God's way of performing another great flood. It had to be.

I squeezed my eyes shut, exhaustion finally taking over me. Carol's image floated up to me and as I tried to paw at her, take off her clothes and penetrate her, a loud rumbling sound shook me.

"Hey, wake up."

I opened my eyes to see Bill with a shotgun. At least it wasn't pointed at me.

"What time is it? How long did I sleep?" The room around me was the same; my heart filled with dread as I remembered that the end of the world was still a fact.

"A couple hours. We figured it would be good to let you gather some strength." He looked over to where Paul was standing.

I rubbed my eyes. Something was different; I could feel the wake of being talked about echoing through my ears. Paul's eyes weren't angry; they were cold. I glanced at Bill's eyes and his seemed to have the same demeanor. However, they darted off me, and focused on his feet.

"Get ready, you're gonna show us where the water is," Paul said, his voice wavering between hard and kind.

"Sure," I mumbled, stood up, and adjusted my belt. "Let's go."

"You first," Bill said and pointed up the door.

When we got out it was darker. The sky looked a color I had never seen before. "Nuclear winter, eh? I had always had faith that mankind would never come to this. That cooler heads would prevail," I said and looked at Bill and Paul. They didn't seem interested.

"No talking, just move," Paul muttered.

Bill shook his head. Both of them pulled out a couple of reined sleds with empty containers strapped on them.

"You mind doing some work?" Bill handed me the reins.

I took his sled. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. Within ten steps I was tired. "This is tough." I cracked a grin, feeling peeved that I would act so weak. Neither of them smiled. Paul only scowled some more.

"You're lucky we don't hitch both of them on ya," Paul said and spat in my direction.

I wanted to say something smart, but alarms were going off in my head. Perhaps I'd offended his sensibilities earlier. If so, now was the time to make amends. I stared in front of me and kept marching.

It took a few hours to reach the cave. I was exhausted. When Bill had said we would switch, he meant I would have one sled at all times. I had yet to earn my keep, I reminded myself. These were, after all, men who had been tested in the aftermath of a nuclear war. Of course they wanted to see how much I could handle. *They* got to rest. I was going to say something, but Paul's look told me to shut up. We trudged up the side of the cave entrance.

"Here she is, my humble abode," I said and pointed at the cave's small entrance. "The water is down there."

"Show us," Paul said.

I led them down to the small hole I'd dug to get out of the cave.

"Down there?" Paul asked.

"Yeah sure, listen." I cocked my head. They fell silent. The sound of running water filled the air.

They smiled. I tried to smile at Bill, but he stared at the ground.

"Can we make that hole bigger?" asked Paul.

I shook my head. "But I can slide through; you two pass me the smallest containers and I can fill them."

Before they could say anything, I grabbed a flashlight and slid through. On the other end I waited. They pushed through a couple containers. I scooped water and handed it back to them. All the while I could hear them both talking. Bill sounded whiney while Paul talked in short hisses. They probably hadn't seen this much water since the nuclear war.

I slid out and as I pulled out my torso, wiggling like a worm, I looked up to see Bill, solemn-faced.

"We got all the water we need right?" I said.

Bill didn't reply. I looked at his hands. He had the shotgun pointed at me.

"Bill, what... No." It hit me. "Please don't. My wife. I have to see her."

"Shutup!" He used a tone I hadn't heard from him yet. It seemed transplanted from Paul. It was devoid of emotion.

I raised my hands. "Please don't."

"Your wife is dead. Everyone in Portland died. Not a single survivor. And now, you're dead."

"Please, Bill. Just let me go, I have to just see if she's alive, my house."

"You still don't get it. There's nothing. It was a H-bomb, there's only a large crater there."

"Just let me see," I said as tears streamed down my face. "I really don't care about dying, but if I could see that she's gone. I would be happy."

Bill shuffled uncomfortably. "You promise not to bother us? Not to come around here?"

"Yes, I just want to see Portland."

"You do him in yet?" Paul yelled.

Bill's face stiffened—emotionless again. He raised the gun to my head. "Sorry," he said in a raised voice. "Can't risk it."

"Please." I closed my eyes and felt urine rush down the side of my leg. It felt comfortably warm. I always thought I would face death with more honor than that. But I didn't, I was scared that I would die and be a nothing in the lineage of mankind, and I was scared to see the flash of the gun barrel.

The left side of my head opened to a searing pain, and as I fell to the ground I heard a loud shot. Everything went black.

I woke up to the sound of rocks sliding. It took all my energy to open my eyes. On the left side of my head was a pulsating pain. I thought I saw shadows. But I was in a corner. The amount of light leaking in through the cave entrance seemed about the same as when I came with Bill and Paul. My stomach rumbled. I felt light headed. I needed food.

I heard some voices. Shadows at the mouth of the cave moved. Was it Bill and Paul? I reached and felt my head.

Dried blood.

"What do you think they did in here?" a voice said.

"Probably buried someone, you heard the shot. And only two came out."

It wasn't Paul or Bill. I looked around for a place to hide. The last thing I wanted to see was another person who would try to kill me. Bill. Oh, Bill. How could he have been willing to kill me?

I saw a pile of large boulders and got up, making certain I didn't make any noise. The accents of the shadows above were tainted with twangs. I had to hide. By the time I wedged myself between two boulders a couple of flickering flames came down. My eyes adjusted, but all I saw was two dark figures holding torches. In their other hands were rifles.

"You see anything?"

"Nope."

Both voices were gruff. The figures were large. I stopped breathing.

I wondered how I'd survive on my own. There was no way around it. I had to ask for help. Where was food to be had in this world? How much longer could I survive without any energy? One month was the accepted science, but I would be worthless by the end of it.

"Nothing here." One of the figures started to trudge back out of the cave.

"It had to be something. You saw what I saw. They were in here for a long time. And who was the third fella with them?"

"Beats me. They probably buried him."

They seemed to know Paul and Bill. Yet they were talking as if there was some animosity between them. Perhaps my enemy's enemy was my friend.

I touched my head. It didn't seem to add up that Bill would have missed me from so close. What was my head injury from? Would these men show me mercy? They had to. Perhaps they'd be open to newcomers.

"Fuck this," said the one who was still in the cave. He walked up and out of the cave.

My heart beat like a frightened mouse. There was no getting around the fact that if I didn't get help I would die here. No food. No way to get food or know how to get it. I moved out of the wedge. The smell of my blood was strong, sweet and I wondered if the two men, used to the barren wasteland, could have smelled it. I stopped to listen. Feet crunched over rock and retreated into the distance. I would be alone if I didn't say anything.

As I got out of the cave, the sun was hitting the horizon. Red solar rays lit up the entire sky from west to east. I looked up in awe.

Click.

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

I felt the barrel of a gun slam into the small of my back, and I went flying into the ground. I turned to look. A large man, at least six and a half feet tall and four feet wide stared down at me. The angle of the sun magnified the lines on his face like fracture from a painting. He wasn't young, perhaps in his thirties, but he was mean. He made Paul look like kind.

"Hi, I... I come in peace," I blurted the first non-hostile phrase that came to my mouth.

The man burst out laughing. "Johnny come look at this weak fella," he said and

stepped near me with his hand out as if he was going to help me up. I reached out my hand and felt his power as he picked me up.

"Thanks, I—"

With a surprising amount of speed, he swept my legs and sent me flying to the ground.

"Easy Big Lee," said a skinnier, even older man who looked a spry fifty as he walked over to me. "You weren't trying to get the jump on us were you?"

"No, not me. I don't want to hurt anyone. See?" I showed him my hands. "I don't have anything. I just need help." Their eyes reminded me of how Paul and Bill looked before they tried to put me down in the cave. "My wife, she's in Portland, I need to find out if she's alive. I was in the cave, just came out."

"Easy, easy little man." Johnny rested on his haunches next to me. I noticed that even in this relaxed state, one hand was on his trigger, and the barrel was pointed at me.

"It's not that I don't want to believe you, I do. But I," he said and looked over at the big man. "We can't afford to trust you. Got it?"

"No trust?" I asked. It was simple statement, but my head was spinning. I felt like vomiting. It was as if my body couldn't take any more shocks. Perhaps I wasn't made for this new world.

"None, bud. You come out of the cave after us, all quiet like. What would you think?"

"But I have nothing. I need some food. Just a little food so I can go to Portland, see my wife." I hoped that somehow I could beg enough to get some help. I needed to see a kind soul. I needed to see some empathy in their eyes. That was all I really cared about.

"Your wife was in Portland?" A hint of kindness crossed Johnny's eyes.

"Yes, I was in the cave. Spelunking."

"Oh, you one of them hiker fellas?"

"I was, yes."

"Never liked those hiking hippies, always too condescending. Never let us hunt where we liked," barked the big one.

"Not me," I said and raised my hands in innocence.

"Of course you would say that now bud," Johnny said. It was getting dark so I couldn't see whether he was talking with sympathy or disdain.

"Just some food... Portland," I said, feeling the urge to piss again.

"Not enough food to go around fella. Can't give you any. Besides, if I did it wouldn't be for something as stupid as going to Portland. Your wife's dead. No one made it out of the cities. The few that did. Well." Johnny glanced at the large man who grinned sheepishly.

"Okay, okay. Sorry to have disturbed you. I'll be on my way. I'll make it somehow," I said and propped myself up on my elbows, slowly, to make it seem as if I couldn't move.

Somewhere in the back of my head a voice was getting louder and louder. It was a voice that I hadn't listened to in my entire life, that had given up speaking and was only now finding its volume again. It told me not to be so trusting with what I was doing. It told me to conceal everything. It told me to position myself so my body had leverage to move.

The look on their faces as they exchanged glances when I spoke, reminded me of how Paul looked at me before I entered the cave.

"Can't do that either, I'm afraid," Johnny said and seemed genuinely sad. "Can't have scavengers in these hills. You'll just come back for us."

Big Lee smiled; he didn't seem so sad.

"It's the way of the world now. Nothing against you personally."

"Of course not. Totally understandable," I said. The voice in the back of my head was speaking up for me. Cover your intentions. Dawn and dusk are the best times to attack because people's eyes are still adjusting to the light. You're next to a steep incline of the hill.

My hand clasped around a rock.

The old man looked at me suspiciously as he straightened his legs out.

I threw the rock at his face. I spun as fast as I could towards the edge of the steep incline. In a second I was hurtling down the scree. I slid. I rolled. I couldn't control myself. The crack of a rifle echoed. A forest of rock formations came at me. Dark, in the crepuscule, they looked like they could hurt. A bullet whistled past me. I was sliding in too straight a line.

"Git that bastard!" Johnny's yelled.

I slid over scree, the sound like a freeway of trucks. My throat was tight. My heart pounded.

With one hand dug into the scree, I turned to my left. A bullet landed on my right. The first big rock went by. I dug in both hands, slowed down, then grabbed the next boulder that jutted out from the side of this hill. As soon as I had grabbed the rock, and pulled myself behind it, I saw the scree where my ass had just been, burst into pieces. The sound of a shot followed.

