

# Renewal

JF Perkins





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Terry pedaled slowly, weaving through the broken patches of tar-and-chip and deep mud holes of yellow clay. He had once heard his pappy talking about driving down these old Coffee County roads on a 1991 Trans Am, usually at incredibly high speeds, to hear him tell it. Terry tried to imagine it, but the kids of his generation didn't dream of cars. He felt lucky enough to have a bicycle. His bike was handed down twice before he got it as a graduation gift. He was the third generation to own it, but only the second to ride it.

The idea of trying to wash all of the clay mud was forcing Terry to choose his path carefully, but he was beginning to feel the pressure of time. The sun was getting high and hot. He wasn't too thrilled with the thought of camping out in the wilds of the county at night. Even though the population had been thinned out considerably during the Breakdown, there were still plenty of folks tucked out in the sticks who had not been seen in town for years and typically thought the crisis was still underway. Those people usually shot first, then stole anything they could find on a body.

He finally wobbled over the crest of the rise, and with a long view of the curving descent, he abandoned himself to the thrill of a ragged downhill run to the Duck River. About halfway down, through bump and speed blurred vision, Terry saw a problem. The center of the bridge was gone. Two seconds later, he was sure and pulled his fingers into the brake levers. That was when he discovered the second problem. Slippery clay mud makes for lousy braking. When he was sure he would disappear through the missing span of the bridge, his front tire grabbed an island of surviving pavement, the bike slowed drastically as the rear wheel came up and over. He splashed through the next puddle and slid to a stop on his back while his tools burst from his old Rubbermaid toolbox, scattering far and wide. He heard a faint grinding sound and tilted his head up to watch his brand new tape measure skittering down the concrete bridge, only to stop 3 inches short of the gap.

His first thought was relief; his second, anything but. His brand new Reclamation Corps uniform was covered in a slimy, orange-tan mud that smelled vaguely of fish... and possibly goat. Terry got up, found his hat, also covered in mud, and began the process of gathering all his tools. The truth was they weren't even his yet. The tools, along with the uniform, came as part of his recent graduation from the reclamation engineering school at Manchester University. They called it a university because frankly, no one had the energy or resources to care what they called it. Terry always thought it was a lofty name for a former storefront converted to a school with about three courses of study, all involving how to extract food from the ground.

In his case, Terry and about three other guys in the county were tasked with finding all the old farmland fields that had been built into subdivisions way back in the 1990's and figuring out how to turn them back into farms. The county had a couple of civil engineers as well, but judging by the roads, and the average age of the engineers in question, they spent most of their time trying to get a cool breeze to come through the county office windows. Anyway, building roads was no longer a big deal. If you could walk it, bike it, or get a goat wagon down it, that was good enough. The real money, outside of farming a piece of land you owned, was in reclamation. The only people with money were willing to figure out ways to expand their farms, not to spend money on smooth roads.

Terry was out on his first solo trip, and it would take at least a handful of successful returns before he could pay off his gear and the certification fee. He was thinking about how much crap he would take if he came home covered in mud, since he was pretty sure this trip had been hand-picked by the older guys to serve as his initiation. He wiped his tools on a rag to clean off the major clumps and placed each one back in the tote in turn. He lifted the old bicycle out of its own mud hole with a slight slurping sound and set about tying the tote back on the rack. The bailing twine had broken in two places and he was forced to join them together with anchor knots he had learned from pappy. By the time that was done, the hot spring sun had turned his mud coating into a stiff, crumbly brick veneer. He pushed the bike onto the bridge and left a trail of ragged globs of clay on the concrete.

He could see that someone had put a plank across the gap in the bridge, and after he picked up his tape measure from the scorched edge, stood for a long time trying to decide exactly how stupid it would be to try to walk across it. One look down to the river below, which was about 4 inches deep, and his command of math failed him. He was sure he intended to try and calculate the ability for a two-inch thick plank, roughly ten inches wide, to span a fifteen foot gap over a thirty foot drop in shallow water, but the numbers would not come. Eventually, he decided this was another challenge he could not fail to meet, if he wanted to pass his initiation, and decided to cross on some irrelevant aspect of faith.