"Shoot him!"

The rock tore off the skin on my fingers, but I didn't feel any pain. Why couldn't they just let me be? If I stayed here, they'd find a way to approach my crop of rocks and finish me off. And in the end I knew that I had to get some food. They were right about scavengers. I was going to have to come and get them.

The sound of both of them skiing down the scree jumped my heart and stopped my thoughts.

This group of boulders was the only place I could stand a chance of fighting. I grabbed a large stone. I grabbed a sharp one. I ran to some closely spaced boulders. Before I jumped on one, I glanced behind me to see the two men only a few yards from where I'd been.

"Come on out boy. You're just makin' it harder on yourself."

"Yeah, it can be quick or we can eat you piece by piece, hippie," Big Lee added.

I faced a boulder twice my height. I looked for a hold, placed the rocks in my pocket and down the front of my pants, and started climbing. Soon I was on top.

I looked down. Night had fallen and, without the moon or the stars, there was hardly a shape to be seen. I pulled the large rock out of my pants and laid it gently on the boulder. Silence drenched my senses. I stayed still and listened. My heart beat, the only sound in the night. The smell of my dried blood and sweat seemed overpowering. The temperature was dropping.

Crunch, *c r u n c h*. Separate footsteps. So it would be easier. I would take the first person that came by me.

*Crunch*. Ten yards away to my left. Another *crunch* and I knew it was moving away.

Crunch. Right below me.

I picked up the large stone and tried to make out a figure, but in the shadow of the boulders it was impossible. Just use the sound. Crunch. I hurtled the rock down with all my might. Then jumped.

A satisfying crunch that sickened me sounded off. I landed on a heap of flesh. My legs buckled and air was pushed from my chest as I fell to my side. I crawled over towards the body, as it twitched. It was Johnny. His head caved in. I reached for his shotgun. Pain streaked through my body. I couldn't take much more abuse.

"Johnny?" Big Lee's voice was very close. The pain disappeared.

I tried to make out the safety on the shotgun. Footsteps, in a hurry. Getting closer.

The gun seemed foreign to me. Footsteps closer. My heart was in my throat. I found the trigger and pointed towards the footsteps. When a black shape formed, I pulled the trigger, but it wouldn't budge. Closer. Three yards. I put two fingers on the trigger, the butt on my chest. Two yards away. Big shadow.

"Johnny?" Big Lee said.

I pulled with all my might.

The sound and the recoil knocked me on my back. I forced myself up, cocked the shotgun and fired into the lump in front of me. Then again. I couldn't hear anything but the ringing in my ears. I stood over Big Lee, placed my barrel on his neck.

He was breathing fast, loud. I couldn't see his face.

"Please," Big Lee said. More wet breathing. Like a hamster in my hands. I was God. A rush of blood to my loins.

"Don't," he said.

"Don't take it personal." I pulled the trigger. A splash of blood hit my face. I turned back to where Johnny was. His body was still. I pointed my barrel at him. Then I remembered I would have to save bullets. I picked up the rock lodged in his head and raised it above my head. Don't take it personal. I slammed the rock into what remained of his face.

Pain returned to all my limbs. I checked the men's pulses. Nothing. I took their weapons, bandoliers, Big Lee's backpack, and a set of keys. Switched clothes with Johnny. They fit perfectly. Then with my new gear, I climbed back up the boulder.

I woke up the next day wondering if my agony would stop. The sharp hurt of yesterday had turned into dull knocks that screeched every time I moved. I leaned over to see the two bodies where I had left them. Insects were eating the corpses.

Insects.

From where? I hadn't seen any until now. Could be that they lived deep in the ground. They *were* always supposed to survive a nuclear holocaust. It was good to know the scientists were right about something. Insects could be food.

I checked myself for insects. There were a few. I held my breath and swallowed a few after smashing them. Some taste lingered in my tongue, an odd chemical taste that made me gag.

I climbed down. Looked at the two bodies. With my finger I let some ants crawl up then swallowed them too. I looked at Big Lee, the lower half of his head gone. "Please...Don't." A man had begged for mercy and I'd shown him none. What else could I have done? Why did I expect mercy when I was on the other side of the barrel, and yet

when I held it I gave nothing? My knees went weak. I tried not to look at Johnny's face. What had I done? The stench from the two was overpowering. I walked away. I had to get back up. In case Paul and Bill returned to the cave.

I slowly trudged up until I was at the mouth of the cave. I would have to find food. At least I knew there were insects around. The fact that the two corpses didn't attract any large animals was comforting. I looked around, at the shape of the mountains, at the landscape, so that I would know where I was if I was to return.

Big Lee and Johnny had left a nice set of footprints to follow. I kept my eyes and ears pricked and followed the path. After an hour the footprints disappeared into rocks. I walked in the same direction but found nothing.

What would *I* do in a cutthroat post-nuclear world where leaving tracks could mean my end? I backtracked and walked at a sharp angle from where the footprints had disappeared. After a few minutes I found tracks again and was surprised to see a makeshift shack in between some boulders near the peak of a hill, only a few hundred yards away.

I retraced my steps once again and approached the abode from high ground. I lay down and listened. Ten minutes passed and not a sound. With my shotgun raised, I walked towards the entrance. I opened the lock with a set of keys, pushed the door ajar.

A plethora of military rations stacked against the wall met my eyes. Blood rushed to my cheeks, and I smiled. Enough for one man to eat forever. I looked around. Nothing else. No hidden rooms. Just rocks and piles of odd containers. I started to eat.

The food tasted amazing. A mix of spices and aromas overwhelmed my senses as I wondered how I was going to control myself from eating everything in sight. I would wait a day to gain my strength before heading out to Portland. There I would be able to see if my wife had survived.

A feeling of emptiness came over me. Perhaps I knew that there would be nothing to find in Portland. That moment, the rush, jolt when I heard the rock crush Johnny's head filled my senses. I should've been elated to know that I'd lived, survived, and would now have food for the foreseeable future, but I killed two men for that privilege. I smashed a man's head in, and killed the other while he begged for mercy

*Please. Don't.*

The words rang in my head; some of his blood was still dry on my neck and face. I peeled off a flake of blood and threw it on the ground. I hadn't shown mercy. Why not? Shouldn't I have been the better man? What about God? Didn't He cause all this so that we could be better? I inhaled. I could feel their presence here.

Why had they been so bent on coming after me? They seemed to have enough food to survive one more person coming here. Seemed foolish to run after me. I was not a threat. They must have known something. I should have questioned them—Big Lee at least. Not blown his neck and lower face out.

Portland.

Or get Bill and Paul?

They would both come back for more water. Perhaps in a week. If they did, they would see the two bodies, or whatever the insects left of them, and they would figure out what happened.

Leave Bill alone, something inside me whispered. Though I wasn't entirely certain what had happened, Bill must've let me live. No way a redneck in a post-nuclear-

everyman-for-himself-age misses a shot from that close with a shotgun. Even I hadn't missed, and I hated guns.

A canteen fell to the ground. I spun around.

Nothing.

But I kept still. There was no wind. The canteen could not have fallen on its own. If it was a rat I could eat it. Never thought I'd think that. Then my nostrils lit up. Sweat. Flesh. Someone was here. I glanced at the door on my periphery to make certain it was still shut. Check. On one side of the room stood a pile of boxes and ammunition cans that the canteen had been sitting on. Something could be hiding down there. I reached for my shotgun and pointed at the area. I heard something breathe.

"Come out whoever you are." I placed my hand on the trigger.

The breathing got louder.

"I said come out or I'll start shooting." My nerves frayed. Adrenaline swam through my arteries. Whatever was hiding was going to die soon. I couldn't risk them getting a shot off.

"Don't shoot," the voice said, soft, feminine, almost crying.

So this was what Big Lee and Johnny were so protective about.

I kept my shotgun out, after all a woman in this environment wouldn't necessarily be nice. "Come out, I won't hurt you," I said.

She crawled out from what appeared to be a space behind the ammunition cans, still in the shadows. I could smell her more so than see her, and she smelled good. No perfume or any of that, but I could smell her sweat, body odor, her sex. My penis rose to the occasion, a libidinous and ravenous thought crossed my mind: take her. So soft and delicate.

How could I think such a thing? All women in such a lawless world were probably in the same situation. I wouldn't be another male to be scared of. I would be a male to look up to, to be in awe of for his self-discipline. That's what it was, I reminded myself, self discipline. If Carol were ever in this situation I would hope she came across another strong man who would treat her properly. The way a woman should be treated. I reached out my hand.

"Who are you?" she said, slinking towards me.

She was short, and her hands, small, white, were empty. She wore a dress covered with dirt and grime. Her hair, auburn, seemed like it could be lighter with a wash. Her blue eyes struck out at me and tightened my throat. Each eye seemed to have a halo. She had to be a teenager. None of that mattered as my eyes naturally rested on her breasts that pushed her dress out, firm, round, and her hips that swooped in to a small waist.

The voice, *that* new voice, growled. Told me to take her there and then. No, I fought back. I would start a new way, with new rules. "I'm Tom, your name?" I realized that I was speaking softly.

"Jenny," she said. Her voice had an edge of flintiness, flirting with my groin. A sexual marker that she never had a chance to use properly, and yet it was enough for me.

Calm down.

"Pleased to meet you," I said and shook her hand, soft, limp, sensuous. I wondered if she had been here as a plaything for the two men. "What are you doing here? Are you friends with Big Lee and Johnny?"

She seemed to light up at the sound of their names. "No family. You friends with



them?"

The spark in her eyes, the way she moved closer to hear something about them pushed sorrow into my mind. I shouldn't have done what I had done. Now what could I tell her? Carol always joked that she'd found the one man in the world incapable of lying.

"Yes, I am. They'll be back in a few days." The lie felt so easy and natural that it surprised me. This made life so much easier.

She smiled, beautiful white teeth, full lips, as she came closer. Trusting me so naturally... "In a few days?"

"Yes, they just had to travel further out. They told me to take care of this area for them," I said and smiled back, the ease of which scared me. I would tell her in due time, for now it was best to treat her with kindness. I handed her a piece of cheese and crackers and she gobbled it down. "What's your relation to them?"

"Johnny's my pa." She swallowed her food.

"And Big Lee?"

"He's my brother." She took more food.

A ray of light hit her face and it was then that I saw that her eyes were much the same as Johnny's had been. Just kinder. My stomach churned. She would find out and then what?

"They usually don't take kindly to strangers. Not these days at least." She looked at me, without the slightest hint of mistrust. "Can't trust anyone. We once let a man in here, but he tried to kill them in their sleep and steal me." She blushed at the word, as if she couldn't imagine what it was that made a man want to steal her.

"Yes." I'd have to think of a story and stick with it. "I helped them find some water, good water. So we're friends now."

She nodded her head. "So you're staying with us?"

"For now, tomorrow I'll head out to finish some of my own work, then I'll be back."

She smiled at my comment then hugged me.

The sudden affection took me back, and I froze for a second before deciding that I shouldn't miss out on her touch and held her tight, pushed against her breasts and let my hand rest on the nadir of her hip and waist. My cock gently brushed up against her, and when she didn't react, I pushed my hips further towards her. It was dirty, but it felt pure. I'm sure she smiled at me.

Tomorrow I would find out about Carol. I would clean myself.

We spent the rest of the night talking about our lives. She nestled herself so close to me that I was certain I would explode. She talked about her high school and friends who were no more, and I talked about my job, Portland, and Carol.

I made sure we slept on different sides of the shack—I didn't trust myself. I reminded myself that this was supposed to be the start of a better world, not a worse one.

The next day I found some topographical maps, and marked out my journey. I packed my food, extra ammunition, hid a couple handguns in my clothes, found a compass and headed out.

I hugged Jenny; she seemed sad to see me go. I locked her inside. I told myself it was so that no one could harm her. But in reality I wanted her waiting when I got back. I had found something innocent in this world, and I wanted to hold on to it. I walked over the ridge and to Carol.

My walk to Portland started out well. All I saw were charred foundations, and pieces of roads that were nothing but rubble, or washed away. The forests that made Oregon so green were gone. It was depressing. I'd always been a person who fought the overdevelopment that happened in my state, in the country. I wanted things left untouched by humans. But this...

Civilization started with a lucky draw of certain seeds in the right conditions, blossomed, and was now gone. The thought of billions of humans seemed like a distant dream. The world. The apocalypse. Carol. What was I expecting to find? The more I saw, the more a gnawing feeling inside me said that there was no way she could've survived this. And if she had she wouldn't be the same, or I would never find her. She would be somewhere in the hills scavenging off the land.

The first night I slept between some metal sheets that I found under a layer of mud. My skin didn't feel warm. Was radiation was still an issue? Then I wondered if that even mattered. My life would be shortened by *something*. I woke up and kept marching. Around afternoon I got to where Portland should have been. I'd seen pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and was expecting charred ruins, but there wasn't even that. There were several craters. The green hills all barren. I tried to think of where our suburb was, and couldn't quite remember. When I finally triangulated my neighborhood's location, with the side of the hill and angle. I found more of the same: some foundations remained and everything caked with mud. As if the city had never existed.

I should have been ready for it, but I wasn't. Carol's image flooded back to the back of my eyeballs and I felt weak at the knees. I fell down. The sky seemed an ominous gray. Lightening cracked slowly across the clouds like a Martian snail.

Carol and I'd met trail running a race only a few miles from Portland. It'd been a typical Oregon summer day. When I saw her, she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen—all smiles—a body flagrantly showing skin in the summer warmth. Normally, I would have just looked, but she smiled and I felt warm inside. I talked to her and asked her out for dinner that night. The rest was history.

Now there was nothing. I looked around.

Absolutely nothing.

They'd really done it. They'd really decided that nuking cities, was the best choice. I shook my head. Had the people who pressed the buttons managed to stay safe? If so where? I was angry and grasping at straws. In a world like this no one would have come out on top. I wondered if God would have allowed his entire creation to be destroyed. Like it didn't matter. I always believed in the Bible, found hope in it. Now, however, I couldn't see His hand in the world; was this His rapture? Not the way I saw it. Was there even any law now? Or was it just me and my thoughts? The wind blew, as if to say yes.

I still wanted to know exactly how it happened, but it seemed like a futile endeavor. The news stories Bill and Paul had shown me seemed either biased or unprofessional. But, I supposed, it didn't matter one bit in the end.

The smell of flesh hit me in this moment of weakness, but instead of freezing, my body relaxed and I gripped the gun in my hand. Two seconds later I glanced around. No one. But the smell was getting stronger. I was close to a rise on the hill. There were some large trench-like grooves from erosion and I ran into one. Lying on my belly I waited with my gun aimed at the direction of the smell. Two seconds later a man and a woman appeared. They were following my tracks. That was something I would have to be careful

about. I could hear them over the wind:

"Did you see him?"

"I tell you, look at the tracks, they're new," the man said in a voice that sounded like glass scraped against rock. He was small and skinny, with a face that sagged from having lost weight recently. The woman was also small, though she was younger, maybe in her thirties. Her voice didn't match her look, as it was low and gruff. Both had rifles in their hands. Their accents were not filled with the twang of the countryside. My heart beat in my throat. So far meeting people, though it brought a sense of elation at having found another human being, had mostly led to violence.

Then, inside my head, the voice spoke up. If they were tracking me over a hill, one they could not see, why were they talking so loud? It defied common sense. I turned to see young man with a gun trained on me.

"I got him dad!" the young man said.

The barrel was intimidating, even after having so many trained my way. His accent, however, was soothing; it too was a school-taught and affluent voice. I could reason with him. "I am not a threat," I said and rose up slowly.

"Don't move," he barked. The man and woman had arrived and trained their guns on me. "He was going to shoot you mom, dad. He was going to shoot you both. "

A sneer crept across the man's face. "Is that right?"

"No," I said. They seemed paranoid, but with reason. "I wasn't, I just heard you two and was scared.

They all laughed.

It was sinister. Like they'd done it before. I realized then that the parents walked as one to distract, then the son came from a hidden flank to finish off those who waited, like me.

"This was a trap?" I asked.

The young man smiled. "Let's see what he has," he said and pointed to my backpack. I threw it down. He went through it like a rat. "Oh mom, dad, he has whole meals!"

"Are you guys from Portland?" I asked. Something inside me said that a family like this couldn't be cruel. They couldn't. God please tell me there's another way. The universe seemed to stand still to my plea.

"Yes," the old man said, without a hint of emotion.

"My wife was here in Portland. I was out of town. I just wanted to see if she was still alive." I thought I saw a hint of emotion in the woman's eyes. But she sneered. "Do you have any idea where she could be?"

They laughed, and sent chills down my muscles. I tensed up. There was only one way out of this situation. My intestines churned. I didn't want to do it.

"Anything else we can get from him?"

"I can tell you where to get more food," I said, trying to iron out all emotion from my words. *That* voice inside was no longer a separate entity—it was me. They had to believe me, give me some time. I had read in a magazine once that the best time to escape was in the initial parts of a kidnapping. If I didn't do that now I would be toast. I thought of making it back to see Jenny. For some reason that gave me strength to move on.

They all eyed me, trying to see through my mask.

"You don't say. How much?" the young man asked.

"Don't listen to him Anthony," the father said, in a tone that reminded me of my

professor. "He's only buying time. Shoot him. It's your turn."

The boy looked at his father as if he had some other thoughts then pulled his rifle up to his shoulder and pointed at me.

"I'm not kidding you," I said, as calm as ever. "Water too, fresh, from a spring. I just shot two rednecks for it. You can't track it back. Only I know. It's hidden." The father looked at the woman then back at me as I spoke. "And enough food to last a few years." I shrugged my shoulders.

My apathetic ruse worked and the young man lowered his rifle and looked at his father. "It seems to be the truth."

"Listen." The father seemed angry with his son, but as he spoke his rifle lowered and his finger came off the trigger.

I pulled out my two handguns. Fired them at the father. Then the son a split second later. Not sure where, but I heard the bullets hitting something. Each fell back, dropped their rifles. I trained my two guns on the woman. "Drop it. Now, bitch."

She looked around, scheming.

I fired a shot into the ground in front of her. "Last time I'm nice to you. Got it?"

She threw it on the ground, started to shake. "We didn't mean anything. Really. We were just going to take your food and leave you be." Her voice cracked. Tears glistened below her eyes.

For some reason, they stimulated a pleasant feeling inside me, like I could bathe in her remains and not care. I didn't like this. "Turn around. Shut up. Face on the ground. Hands on the back of your head."

She got on her knees and fell to the ground.

I moved over to her husband who seemed to be moving. A shotgun blast to his head stopped the movement. The son wasn't moving, but I added a shot to his face to be certain. It felt cruel. I reminded myself that their wounds were beyond repair. I threw all my food back into my backpack and threw in the men's weapons as well. Then I searched them for anything useful. All I found was a knife. The woman tried to look up.

"Don't move," I said and walked up to her. I searched her roughly, feeling her soft curves. She was old enough to have lost the firmness of her body. "Turn."

She turned to face me. "Please don't."

I paused, then brushed off her plea. "Hands behind your back." It was a weird sensation: her tears, her pleas; they felt like power. I wondered if that was what my pleas sounded like to the others. It was at that moment that I thought there was no way that Bill let me live.

My survival was destiny.

"Please," she cried. "Please don't." She raised her hands to defend her face.

"Hands behind your back."

She complied as soon as I spoke, and I enjoyed the feeling that gave me—a surge from my balls to my head. I scanned the landscape to make sure no one would surprise me. "How many others are there?"

"N-none," she said.

"I see more tracks," I lied and pointed the gun at her face.

"No, no one else, just me, my husband, my son." She let out another sob.

I felt she was putting on a show, that perhaps this was all just an act.

"You lot from Portland?"

"Yes."

"Why did you want me dead then?"

"I swear we didn't. Just your food."

The lie seemed like a taunt. I pointed the gun at her foot. "One more lie and I'll start hurting you. Got it?"

She nodded.

"Were you going to kill me?" I asked.

She seemed frozen with fear.

"What happened?"

"What?" She looked confused.

I glanced around. "The bombs, when did it happen; why did it happen?"

She still seemed confused. "The bombs?"

"Yes," I muttered, annoyed, wondering if she was playing me for more time, for me to get jumped by another son lurking somewhere.

"A war broke out."

"What do you mean?" I said through my gritted teeth. She was really annoying me.

"I don't think so. It was all so quick. There wasn't much time to think. Then the nukes fell. And didn't stop for a whole day."

"That's it?" I said.

"That's all I know. We were camping. We got lucky."

Worthless. "Okay show me where you live, keep your food and such." I motioned for her to get up.

On her feet, she looked at me wearily. "Does this mean you'll let me live?"

"Of course, I have no beef with you." In the back of my head I thought about how I had been lucky so far. By letting her live was I stretching that luck too far? A new beginning, I tell myself. Remember, it starts with you. The Bible comes back to me and I think about Jesus. I will have to win this woman over.

She glanced over at the bodies of the two men in her life and shook; tears fell from her face.

After a few seconds, I nudged her. "Move," I said thinking of their laughter when I had mentioned my wife.

I marched her for a few hundred meters before she walked to a hidden trap door in the ground. I motioned for her to enter first. She seemed in a daze, but listened.

The place was a dug out cave. There wasn't much food. I threw some in my backpack, which was full to the brim. It didn't seem like they would've survived for much longer.

"Back out." I motioned at the ladder leading out. She walked out. I closed the trapdoor. Covered it with dirt again. It would be a good place to know in the future. I marked the approximate area, judging from the terrain, on my map. A sense of accomplishment splashed over me.

We walked some ways away from her home.

"Are you going to let me live? At least just tell me. I want to live," she murmured, as if she knew her words didn't matter anymore.