In his fear, Terry was almost surprised to find himself on the other side. Not a problem. The north side of the river had a dirt path access to the water. He decided to clean himself up, and when he reached the far end of the bridge, he leaned the bike against a large limestone boulder and skidded his way down to the water. The hot May midday and a coat of mud had Terry convinced that the entire world was sweltering hot. When he removed his boots and socks and stuck his billfold in the left one, he found out the truth. The water was cold! He flopped down in the shallows and rolled around on the smooth river rocks underneath. Soon, he stood up shivering and decided that was as clean as he would get without a mild case of hypothermia. He dribbled streams of water as he splashed out of the river, took a quick look into the trees, and carried his boots up the short hill to his bike. He wanted to get moving quickly, due to the schedule he was trying to keep, and due to the fact that his entire generation was raised from birth to think like predators and prey. Sitting in the bottom of a tight valley made him itch with an imaginary target circled on his back. He threw his boots on top of the tote and walked barefoot up the hill.

At the top, he was no longer dripping. Terry was just miserably wet. He wrung his wool socks out and put them back on, along with his boots. He got remounted the bike and pedaled on, up Power Bridge Road. Before long, he was passing an old school on his left. The sign was gone, like every other sign in the world, but his map told him it was once an elementary school. Now it was just a burned husk of ragged cinder block walls, the original brick cladding piled around the foundation. The rusting playground, ironically, still stood in relatively good shape off to the side. The road right at the entrance was devoid of pavement and blackened between scraggly weeds. He knew that meant the cars had once burned there, and they burned so hot that the ground underneath was just now recovering. He wondered if anyone knew the story of Hickerson Elementary. Maybe he could find it in the library, but there were literally thousands of battles fought in Coffee County after the whole country collapsed and there was no guarantee that this one would be a fight that was big enough to be recorded.

Terry started pedaling again as the hills near the river gave way to huge, flat fields, clearly operating as farm or pasture land when things went bad, but not in use today. It was still too far from town to make it feasible, he guessed. If this was too far, then it was sure bet he was being sent on a wild goose chase into the wilderness, since he still had a couple of miles to go. Of course, it could be that the land was just played out, and without nice petroleum-based fertilizers or enough manure-making animals left to cover it, there was not much to do except to wait for the fields to recover.

He was making good time when he made the left turn onto Blanton Chapel Road. He kept looking to his right, expecting to see a field full of 20th century disposable houses any time now. He passed a field that looked like the right style, but nothing that matched the description the office had given him. When he had gone a half mile, and started back down into another creek valley, he knew he had missed it. The only possibility was the field with three houses, or the completely overgrown one next to it. He needed a better fix.

Part of Terry's education was surveying, which was done in the old way, the way they did it before lasers and GPS. GPS had been gone for 35 years, when the Chinese decided to take out any satellites they could target. America made them pay for it, but it turned out to be one of the last effective jobs of the US Military. They took out the satellites, we nuked them back to the Great Wall, or at least that's how it was always told. After that, and a whole lot of nuclear war in the Middle East, oil was mostly gone. America used the last of its own reserves to bring home anyone they could, to be deployed in the fight to maintain order in the states. Before long, it turned into an army with no fuel and no bullets and a whole lot of panicking civilians with plenty of ammo. At that point, the soldiers just dissolved into whatever safe escape they could find. No one to this day would say much about grandparents in the military. In the end, the powers-that-were turned our own army against us. Even though most people understood they were just following orders, no one could shake the sense that those soldiers just should have known better.

Terry pulled out the local survey from an ancient leather binder in his box, and went searching for the nearby iron pin. He hacked his way across an overgrown ditch with a machete until he found a corner post that was still standing, despite the fact that the wire had dissolved long ago. He dug into the heavy grass around the base of the post until he found a bit of white plastic ribbon held under a metal pin. His sweat dripped on the ground while he caught his breath and realized how lucky he was lucky to find the pin so fast. He knew RE's that had spent two days doing what he just did in 10 minutes, and plenty who never found the pin at all. Survey pins made decent weapons in a pinch and a good source of metal any time. The only reason they were still in the ground was that they were hard to find, unlike old metal road signs which became everything from primitive blades and arrowheads, to shingles and shutters on plywood huts. His own grandmother, bless her soul, had used one to roll biscuit dough when he was little.