A pang of regret. If someone had asked me what the first thing I would have done if the world was caught in a nuclear firestorm, I would have said: "Easy, get a group of people together and start building civilization again." What a fool I was. Who could I

trust? This woman in front of me? Could I even trust myself? Part of me wanted to ravage her body, another part wanted to shoot her dead, and a small, almost silent part said to let her go. Maybe make friends with her. That last part seemed a fool's hope. I beat it down: this was not the same world. I couldn't trust someone who had just tried to kill me. No way. Don't be stupid; those were the ways of a world now gone.

"Can you talk?" she said.

"Stop. Don't turn around."

She trembled in place.

There wasn't much else to do now. It had to be now or never. I felt warm; a tender wind caressed my skin. The sky seemed to have opened up, and some sun touched the ground. Looking to where it landed I saw a green shoot. Life was starting again. Was it a sign from God?

"Please," she said. She held herself and shook violently.

This was a chance for a new beginning. Soon the world would need to strive towards a better future. It wouldn't be built on murder. Because that's what I'll have to do: murder this woman right here and right now. There were laws from before and they had been chosen for a reason. They worked. If people forgot them, then they forgot what it meant to be human.

"Please, don't." She broke into tears.

I remembered Big Lee. Now was my chance to redeem myself. "Turn."

She shuffled around, her face contorted into a wail. I felt sorry for her. For the first time that day, I felt like she could've been Carol. If she lived through nuclear war, she could've been this lady right here, begging for mercy from another soul.

I lowered my weapon. "I'll give you two choices. Listen to me." I waited for her sobs to stop.

"You can join me, or you're free to go. You can go back to your house. Whatever. The choice is yours." She scrutinized me. I sensed her elation.

"You're not kidding me are you?"

"No." I tried to smile. It didn't come out right; at least it didn't feel like it did, because she seemed pained by it. Though she cracked a smile that seemed goofy. "You have to decide now, however, because I don't have time."

She looked around, then back at me, as if she was coming out of a dream. "I'll come with you." She stared at her hands. "I have nothing else now."

We walked in the direction of my shack for a few hours before she talked again. I let her be. After all, she'd just lost her husband and son. I hoped that me sparing her life, after I'd almost been killed, would show her the right way to live.

"So how come you don't know anything?" she said as she slowed down and walked beside me.

I didn't trust her completely, so I walked slightly behind her, made sure my gun was out of her reach.

"I was spelunking," I said.

"Cave stuff right?" she asked.

"Right."

"Your wife was in Portland when everything went down?"

"That's what I think. Don't know for sure. You found me near where our house used to be. There's nothing. I can only assume she didn't get far. After all, even the

countryside." I swept my arm to the ash land that surrounded us. "Got destroyed."

"Yeah, they sure did put a number on us," she said and tsiked. "Only satisfaction I get is that they got it worse than we did."

"How do you know that?"

"Don't know, only hope. After all, if someone survived, you think they'd have made it out here by now. Right?"

"Right," I said, not really knowing.

"Sorry," she said.

"About what?"

"Your wife. I'm sure you came out here thinking you'd find an answer. But there isn't one."

I looked her over. She was a sweet creature. Whatever distrust I had for her wasn't warranted. "I'm sorry about your family. I really am," I said.

She stayed silent for a second, looked away. "What's done is done. Now lets look towards something else." Her eyes met mine, and she gave me a brave smile.

I knew then that she'd forgiven me. That plant had been the first sign. Her smile was another sign that things were on the right track. I placed my hand on her shoulder, squeezed it.

"You a big hiker?" she asked.

"Yes, love it." I looked at the sky. It was getting dark, and I wanted to find a protected place to sleep. "You?"

"I liked the outdoors fine, my son and husband couldn't get enough of it. Guess it saved us in the end." She seemed to ponder her thought over. "Can you spare me a weapon?" she asked me in a child-like voice.

"Well..."

"In case we run into trouble. I want to be of help, not be a burden. I can shoot pretty well."

"Yeah..." I said.

"We're together in this right? So lets make the best of it. Come on." She smiled. "After all, you let me live, right?"

I pulled out a knife and handed it to her. "This for now. We'll get you something better soon... My other guns I'm too attached to." It wasn't a bad excuse, because they had saved my life twice already.

I pointed at a pile of rocks that looked like it could protect us. The sky had darkened fast, and I wondered if it would rain. "We'll sleep there."

She nodded. "Good spot."

Her agreement evaporated my suspicions. When we settled into the ground, I lay down in my jacket, my backpack to my side, hoping that it would provide some warmth. She lay near me, but not too far.

The sun was crashing into the horizon, the clouds lit up across the sky, a firestorm from the gods.

"It's beautiful isn't it?" I asked her, hoping the sunset would create a connection. Sunsets with Carol, had always been a perfect combination; a moment to stare at a dance of colors and assume that it was only for us.

"They're all beautiful," she said, as if it no longer mattered, or never quite did. "After the war, they were all great. As if the sun knew that a world of people could no longer see

it."

"Yeah," I said stupidly, though I didn't agree. It seemed like a great sign of the possibilities that now hung around my thoughts.

"Tell me, why did you let me live?" she asked.

"Why not?"

"No, really. You were going to kill me at first, but something changed your mind. I could see it in your eyes." She flashed a smile as she pointed at me with two fingers.

"What was it?"

Her eyes at that moment reminded me, for some reason, of Carol's, especially when she tried to tease the truth out of me. "Believe it or not I saw a light from the sky touch the ground and where it touched, there was a plant. I thought of new beginnings. I think what happened to me was a mistake, a matter of circumstance. I shouldn't hold that against you." I looked at her face feeling somewhat foolish for opening up this easily. "I think we can start something great.

"I do too," she said, rather quickly. There seemed to be a sneer on her face, but I was happy to have told someone about the sign. Night fell quickly and my eyes were soon drooping under their own weight.

"Good night," she said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her darkened form. The voice, the killer who was gnashing at my insides for ever letting her live, took the reins and told me not to speak too coherently. Speak like you're almost asleep. I mumbled an incoherent "goodnight."

With my other hand I grabbed the handgun, and held it tight. She had a nice face, I reminded myself, but the voice didn't care. I pretended to be in a deep sleep. But the rhythm of the air coming in and out of my lungs soon put a mask over my face and I was asleep.

The sudden noise cracked my eyes open with a sharp tug. Something had made moved. Or was it a dream? The night sky was black. The land was black. I felt like I was in a tomb. I didn't want to move for fear of waking some monster up. I was a child again. I glanced around with my eyeballs. Nothing. No shapes. It had been a dream. I shifted ever so slightly and tried to see the woman. It was too dark.

The flash of fear that broke into my visual field scared me to paralysis. In a split second, I twitched and shot the black air coming at me. Repeatedly. The knife in her hand cut into my jacket, but my shots impacted. She was a soft bag when she collapsed on me. Her chest torn open and warm blood flowed on me.

It was still too dark to see her face, but I heard her breathing, could feel it on my face, the smell of rotten garbage.

"A plant..." was all she managed to gurgle before her breathing stopped. Her voice sounded pleasant in that last moment.

I kept her body close to me for warmth, but I couldn't sleep in the end. When dawn came, I set out for the shack. My strides were full and though I scanned, I didn't slow down to observe any of the remains of civilization. I remembered that I hadn't even bothered to know the woman's name. I realized that I didn't care what she was called. I had been a fool.

Again.

When I saw the shack in the distance, I slowed down and slinked to the higher



ground just above it. I observed it for several minutes. No sound. I wondered what I would tell Jenny.

"Hey," I said sheepishly. I was still covered in blood.

She looked me up and down before finding some clothes and handing them to me. Her eyes were no longer trusting.

"When did you say Big Lee and pa were coming back?" Her eyes pierced me like a knife and it took all my energy to maintain eye contact.

Carol was gone. What I'd been clinging onto was something I couldn't believe in anymore. If I did I would lose. Yet I knew how the wife had reacted, and so too would this woman if she knew the truth. But that didn't have to be. I let the voice, my balls, speak.

"They haven't come back?" I screwed my face at her. "They should've been here yesterday at the latest. Are you certain?"

She seemed stunned, as if I slapped her. I liked that in her. I liked weakness in her.

"You think, you think they're...?" She held her hands to her face; her eyes welled up.

I stepped to her and hugged her. "I'll go look for them soon. All right?"

She cried and squeezed me. The firmness of her breasts, the small waist made my blood flow. I sensed a sharpness to the world. To her.

I made some food from the rations. Gave her some, and she ate. I watched her pouting lips devour the meal.

I rolled out a blanket and made sure my gun was next to me. I looked at her. "Sleep here," I ordered more than asked.

Carol's image flashed. Be good.

No, don't.

She was more hesitant than willing, but when I lay down, she slid next to me. Her body was warm under the covers. The blood started to rush, explode through my veins, my heart in a weightless state. My cock's skin was stretched to a point of pain. I turned to her. She put her lips next to my neck. It wasn't meant to be sensuous; I could tell that she meant nothing by it, but the voice wouldn't listen. This was not the path to a better world, where trust would be the glue amongst people. My thoughts whispered. But there was a beat in my heart that even I couldn't control.

I placed my hand on her thigh. Supple, soft. She seemed willing. I slipped my hand under her dress and on her thigh.

She flinched, but didn't move.

She was innocent.

I was hungry.

Her fear I could smell, but something in me confused it—or wanted to confuse it—for desire of the unknown.

I gave myself another chance to stop. Part of me still wanted to stop, to take a measured approach to this, to be nice, to slowly gain her trust. The rest of me laughed, mocked this part and said take it, she is one of the spoils in the battles you have fought.

Was it the memory of Carol that motivated me? Her soft, warm body that I missed and wanted to taste again? Or was it the dead bodies of Big Lee and Johnny? Their twisted bodies being eaten by insects, punishment for trying to end me—was this one more strike at their folly? No. I stopped thinking of Carol or Jenny's family.

My other hand slowly moved across her chest and barely touched her breasts. Soft.

My hands rubbed harder. Then pressed down. My heart beats like a drum, like a drum from an ancient ritual.

Mine.

All mine.

The reward would come soon. I rolled myself on her, my knees on her thighs, pinning her down, my hand now on her shoulders. Her mouth—that sensuous mouth—let out a slight wail of strain. That should have stopped me, that would have stopped me a few days ago, but I wouldn't. Couldn't.

The voice wouldn't.

My cock was roaring, and I flipped up, ripped her dress. Her arms reached up trying to push me off, but she wasn't strong enough. Her legs, those amazing hips and thighs squirmed under me, but weren't in the right place. I pulled out my cock. I leaned in for a kiss.

Her head seemed frozen, as if she was asking for more.

A lie to make the moment better.

I kissed her slowly, for a moment I tried to seduce her. Rubbed my lips against her. Her eyes seemed to look at me in awe. It might not have been awe, but that's what I wanted it to be. And I kissed her and she seemed to kiss me back. But I couldn't be certain, so I kissed her again. The voice, my cock, growled at me, swayed like gorillas, told me to stop fucking around and start fucking. No one is here to judge. Nothing is here to judge. Just you and her.

She kissed me back.

I absorbed her saliva with joy—she'd stopped kicking. Her arms were around me. She had no one else. She had nothing else—not in this world—she knew this and knew that I was hers, as much as she was mine. She'd realized this and came to her senses.

My hand felt between her legs, it was wet. I slid inside her, and she arched like a frozen gymnast, her mouth open, almost screamed. It took a few thrusts to get all the way inside her. When I finally pushed deep inside, the welcoming feel was so overwhelming, so everything that made my hips move, that made life worth it, that it only took a few extra thrusts before I came.

I collapsed on top of her breasts. Slid off her with great effort. She rested her head on my chest, as if she'd wanted it all along, but in her eyes I could see that she was looking elsewhere, thinking of something else. Maybe even someone else, but that didn't bother me.

Before I went to sleep I felt her up, still amazed at what I had, and entered her one more time.

The part that had told me to stop, not overpower her, was now the only thing that stood up and spoke inside me. It spoke and filled me with a horrendous feeling. What had I done? What had I become? I was a fool, a beast. I wanted to apologize. Instead, I just stared at her as she averted her gaze and pretended to go to sleep. I would apologize to her in due time, I thought, but for that moment I had to sleep.

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The next day I awoke to see her standing over me. My eyes darted to her hands. They were empty. They grasped her thighs, then each other. Something was bothering her. Something. Of course, I thought, you've acted like a complete animal. I got up and placed my hand on her shoulder. I wanted her forgiveness. She didn't react to my touch,

to my look, to my: "How are you feeling today?" I almost wanted to reenact the previous night, just to get some passion out of her. She stared at the bed we had slept in, as if it were some ghost speaking to her. What was it saying?

I pulled out some rations, divided them into two, and handed her half. She took it and ate quietly. I looked over at the bed again, and realized that it was covered with blood.

Oh.

I could smell the sweet metallic blood. It filled my nostrils and filtered down to my stomach. From there it wormed its way to my heart, and I felt sick.

This was not the way it should've happened. I should've earned her trust. But how? Was it supposed to be before or after she found out I killed her family? Don't be a fool. This was the only way. I remembered reading about ancient tribes, how volatile their societies were, wrecked with violence. When they vanquished their foes, they would murder all the men, and take the women as chattel. A way to expand the tribe, to expand enjoyment, and expand their genetic material. It had always seemed like the wrong way to live; yet here in a similar situation it seemed like the smartest route for me. There was no other way.

After I'd finished my meal, I looked at her slowly chewing her food. It would take her a while, but she had to accept reality. She had to stay here, and as far as I was concerned this was my place. I'd won it. It was my choice whether she stayed. I didn't say this as I surveyed the hut. There was plenty of floor space, but no place to eat a meal on, or to study. A sheet of metal lay on the floor. I grabbed it, scraping the packed dirt floor, and I leaned it against the wall. I piled the ammo cans into three separate but equal stacks and placed the sheet metal on them.

"This is our table," I said. "We will now eat here." She was still staring at the bed, the blood. It didn't seem right, as if she was in a shell. I walked to her and lifted her chin. I wanted some recognition. She looked up at me, not with fear, not with hate, but without a sliver of recognition.

My heart sank. I'd been a monster to her. What was I thinking? Time, she needed time.

I walked back to the new table and pulled out my map. I marked where we were, the cave, and approximately where Bill and Paul lived. I remembered that I wouldn't want all these places to be found by anyone with the map. So I picked a few other random places and marked them with letters. Every third letter was a legitimate site. I drank some water. It was horrid, like urine.

"Where did they get this water from?" I asked her. She looked at me then back at the bed. This was too much. There was a world to rebuild, and she didn't seem to understand that. I strode over to her with a great force in my step. She jumped back, a startled deer, I grabbed the blanket, that was almost stiff from the dried blood, and threw it outside. We would deal with it later. For now I needed to get water. "Where did they get water from?" I raised my voice.

She looked at me, fear in her eyes. "I don't know. Some of it is from our piss."

I convulsed at the thought; then remembered that it wasn't so bad: just water, some minerals, and ammonia. I'd get real water today. Clean, clear, water, that she'd be amazed by. She'd come around slowly. I was in the right here, I repeated in my head. I walked out of the shack, gun in hand, backpack full of containers, and a heavy weight in my stomach.

The walk to the cave was uneventful. The sky seemed the same bleak nothingness that it had always been. A few rays peeked out, but what I had considered wondrous was now banal.

When I came back she was sitting in the same chair.

She was taking this act too far.

"Are you ever going to get up and do something?" I half-yelled.

She looked up at me. No words; looked right through me in fact. Half of me wanted to plead with her, wanted to ask for something from her mind, but the other half was willing to drag her through this world, whatever the mood, without a care for anything besides her sex. I pondered this, took her shape in, took her mood in. I'd expected that she would have been more conceding, that the way this world had affected everyone in it, including me, was something she would have to get used to; adjust her little moral world for, not the other way around. I would have to be gentle during that adjustment period.

The water. She would appreciate that. I walked over to her and poured some of the water into a cup. "Drink that up, it tastes great," she looked at the cup, then me. As if I was some monster. It hurt. Didn't she know what I'd been through? "Try it," I said firmly.

She took the cup and drank it all, one gulp, held out the cup for more. I poured more. She drank that up. I poured more. She sipped, stopped and looked at me. "Any sign of pa and Big Lee?"

Was that what was on her mind? Of course, I should've been more understanding. She was my only companion in the entire world. Universe. It was tough to think of it in that manner. And to think that she was going to hate me made it worse. I wanted to confess to her—as I stood there, staring at the abyss of nothingness between us, with the thought that the previous night had been complete evil, even though it'd felt good—that I wished I could've taken it back. Not been a beast, a horrible man, an animal that preys on young flesh. There was a kindness left in me. I was still trying to find a way to her heart, and I contemplated falling on my knees, confessing everything, telling her what had happened, how I had been attacked, been ruthlessly targeted, for no reason. But I didn't, she couldn't possibly understand. Besides, being firm had worked so far. I had been honest the night before with that wife. That's what got me in trouble. Use what she fears, I told myself, use what she is frightened of and sooner or later she will come to see that you are her only hope.

Oh hope.

"Jenny." I lifted her chin so her eyes had to look at me, she stared downwards.

"The water was good," she whispered.

"Big Lee and Johnny." The truth was right there, a scary proposition. One that was almost impossible, but still called me to speak it. "I will start a search for them, but you have to tell me everything you know. It will make it easier to track them. All right?" The lie felt better.

She nodded her head. Her face impassive as ever. I wasn't certain if it had inspired her.

"First, have you ventured out of here? This shack?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Listen, you want to find your family, right?"

"Yes."

"Then you have to be more cooperative."

The look she gave me struck at my heart like a knife.

Be strong.

"I know you must not like me right now, but believe me," I said as I put on the most earnest face I could manage. "I am trying to help."

Her eyes felt my face like a blind man's hands. "Okay."

"Have you been outside this shack?"

"Only to look around, once."

"They didn't let you out?"

"They did, once it was safe. But that was only a week ago," she said.

"How did they know it was safe?"

"Rats."

"Rats?"

"Yes, in a cage. At first we had to wear suits." She pointed at some sinister looking plastic protective suits on the wall, masks next to them. "The rats died from something outside. Then they didn't." She shivered.

"Then they decided they could go out. They let me take a look, but it scared me too much."

I nodded and reached for her hand, but she shirked back from me. There was nothing between us. One step at a time, I reminded myself.

"And did they find anyone when they started to check things out?"

She shook her head.

"Do the names Bill and Paul sound familiar?"

"Oh... They mentioned them. But they didn't say much. Only that they were our neighbors. Not friends."

That was my in. "Anyone else?"

"No."

She still hadn't looked at my eyes. I would have to get over that. "What about places for water, or food? They mention anything that they found?"

She shook her head.

I raised my hand to my lips to make it look like I was thinking. "I think I will try to find this Paul and Bill. Then we'll see. You want to come out with me?"

"No. It scares me."

"And what about this." I waved my hand at the inside of the shack. "This all you want to see everyday?"

"It's home."

A simple girl. And I'd taken her away from it. Meaning was ripped from my actions.

I remembered Paul and Bill. I would have to confront them. Sooner or later they would either come for me or we'd run into each other at the water hole. Then it would be trouble. Big Lee and Johnny had been right.

I thought about food, if we ever ran out I could set traps for insects and rats. "What about the rats, did you catch any recently?"

"No."

"Any reason?"

"Pa said they're dead too. That soon it would be our turn."

Those words struck me harder than they should've. I grabbed a rifle and two handguns and rustled through the ammunition boxes for more bullets. Paul and Bill. I

opened the door and looked outside. Nothing. The sky was still covered in a gray texture. Some rays pierced through. They didn't seem so miraculous. I turned to her. "You know how to shoot?"

She nodded; her eyes were once again fixated on where we had slept the previous night.

"You have a gun?" I asked.

She shook her head; she still refused to look me in the eye.

"You want one?"

"No."

"Why not?" As I spoke I wondered if it was a good idea to give her a weapon in her state. I could very well find myself on the wrong side of the barrel.

"Why does it matter?"

Her dejection was contagious. In the back of my mind I knew that she hadn't been like that when I first met her. "Hey, I'll be back. I'm going to look for your family. Got it?"

She nodded. But that wasn't enough.

"Got it?" I said loudly.

That startled her and she looked up and once again examined my face with her eyes. "Yes."

I don't know what I'd expected. For her to look at me like what happened last night was an amazing event? That we now had a connection? Yes I wanted that. If she didn't, she was somehow a fool who couldn't see reality for what it was. I shut the door behind me and locked it. It was for her own good.

I approached the cave slowly, hiding behind rocks until I came to the mouth. I listened for some sign of life. Nothing. I moved back to the satellite peak behind the cave and looked in the direction of Paul and Bill's homestead. A line was traced in the distant flat land. The sleds. Unless I watched this path everyday there was no way I could get them. I entertained leaving them alone. No, they were running low on food and would soon be after me. This was no time to be weak. But I felt weak.

The land before me was desolate, a cemetery more than anything else. No wonder Jenny had looked at it once and stayed in the shack. She was more human than I.

Please. Don't. The words rang in my head. I felt the shock of melancholy ripple through my body. Yet I had, over and over again. Who was to blame? Surely it couldn't be my fault? But the look Jenny gave me. What was that? I felt Coral's ghost looking at me.

Silence. My thoughts got louder. What a land. What fruits could it possibly bear? I let my hands catch my face, as my head fell forward. I cried. Sobbed uncontrollably. It was a pathetic show, but without anyone around it didn't matter. I needed the release. Poor Jenny.

Big Lee and Johnny.

The other family.

All dead.

I'd massacred an entire family! Taken the mother prisoner. She must have thought I was horrendous. A madman. Taken advantage of a young woman. These thoughts circled around my head like vultures, each taking their turn to dive. I tried to shake them off. There was nothing anymore, I reminded myself, there was no higher power, no group of

peers to judge me. I was alone and free. Besides, the blame could not be laid at my doorstep. I'd been attacked each time. What else could I have done?