With the pin located, Terry knew exactly where he was, and walked 100 yards back down the road to the place he had seen before. He rounded the row of thorny Osage orange trees that had grown up to replace the fence that was once there, and he saw immediately that everything was wrong.

First, the grass was cropped close to the ground, almost like someone was keeping it mowed. Second, the entire layout of the place was wrong. There was supposed to be an entrance road leading to a square drive crammed full of houses. Except for a patch of gravel over an old drain tile, there was no sign of any pavement at all. Instead of twenty-one houses, there were exactly three. Terry was

rookie, but he couldn't help feeling stupid for missing the details on his first pass. That's when he saw the man with the shotgun rounding the corner of the closest house.

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Terry was unarmed, except for an old stainless Gerber belt knife. His first instinct was to run, but the man was too close, so close that Terry would get shot in the back just trying to mount the bike. Then he thought, wait a second, he was here on official business, and that ought to count for something, so he squared his shoulders and waited for the man to arrive.

The man could see that Terry was unarmed and moved his twelve-gauge from pointing to port arm. Terry breathed a quiet sigh of relief, thankful that this wasn't a shoot first bandit. He held up his hands and said, "Hello, sir," in what he hoped was a friendly but official way.

The man replied aggressively. "What do you want?"

Terry suddenly felt outmatched by forty pounds, at least twenty years, and of course by the shotgun. "Well, sir," he stammered just a bit, "I work for the Reclamation Corps, and I was sent out to survey this land for, uh, reclamation, you see."

The man turned his head without taking his eyes off of Terry, indicating the land behind him. "Looks pretty reclaimed to me."

"Well, sir, the survey requests come from the legal land owner, so I guess whoever owns this land doesn't know that."

The man shrugged and said, "Me and mine have been here for over 11 years. I figure we own it now." He wagged the end of the shotgun to emphasize the point.

Terry began to feel the embarrassment of a twenty year old sent back home with his tail between his legs and pulled himself up to his full six feet. "Sir, it's my job to survey and report, and I intend to do just that."

The man smiled a little, a tiny show of respect for the boy, and said, "Alright then. I don't have any shells for this thing anyway. Why don't you come up to the house, and I'll show you around. My name is Bill, by the way."

Terry relaxed and stuck his hand out. "Terry Shelton, sir."

Bill gave his hand a single pump, and turned toward the houses. Terry shoved his bike across the ditch and followed across the grass. They walked into the shade of the first house, and Bill showed Terry where to park his bike. They kept going until Bill mounted the porch steps on the back of the middle house. The northern exposure kept it pleasantly shaded. Bill whistled and people appeared from three different doorways at once. Terry had another burst of nerves as he found himself surrounded by three more men, mostly in their forties, and four women, roughly the same age. The women looked older than the men on average, but Terry knew that was just how things worked these days. He definitely felt like a little kid among all these adults.

Bill set about introductions, "This is my wife, Aggie. Aggie, this is our local Reclamation Engineer

Terry..." Aggie was lean with long gray hair and deeply tanned skin. She wore the same jeans and cotton work shirt as everyone else. Terry shook her hand and looked her right in the eye. She looked back with considerably more force of presence, and Terry quickly looked away. Bill introduced everyone else in rapid fire sequence, but Terry couldn't remember any of it. He did pick up on the fact that they were all related. The entire group was built around a set of siblings, he decided, but he failed to absorb the details.

Bill continued, "Our young friend here has been sent out to survey this land for reclamation." This brought a chuckle from some members of the group. Terry blushed bright red as he realized that he was the butt of some kind of joke.

Bill slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "It's ok, son. It's just that every time we see some kind of 'official' out this way, it's always trouble and never any help."

Aggie saved him. "It looks like you had a hard trip, Terry. How about some sassafras tea?"

"That would be great, ma'am."

Aggie stepped through the back door and the rest of the group went about their business, throwing light greetings over their shoulders as they dispersed. Bill smiled and waved toward an old aluminum chair with reeds where the nylon used to be. "Have a seat, Terry. Take a load off."

Terry settled into the chair and couldn't help but sigh as his legs relaxed.

"How was the Powers Bridge Road?"

"Well, sir. It's pretty rough since the rain. Lots of mud."

"I can see that," Bill replied, looking Terry over with another smile.