A weak wind picked up, blew dry air against my skin. It was chilly, odorless. I wanted to see some weather. Something other than the bleak everyday-nothing that I'd seen so far. Then the wind whipped around, and I smelled flesh, body odor. Not Jenny's sweet smell, but a dirty, grimy, manly smell. I looked in the direction of the wind and stole a quick glance behind me.

I cocked my head; the child of an echo touched my ears. Someone was nearby. I pointed my rifle in the direction of the noise. Silence again. My heart beat against my lungs, almost worried me that it would make too much noise. My stomach churned. It was as if my body was rebelling against another encounter with people. At the same time my mind focused on the land around me with a laser-like intensity. I felt invincible, as if anything could come at me, and I wouldn't have flinched.

I saw one head appear, then a second one, then the sleds behind them. They were halfway up the hill to the cave. From their walk, movements, I knew it was Paul and Bill. I wrestled with what to do. Carol and rebuilding a new world. But there was also the wife and how I survived so far. My mind clicked. The threat they posed now seemed greater than any existential question I could ask myself. It was more important to have them killed, and save myself, than to worry about how much anguish it would cause me to kill them. They tried to kill me first. I couldn't expect to find peace with them alive.

I placed Paul in my sights. They were at least 400 meters away. This was an untested rifle. If I missed they could easily hide and launch some counter attack. Then I wouldn't be so lucky. My handguns I'd used several times now, and I knew that they were trustworthy. I slid back from the edge of the peak. Crouching, I ran towards the mouth of the cave. They would take at least a few more minutes, pulling those sleds, to get to the cave.

I slung the rifle over my shoulder, so it was behind me, and pulled out my two handguns. I double-checked to make sure bullets were chambered. I raised each gun up to my chest. Off to the left of the cave entrance, I waited behind a large rock jutting out from the hill.

Every other second I'd check behind me, check above me. Two minutes later, I wondered if I'd misjudged which direction they were headed. I looked behind me, tried to listen for some sort of dislodged rock falling down the hill. But I couldn't hear a thing. My heart started to bang against my ribcage. This is a trap, the voice said. You need to get out and at least find higher ground. Find a place where you can shoot them from a long distance, and from where you can hide if anything goes wrong. Coming this close to them will only put you at risk. Fool.

I was about to turn and find refuge in the higher ground when the sliding sleds with matching footsteps crunched on the other side of the rock.

"Leave the sleds here, we'll take the containers down, then bring them up one by one."

"Why don't you stay here with the sleds. I'll get the water myself."

I could tell there was some tension in Bill's voice. I glanced behind me one last time.

"What's been gettin' to you Bill? How can you fit through that hole? We'll both go."

I heard some containers scrape against the sleds. It was now or never.

I stepped out. Both arms extended with the handguns gripped tight. My foot

crunched under some rocks and Paul looked up, startled. I fired into his chest. He looked shocked. I fired again into his face. The shock switched to nothing as he collapsed to the floor.

Bill stared at me. Fear crept across his face, then an infantile acceptance, not of his fate but of me. It made me pause for a second. But in that second the voice chanted my doubts down. He just lost a friend. Don't make the same mistake as you did with the mother. It's not like he didn't try to kill you. The last cogitation filled me with another second of hesitation before I pulled the trigger. Right in his stomach. He doubled over. I fired another shot into the top of his head. He fell over in a funny position, his ass in the air, before he toppled over to his side.

It had to be done.

I walked over to Paul. Checked his pulse. Nothing. Tapped his eyeballs. Nothing. Same with Bill. His face was nice, kind, like a child's. With one hand I covered his face with his shirt. It exposed his belly, but that was better than seeing his face. I followed their trail for a few meters then stopped and waited. Just to see if someone else was with or following them. When I was certain there was no one. I walked back to their bodies. All I could hear was my heart beating. All I could taste was blood in my mouth. I tongued my gums. Blood flowed. It tasted metallic. Good.

One by one I searched them for anything worth keeping, rolled them on to a sled, dragged them to the edge of the hill, and tipped them over. I hid the sleds above the cave, partially covering them with ash and rocks.

I picked up a few containers and tied them to my backpack before walking back to the shack. My heart had slowed down and I felt elated, like an invincible ghost. This holy feeling worried me.

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Jenny sat in the same place as when I'd left. I saw her and an anger grew inside me. I didn't care about the previous night. I wanted to see some appreciation for the other things I had done for her.

Don't be too firm.

I walked up to her and placed my hand on her shoulder. The same dress, it even had my smell on it. It was probably better not to tell her what had happened.

The look on Bill's face flashed across my mind again. I felt weak. I felt more human. "Change," I said to her, shaking her softly with my hand.

Her stolid look shook me out of my spell, and I lumbered outside to take a piss. When I came back inside she hadn't moved. "Is there a toilet here? You said you rarely went out."

She pointed at some small bags. I looked them over. "Well no more wasting bags. From now on you go outside and do your business, got it?"

Her look was sharp. Empathy rose inside me. I walked over to her. She needed some kind of focus, then she would be able to get over this. "Listen. I don't know what your problem is, but I'm not your enemy."

Another sneer.

I looked around the shack again. It needed cleaning. Rearranging. "I ran into Bill and Paul."

No reaction from her.

"I think they ran into Big Lee and your father. I finished them off, but I couldn't find



your family." I clasped my hand around her shoulder. She nodded slowly. I leaned in to hug her. She stayed stiff. "Sorry," I whispered in her ear.

I pulled back.

"I said change, didn't I?" I said in the softest voice I could manage.

She got up and pulled out another dress. It was white with flowers, though still dirty. She stared at me blankly for a few seconds before I got the message. I walked away and started to arrange the cans in an orderly manner. After a minute I turned to take her in. The dress fell casually on her breasts, her hips. It grabbed all the air from my lungs. Everything in me wanted to take her one more time. It wouldn't matter would it? As far as I was concerned it didn't. No one else in the world but the two of us. Be nicer, I thought.

I counted the ammunition remaining. I would need more. I decided that tomorrow I would head out to Bill and Paul's place to fish for some ammunition. I perked up trying to remember if there was anyone else with them. They hadn't mentioned any, had they?

I paused my planning to take Jenny's curves in; it filled me with raw energy. She was beautiful, and she was mine. New world, I reminded myself. There was nothing that mattered but survival. And in the most basic sense we were the last hope for the human race. Pure and simple. She would come to understand that with age. Her eyes moved around the shack and rested on the place we slept the previous night.

The light peeking through the shack was turning sepia. Another gorgeous sunset. I wanted to enjoy it with her.

"Listen," I said and strode over to her. She sat on the chair with that grim look on her face. I remembered that she was probably a teenager and still liable to fall into moods. Sooner or later she would come around. I rested on my haunches, my face next to her knees. "Are you thinking about your family?"

She nodded her head, some tears poured down her cheek. I almost smiled. It wasn't something wrong with me. She obviously was going through a tumultuous time. I took her hands in mine and leaned forward to hug her as she shook.

"I'm sorry. But I got the men who killed them."

"Are you certain they're dead?" She leaned back to take in my face. Again she studied me, like she was looking to poke through my mind.

I nodded, suppressing a smirk. "Before I killed one he said as much."

"You didn't say that before."

"Sorry. They're dead." It was better I said it now and wait for her to get over the loss. I glanced her over. Her cleavage peaked through the top of her dress.

She cried for a few more minutes. Let her face rest on my chest. I felt like it was the best that I could get out of her. I took her hand, led her outside, and sat us down on a rock with a vista of the land that was ours.

The sky had managed to outdo itself this time. It bled orange, red and amber, over a sheet of cracked glass, each separate pane a slightly different color.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She looked at me, curious, then nodded her head and rested her head on my shoulder. Her hand came down on my other side. I felt calm and collected as the panes in the east slowly turned dark purple then black and spread to the west. When it was done an evil blackness came over the land, and I felt cold. I held her closer, and she hugged me back. We went back inside, and I made us food. After dinner, I laid out some other clothes for a

makeshift bed and lay beside her.

"We'll have to get some work done. You're going to have to help. All right?" I said.

She nodded her head and buried it in my chest. I pulled her tight, felt her curves with my hands.

"How did you kill those two men?" she asked.

The question seemed out of place. Her voice was filled with a certain hunger I couldn't quite understand. "I shot them."

She looked me in my eye then studied my face. It was an uncomfortable feeling. "How do you feel?"

I shrugged. I could still see Bill's face. Feel his presence in the room. I could feel Big Lee's words in the room too. Please... Don't. Why burden her with that? "Nothing. They were bad men."

"Have you killed men before?" she asked.

Your Family.

"No," I lied.

Again she scrutinized my face. Could she tell in the small pauses, the fact that I took a nanosecond more to think, that I was lying? No, she was too young.

"They were our only neighbors," she said.

"How can you be certain?" I said, trying to change the direction of the conversation.

"Pa said so. He said there was no one around for miles."

"Well we can't be certain, there is a lot of exploring to do," I said.

I had the plan in my head. Each day pick a direction and walk. I had to find soft soil. I had to find a way to live. The rations around us wouldn't last more than a year, if we were lucky. I wanted to find a place that was well hidden, better protected. I also wanted to find people.

"And you killed them. The only other people." She finally held eye contact with me for a few seconds before she shifted her gaze somewhere behind me.

What was she getting at? I wanted to dig into her mind. Now. Now. Now. "What are you trying to say?" I nudged her. "That I shouldn't have defended myself?"

"You were defending yourself?" she asked. Her voice strained with doubt.

"Yes. Do you think they gave your family a chance?"

"One man can't kill two people unless he surprises them."

She stayed silent. I did too.

"I did." My voice cracked as I said it.

She moved her body away from me. Though it was only a few inches, the distance scared me. As if I was on the edge of a cliff, wind whipping on my back. How could I possibly get to her? Did she know the lie about her family? Could she sense the killer inside me? This wasn't fair. She had to be on my side. We were the only two people left. We had nothing but each other. Why didn't she see that?

"Listen," I waited for her to look at me. "Could you please tell me what's going on with you?"

She looked at me. "I don't know," she said.

"Please understand that I am trying to help. Would you rather I leave?"

Nothing. But her eyes seemed to jump at the thought.

"Is that it? What will you do? Who will protect you? You think the next men that find you will be nice to you?" I drew in some air. "We are the only people around, so

we need to stick together." I looked for her hands. "I know the land looks daunting, but there's hope. We have a chance to make something here. Sooner or later we'll find people and we can build something together. Do you understand?"

She didn't reply.

The next day, using the hills as cover, I took her to Bill and Paul's container. The walk took a few hours. I went inside first, searched everything. They had dug out several different chambers for themselves. I grabbed as much ammunition as I could, gave a load to Jenny and headed back. It took a few days going back and forth to clear their place out of everything useful. Their food doubled our rations. They had kerosene lanterns, batteries, radios, grenades, a machine gun with several belts, tripwires, oil, generators, filters, knives, acetylene torch, steel beams, other survival items, and books; books on survival, on growing, on surviving a nuclear holocaust. I wondered if this literature was based on actual knowledge.

When we transferred everything, I made another decision to move to the cave. The shack was too small. Jenny seemed all right with the move, if a little recalcitrant. Every time I said something, she would listen, do a task but stayed away from looking at me or speaking a word.

I let her be. She needed to mourn her family. And now, more than ever, I felt a strong connection to her, as if we were finally a couple.

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"I'm going to burn down their place tomorrow. We got everything we wanted from it," I said.

We were sleeping together in the cave. I'd managed to cover the entrance so that it was hidden. I'd glued rocks on a metal sheet for a door. Someone might have found it if they looked closely, but for the most part the concealment was perfect. The cave was now home. And I hoped that being away from the shack would help her forget her family quicker. I threw the blanket away as well. Better to eliminate the evidence of that night.

"Why?" she asked.

Her words startled me. Spoken softly, they broke her silent cocoon like a sledgehammer. I could smell her clothes, her sex. I wanted her, but I didn't want her to contradict me, or ask too many questions. "What do you mean?"

"I mean didn't you say you wanted to build something in the world? How can you do that if you're burning things down?" she said.

"Yes, we'll build things soon, but that place could become a hiding place for our enemies," I said. Her glare made me feel like an insect.

"How do you know there's anyone around?"

"I don't." Her questions were angering me. "Besides maybe the fire could attract people as a signal," I said as the thought came to me.

"But you just said they could be our enemies," she said, feigning patience.

I fought the urge to shake or slap her. I was *not* a monster. "Okay we won't burn it."

"You can do what you want. I was only asking." She turned away from me.

I spent the rest of my night staring at her back and the black emptiness that was our cave. It felt so cozy. That feeling turned into a sense of injustice at the cards that I had been dealt. I hadn't asked to be attacked. Self-defense had been my only choice. I couldn't explain that to her anymore. If she ever found out that she was with the man who killed her family, she would certainly end me then and there.

Jenny agreed to come with me. She scared me when she pulled out a rifle and filled it with ammunition with a learned smoothness. She was better with guns than I was. The thought frightened me—she could kill me any time she chose, as my guard was always down around her—and also filled me with hope—she hadn't tried to kill me yet. Why? With another handgun tucked under her dress, she came along with me. The hills were rocky, a tortuous up and down.

"We'll sleep here," I said and pointed to some rocks. We'd been walking for almost an entire day. Jenny had once again reverted to silence, and stared at the place my finger aimed at. That all the space she touched seemed to come to life, that I hoped to be in her good graces again, made me realize that I loved her. The romantic in me still wanted to fall on my knees and ask her forgiveness. The voice, the one that threw my eyes to every shadow and place where the wind rustled, told me never to try such a thing and show weakness. It had a point. Her silence was driving my mind to spin. I had to leave her.

"I'm going to check out the surrounding area," I said and walked off over a rise in land. We had come to stop in a saddle between two satellite peaks. The ground here was as dirty and rocky as anywhere else. I kept an eye out for plant shoots. Waiting to see if life was slowly rearing its head, but I couldn't see anything.

I walked up one peak, sat down and listened. The sun's rays were getting weaker, and soon darkness would crash all around me. I looked at the overcast sky and realized that it wasn't lighting up like it usually did. I smelled the air. Nothing. It was depressing. I couldn't smell soil; I couldn't smell myself; the only sound was a distant wind carving up the world like it had done before mankind and it would do long after us; it would only stop when the atmosphere burned up and drifted away as the sun turned into a red dwarf.

What was I striving towards here? A life with Jenny? So our kids could grow up in a land like this with no hope—or the slim hope that there was another group of people out there? Then when the possibilities were exhausted, would they revert to incest? What a life. It would be mercy to end that right now. And for all that, I knew a smile from Jenny would change my mind in a heartbeat. And what if we found a group right now? Would they accept us?

I walked back down and up to the next satellite peak. This one was more of a dark brown color. I kicked the rocks. It was the same as before. Nothing could grow in this hard soil. The sky was still overcast and only lost its light as the sun set. The lack of color only added to my sense of loss and I walked back to Jenny.

Jenny was under the blanket when I returned.

"You eat?" I ask.

"Not hungry."

I didn't push the matter, as it was better to save some of our rations.

I lay down next to her. Tried to push my body towards hers. No reaction.

"The sun didn't light up the sky. Depressing, isn't it?" I said.

"Why?"

Sometimes her questions were like a child's. They were getting tiresome. "You didn't like the sunset yesterday?"

"I did."

"Then wouldn't you want to see that again?"

"Maybe. Does it matter? The sun will do what it wants and we're still down here."

I nodded my head without meaning it. I leaned over her to see her face better. "What is it that keeps you going then?"

"Nothing."

It wasn't the answer I wanted from her. "What about the future of mankind?"

"Why should that bother me?"

I couldn't reply. Why should it?

"Do you believe in God?"

"I did."

"And now?"

She looked at me then touched my hand and pulled herself closer to me. I could feel her breathing on my cheek. It startled me. Her touch was a thousand sunsets.

We made love that night. As best as people grinding on top of rocks could. Every caress of hers drove me further into a hole of happiness. And I woke up with her head on my chest and the feeling of accomplishment on my mind.

I moved out from under the blanket and into the cold morning. The air bit at me. The sun cracked out from under the overcast sky near the horizon. I walked in a circle, crouching, trying to see any footprints, other than ours. We were alone. I walked to the satellite peak and found a flat rock to sit on. I looked down on the ground. Lifeless. What I would have given to see a sign of insects crawling around. Did they only come out to eat the dead? What did natural selection have to say about that? That they would soon develop a taste for us? Eat us in our sleep? I shivered at the thought.

Jenny.

She would save me from all this. I'd treated her wrong that night. But that hadn't been me. It was some animal that had allowed me to survive. The only other people out there who had survived this far were lucky, killers, who knew better than to trust another soul that was trying to survive like them. So what would happen in this new world? Surely some agreement or truce would come from it? The more I thought, the more I wondered why I was trying to find other people. Would I want to? If all the population centers had been hit, which in a grand mutually assured strike they would have, then why was I trying to walk towards them? The only places that wouldn't have been struck would be places that were of no one's concern. Correct? The United States and all other major players would have been wiped out, but places like the Amazon would hold no value. Then I would have to go far away from population centers. Travel to or through Central America.

I shook my head, spat on the ground. Watched my saliva as it sat there, an abomination on the otherwise pristine earth.

Central America? That was my hope. With the sleds we had enough food to get down there. If it was untouched by nukes it would be filled with people. Perhaps people like Bill, Paul, Big Lee, and Johnny. People who had nothing more to do than be territorial. I was unlikely to find someone as enlightened as I was. If that was the case, all hope was lost. Besides, I didn't want to travel that far. I had to make something here.

I got up as the sun floated higher in the sky, hidden behind the clouds, which seemed to be losing their thickness. It was time to move and find something. The thought of finding other people still jumped about my mind. What would I do?

As I walked down the peak, I took another deep breath. The air had warmed

considerably since I woke up. A scent, something familiar, something that I hadn't smelled in a very long time, hit me. It was organic, but it wasn't human. Soil. Not the barren soil between the rocks that I'd smelled so far, but fertile soil. Soil that I'd smeared across my knees a million times as a boy. I trotted back to Jenny who stretched with the blanket covering her legs.

"Jenny, you awake?"

She looked at me with half opened eyes. "Yes?" She smiled.

The smile caught me off guard. Could it be that she'd forgiven me? That last night wasn't just a moment of weakness? I grinned, eager for more. "Do you smell that?"

She sniffed. "No, what is it? People?"

"No, soil!"

Her look evaporated, and she gave me a sympathetic look. Then she laughed. "Soil?"

"Yes, soil," I said and chuckled. Her eyes sparkled. This was all that mattered. The rest of the world could smolder for the rest of eternity, all I needed was one more look like that from her. "Soil that we can grow plants on. I'm sure of it."

She sniffed the air and nodded her head imperceptibly. "It does smell like that."

I started packing our things. I didn't want to look her in the face anymore. If I did, I was liable to break down in her arms. Her last words were encouraging. They could've been said to satiate me, or they could have been said in earnest. Both were good signs.

"Let's see," I said.

We walked up the satellite peak and back down it. The smell grew stronger. It would drift away sometimes, we'd change direction and it would return. Soon, near the bottom of the hill, close to where the plains stretched out, I saw a patch of mud. Green shoots sprouted out of it.

I focused on the patch of plants. They looked like weeds, and the patch was about ten yards in diameter, but it seemed like a piece of paradise. I took out my map and made a note. We would leave it be for now and come back when the plants were older.

"This shows that the world is growing again. That we will soon be able to live normally," I said.

"That we will be able to build?" Her tone felt like a punch. Had the size of the patch turned her off?

I tried to ignore the comment. Only a minute ago she seemed full of life and now... There was only so much I could take. After all, I had decided not to burn down Bill's place.

"We'd better get going," I said, and placed the map in my pocket. We marched back up to the ridge and continued towards the south.

Two hours later we came upon a cliff face that couldn't be scaled. The wall was wrinkled with sleeves of orange rock. We followed the base of the cliff until we found a path that cut up into the cliff face. I didn't like the feel the path gave; it put us at the mercy of anyone who was on top. Still, I couldn't smell anyone or hear anything, so I figured it would save us some time.

We walked up this natural alleyway for half an hour. Each time I looked back I could see more and more of the land. The shape of our hill, where our cave was located, stood a distant reminder that we had something to go back to.

That's when I heard the voices. Multiple low voices echoing down the path we were walking up. There was no place to hide. We could've run back from where we came, but

if they wanted, they could mow us down. There was no choice. My heart jumped into my throat. I looked at Jenny who grabbed a hold of my sleeve. The voices were clearer now. Men. I pulled out my rifle from my back and held it. Jenny did the same. Her other hand checked her hidden handgun.

Then I glimpsed the men as they walked down towards us. They didn't have the slightest hesitation in their strides. All laughed and talked to one another as if no one would ever hear them. I looked above us to see if anyone was checking their flanks. There wasn't any movement. My heart slowed down. I could handle them. Jenny shuffled her feet. Her breathing increased, and she looked at me and gave a small smile.

I smiled back. I would be fine, as long as she was on my side.

Four men. No one else behind them. At least the odds weren't bad. Assuming Jenny did her part too. I could smell their body odor and unchanged underwear from twenty yards away.

They were so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't notice us until they were ten meters away.

"Hello." I raised my hand.

My voice scattered their thoughts as they looked at me, then Jenny, then pulled out their rifles.

"Easy," I said. "I have no problems, I just want to pass. Me and my wife," I glanced up and back behind us. No one.

The men looked at each other, still shocked. They were lean, dressed in black. Though the black was more from dirt than actual dye. The two on the flanks seemed the youngest. They kept looking at the other two for what to do next. Of the two in the middle, the one on the left was old, fifties maybe, while the one to the right was thirty. All looked they were in the same family, with sharp noses and chins that pointed to the same point in front of their faces. Finally the oldest one spoke up. "You say you want to get past us?"