"And the bridge has a big gap in it. No one told me."

"Been that way for years. We keep it that way for a variety of reasons. I'm betting you are just out of school, right?"

"Yessir." Terry looked at his hands.

"So, they're messing with you, huh?"

"I reckon so, sir. I mean, the bridge is pretty close to town, and I'm sure somebody has been out here before now."

"Yeah, they've been here. But those were tougher times. It's been a while since we had any real problems out here. The bridge has been that way since '22. Apparently there were two groups of real assholes on either side of the river. The ones on the other side were getting pounded, so they blew the bridge and scattered. They were still assholes and mostly ended up dead. The ones on this side were a real problem for our folks, but they were mopped up inside of a year. Once they were gone, the last



the other group set up shop on the other side. Still there as far as we know. We heard their place is real cesspit.”

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“Well, it did smell pretty bad when I came over the hill. I thought it was just pigs or something.”

“Long pig, maybe,” Bill said with a grim look in his eye.

Terry’s eyes got wide. “People still do that?”

“Unfortunately, they do. Do me a favor. Drop the plank in the river on your way back. They won’t make trouble in a stand up fight, but they have been known to sneak across the river at night in search of easy prey. Luckily, easy prey we are not.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have shells, sir.”

“We don’t, but we do have a good supply of rifle ammunition, among other things. We got a young fella who could hit you a half mile away. He’s been upstairs watching you since you passed the woods by the old school.”

Terry was surprised again. “Really? I never noticed anyone.”

“That’s the way we like it. We always keep watch, and if we see anyone, the whole place shuts down.”

Terry mulled it over as Aggie came out with a wooden tray, three cups, and a pitcher of tea. She leaned over and poured for them. Terry found her distracting. For one thing, she smelled clean. For another, her lean torso was less than a foot in front of his eyes. Not much else to look at for the moment. He realized in startled surprise that he had never thought of a woman his mother’s age as attractive before. As soon as the thought entered his mind, he looked down at his hands again and waited for her to finish.

Aggie sat in the chair opposite him, with Bill in the middle. She asked, “So, Terry, where are you from?”

“Well, ma’am, we have a few acres out in the scrubland near the old high school. It’s not much for farming, but it’s not bad for goats and chickens.”

“Why did you become a reclamation engineer?”

“My daddy is always talking about rebuilding. I’ve been hearing it my whole life. I figured this was a good way to help it along.”

Aggie paused for moment. “Yes, I guess you’re right. Rebuilding is important.”

“Yes, ma’am... My pappy was always talking about what it was like before the Breakdown, and it seems like they had it pretty good. He died when I was little, something about blood sugar. Grandmother was around until a few years back. She just got pneumonia and coughed herself to death one night.”

~~Aggie leaned across and put her hand on his knee. "I'm sorry, Terry. It's always hard to lose family."~~

Terry gathered his thoughts and said, "Yes ma'am. Thank you."

"We don't hear much out here. How is the rebuilding going?" Aggie asked casually, seemingly in a polite conversation with no substance.

"Well, it definitely better than it was. We can almost always find food now, and people seem to be getting along for the most part. In town, it's mostly quiet. The sheriff and his boys do a pretty good job of keeping the troublemakers out."

Bill chimed in. "How about fuel?"

"There is some for farm equipment, but it's strictly rationed by the county. The trains get their fuel from the state, but it's still pretty rare to see one come through. The interstate is still too dangerous outside of town. We're mostly on our own."

"I see. Same old... Well, if you're ready let me give you that tour I promised you." Bill got up and walked to the door. "I'm going to make a big mistake by starting with the punchline." He reached his hand inside and flipped his hand upwards. The entire kitchen filled with light - electric light.

"Holy sh... crap, sir! You have power!" Terry found his cup swinging on one finger and set it down quickly.

Bill laughed loudly. "That's always good for a laugh, don't you think, Aggie?"

Aggie snorted and said, "Drama queen."

"What can I say? I like to be the center of attention."

Aggie was still chuckling as she gathered up the cups on the tray and went back inside. "Have fun, boys."

"Let's go, Terry." Bill walked to the fence line that was once the back of the sub-division. Terry hopped down the steps and followed him. They stopped at a big wooden gate and looked across another grass field behind the fence.