Though his tone was uncertain, there was a level of anger and contempt in it.

"Yes, please," I said.

"What business do you have here?" the old man's said, louder and angrier. I could hear his twang.

"Well. We were hoping that we could find people. To trade with. To talk to." I looked over at Jenny who seemed to be annoyed. "Are ya'll alone?"

"We have more people," one of the younger ones said with a fearlessness that was troubling. "Plenty more people. You?"

"No." There was no need to lie. I had to try to reach out to these people. "But we come as friends."

They all cackled together.

It reminded me of Big Lee.

Please... Don't.

Was this how it was always going to be? Anger bubbled up inside me.

"Is that so? Well we don't," the old man barked. "Throw your gun down. You too sweetheart," he said and smiled at Jenny. "You'll be fine with us. We're just going to take you with us."

Jenny threw her weapon down and I felt sad, betrayed, as if there wasn't anything else for me to do. If I lost her what else was there?

"I can't do that," I said.

"The hell you can't. We outnumber you four to one. Give us your woman, throw your weapon down, and we'll send you back where you came from."

I didn't believe him. Once my weapon was down I would be dead. He had every reason to kill me, and none to let me live. "All right," I said and lowered my rifle. "Lower your guns first." My chest felt weak.

The old man gave a signal and the rest of them lowered their weapons.

I kneeled down, setting my rifle on the ground. I looked at Jenny who turned to me and gave me a wink, then mouthed: one, two. She stepped back to my right, her left hand on the handgun under her dress.

I reached for my two handguns, pretended to stumble forward then flashed them out, firing at the older men in the middle.

It was a wise choice. The two men in the middle were the first to raise their rifles and my bullets landed with comforting thuds on their chests. I fired three more shots into the two men. Their rifles fell out of their hands. In my periphery I saw the two young men jump back, then raise their rifles. I shot the one to the left and he stumbled back. I heard another shot go off and saw that Jenny had shot the last young man right in the face. He collapsed, a lump of flesh.

I moved towards the men, fired into the two old men's heads as I stepped over them and walked to the young man I'd shot. He took shallow breaths as he scratched his chest. I kicked the rifle out of his hand and picked it up. I was calm, a monk who had attained Nirvana, not a care in the world. I pointed the rifle at his face.

"How many more are there?" I asked.

He shook his head.

I pointed the rifle at his knee and fired. He screamed. I pointed it at his balls. "It can be slow or quick. How many?"

"Three!" He spat out blood. He was young. Blue doe-eyes, skinny but with some baby fat on his cheeks.

"Who?" I asked.

"My mom, sister, dad."

"No one else?"

He shook his head. He was too scared to tell a lie—I was sure of that.

"How far?" I asked.

"Don't hurt them, please."

"I won't. I promise." I jammed the gun into his balls.

"About a mile away." He strained to keep his eyes open. "Some water. Please."

Please...Don't. Big Lee's last words rushed back to me—what had he meant? Don't kill him? Or was he trying to warn me away from Jenny? That possibility ran through my intestines like a rock, and my visual field bent, as my equilibrium was lost. I crouched unto my haunches. I reached for my canteen and unscrewed it. Then I handed him the water. He drank the whole thing.

"That was good." He licked his lips, a child-like smile spread on his face as if there was a secret he couldn't hold back. I looked around again to make sure there wasn't anyone else.

"Anything else? Have you met any other people?"

"No one friendly," he said.



I bent over his face to hear him; his voice cracked.

"Other people always try to take from us," he said and stopped to swallow, then grimaced. "Beware."

"Beware what?"

He started to spasm. "Please, it hurts. Everything hurts. Make it quick."

My Zen-like state evaporated. He was brave. Even I could see that.

I pointed the rifle at his face, and he closed his eyes. I leaned my head back and pulled the trigger. Blood, skull and brain splattered on the ground.

I surveyed the bodies at my feet. None moved.

Jenny stood staring at the bodies, her mouth open. She'd done well, made me proud. I walked up to her and took her hand in mine. "Jenny?"

She was staring at the bodies like she'd stared at the blanket on which we first had sex.

"Jenny, please don't look." I placed my hand on her cheek and pulled her face towards mine.

"I killed him."

"You had to."

"I killed him."

She was not as tough as I hoped. She could shoot straight but that was it. The mother I'd killed earlier that week was made of more resilient material. Jenny was a gentle flower; I should have kept her at home. But, I reminded myself, if I hadn't I would be dead.

"We have to get going. Don't look," I said and picked up her rifle, placed it in her hand. There had been too many gunshots. If the others were a mile away they would have heard something and be coming soon.

I led her some way up past the bodies. Told her to wait and went back to strip them of ammunition. My backpack was already heavy, but that was fine with me. I packed two of their rifles and pulled the other two apart, exposing the bolts and firing pins, and threw those as far as I could. Then I ran back to Jenny who stood teetering.

I took her hand and walked her out of the orange-rock-alleyway that now stunk of blood and flesh and shit. Once we got to higher ground there was a narrow trail that led around a cylindrical four hundred foot peak. The land here was an orange-brown color, and there weren't many other choices but the narrow trail. I led Jenny down the path until it opened up on the other side of the peak. Here the ground dropped off rapidly. In front of us, I could see a couple of shacks that lay in a natural divot under the shadow of the peak. I moved back behind a large rock with Jenny. She looked scared of me.

"Are you going to hurt them?" she asked.

What could I say? "I don't know. If they find those bodies they'll come after us. We won't be able to hide. Always looking over our backs. Do you understand?" I said. They wouldn't forgive me. Looking in her eyes I knew that she wouldn't either.

She shook her head. I could see the child with moods had returned. There wasn't going to be a way into her mind, but I had to try. The night before had been so sweet.

"I have to go and at least see what's going on. You stay here. Okay? If some one comes fire in the air once." I took her hands, but they were limp. I wanted to beat on her chest and wake her up from her little world. This was real life, and she needed to face it. Please... Don't.

I left her and entered the depression with shacks, three clustered around a central area that had the burn marks of a fire pit. My eyes adjusted to the shadows. The walls of the surrounding rock rose up ten feet on all sides—a perfect sanctuary. The smells of life were everywhere. Voices came from a shack; one was low, calm. There was a plot full of budding plants not too far away. I backed into a dark corner. The entire compound was about twenty by twenty yards wide. I watched as a father came out with his wife. Behind them was a little girl. Three, like the boy had said.

I raised my rifle. Was this the only way into the future? If I took this step there would be no turning back. Bill's face, innocent like a child flashed.

Had he let me live?

I would never know.

Please... Don't.

What had I become? And if this was what it took to survive, to live long enough to pass on my genes to my offspring, did I want it?

But Jenny—the look in her eyes—was all I cared about.

Please... Don't.

What a choice.

\*

Jenny was right where I left her.

"Let's go," I said and reached for her hand.

She pulled her hand away from me. Her eyes were blank. That frightened me. I would rather have seen the passion of anger than that. We walked back, past the bodies, through the night, stumbled over rocks until we were back in our cave. She went inside and fell asleep.

It was dawn, so I stayed up and marked what was what on the map.

I looked at the horizon we'd just come back from. There was nothing, not a speck. I looked in the other direction. Nothing again. I went back to the cave and rearranged some metal sheets so we had rooms, a place for the shower. I drew a contraption that could provide showers for us. I missed Jenny's smile. And I wished that I hadn't killed Bill and Paul. And all the others.

And what would death be but a sweeter caress than what I'd experienced?

As evening came I went back in the cave and watched Jenny sleeping. She crouched in the fetal position and mumbled in some far away dreamland. Her face crunched up and I lay down beside her and placed my arm over her. She rolled around and placed her head on my chest. This affection jolted my heart, then stroked my insides like a mother. I felt proud, happy. She had forgiven me.

I closed my eyes and fell into a deep sleep. In the cool of my dreams I ran into Carol, she smiled and admonished me for not waiting for her. How? I begged. There was nothing else I could have done.

Always going off on your own. She shook her head. I reached for her hand and she vanished. Bill took her place.

What happened?

You tell me.

I did what I had to do.

Did you? He ran at me with a shotgun and vanished. Big Lee appeared and ran after me; I ran as fast as I could, and when I turned he looked down on me. Then I was on him.

Please... Don't.

Don't what?

You know.

You were going to die anyways. You were trying to kill me.

Please... Don't.

I woke up and realized that Jenny wasn't next to me. Grabbed a kerosene lantern, lit it, and looked around the cave, but she wasn't in there. I walked outside and searched around. I couldn't see her, but by her smell I could tell she was near. I looked up and saw her on the peak above the cave. I ran. When I came to where she was, my lungs hurt from the exertion. She was standing on the edge of the cliff. The drop off was several hundred meters high. It spoke softly to me, to her.

"Jenny, you scared me. What's wrong?" I asked and looked into her eyes. Cool, lifeless. My heart lurched into my guts.

"I can't forget him. The man I killed."

"You shouldn't think that way. You couldn't help it. Self defense." I tried to reach for her, but she avoided my grip.

"I can't stop thinking about it. How can you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Kill like you did. So well," she said.

I wasn't certain if the voice belonged to Jenny. Everything seemed like part of the previous dream. Only the cold air seemed real.

"I don't do it well," I said.

"You did. And I saw you with that boy. You enjoyed it, torturing him, watching him die."

That wasn't fair. I hadn't. I only suppressed what was a weakness inside me. How could she think such a thing? I looked into her eyes and saw how much she hated me, was scared of me, saw nothing to love in me. The bottom of the cliff welcomed me. "I didn't..." Was all I could manage as a defense. "We had to do that. They didn't want peace."

"I can't live like this."

"But you have to. We're the only ones."

"So what? What if we are the only ones? Why go on?"

"Because we have to," I said again, more to convince myself than anything else. "We are all there is." I realized then that the reason I could see everything was that the stars and the moon were out. The overcast sky was gone. A sign of the better times to come? "See? The sky is clearing, soon things will improve."

"And everyone we meet will try to kill us," she said and examined me with a sad face like I couldn't understand.

I should have implored her that my love for her was real, but I couldn't. Something in me was still ashamed. "What about us?" I said.

Her look turned to disdain, then to horror. She took a step and disappeared.

###

**Other Books by the Author (along with the sequel to this book!):**

[When Gods Fail II](#)

[The Struggle Trilogy](#)

## [Tree of Freedom](#)

### [Satan's Plea](#)

#### **About the Author:**

Nelson Lowhim was born in Tanzania where he lived for the first decade of his life. He then lived in India for a year before finally settling in the U.S. in the state of Michigan.

He spent some of his formative years hitchhiking and hiking around the great state of Alaska. From there he joined the Army and served for seven years as an Infantryman in 1st AD then as an Engineer in Fifth Group. After his time in the Military—which included many travels through Europe and the Middle East—he came to New York and earned an undergraduate degree from Columbia University. He currently lives with his girlfriend in the Bronx.

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