Bill started his tour by talking. "My folks were from Nashville. They were taking us to visit our family down in South Georgia when it hit the fan. They said that when it became clear that things were getting bad, they wanted us to go for a visit while we still could. My dad had an old station wagon from the 1970's with a brand new GPS on the dashboard. He was an engineer and loved gadgets of all kinds, which didn't make sense with the station wagon, an antique even then. That was 2012. When we asked him why we couldn't have one of the cool SUVs that our friends had, he always said, 'First rule of engineering, boys... If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' We always rolled our eyes at that. He probably said it ten times a day. Turns out, he was right."

Terry didn't know what to say, but he knew this was important to Bill.

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Bill kept going. "My dad had been selling my mom on how great that GPS was, all the way from Nashville. She probably just thought of it as another one of Dad's useless toys. My brother, Tom, and I were in the rumble seat way in the back, so we couldn't see what was going on. We were too busy trying to get truckers to honk their air horns anyway. We were coming up the long hill from the Beech Grove exit when Dad started grumbling. The thing wasn't working right. He pushed a bunch of buttons on the screen and gave it the old engineer slap. All it did was read, 'Seeking satellites.' Dad pulled over at the next exit, up here at Busy Corner, to do some trouble shooting and fill up the tank with twelve dollar gas while he was at it. Busy Corner was actually busy that day, and we weren't the only ones with GPS troubles. By the time he finished putting gas in the car, it was clear that everyone with a GPS was trying to get it to work and everyone with a fancy cell phone was just as puzzled.

No one knew what was going on at that point, but I think Dad was getting the idea. He did something he hadn't done in 10 years. He turned on the old CB radio under the dash, and listened to the chatter. It was full of truckers who had lost their GPS as well. Dad was torn, he told me later, about whether to keep going, but I guess he decided to go on since we piled back in the car and headed east. We made it all the way to the Tullahoma AEDC exit before we hit a road block of Air Force vehicles from the base. I remember thinking how cool it was to see all those camo Humvees with the big guns mounted on top. The traffic was light so we waited to see what they would say. The Air Force guy told us that there was a major blockage on the road ahead, and that we should go back to Manchester to wait until the highway was cleared. Dad took him at face value and headed back to the fast food and motel strip near the Wal-Mart. We pulled into the McDonald's right off the exit, my dad handed her some cash and asked her to bring him something to the car. The rest of us went inside while dad stayed outside, trying to listen to the two radios at once.

We were waiting in line, except for my older brother, Kirk. He was in the restroom. Apparently McDonald's was the stop of choice for blockaded motorists since we were hearing a lot of chatter about roadblocks and GPS from the people in line with us. We were still behind some lady who seemed to be ordering for an entire office building when my dad rushed in and told us to forget it and to get back in the car. He had a wild look about him we had never seen before. As much as we loved McDonald's, it never even occurred to us to argue. We left with a bunch of people watching us. Dad grabbed Kirk out of the restroom and practically dragged him to the car. He was probably just playing with the hot air hand dryer anyway.

Dad gave a quick look over his shoulder, maybe looking for traffic, maybe counting us kids... I was never sure, and he made a squealing turn out of the parking lot. Back in the rumble seat I remember people coming out of the McDonald's as we left. Maybe they thought we knew what was going on. Dad floored it for the quarter mile trip to the Wal-Mart just across the overpass. He hung a hard right into the parking lot, found the first decent parking space, and jolted us to a stop.

Dad turned to mom and ordered, "Beth, you're with me." He looked back at us with a hard glare and said, "Nobody even think about getting out of this car. Lucy, you're in charge until we get back." Lucy is the oldest.

It seemed like they were in there for only about twenty minutes, but they came back with four fu

carts of stuff. We had no idea what was going on. We were pretty sure Dad had lost his mind. He threw a bunch of squishy cloth and bags in the back with Tom and me. He filled the backseat floorboard with cans of food and bottles of water, and more cloth stuff between - and on - Kirk and Lucy. He threw a few boxes at us in back and told us to hold on to them. Then we could hear him thumping around on the roof. He cracked open a blue plastic tarp and tied it to the roof too. Mom was saying something, but mostly it looked like she was upset and trying to stay out of the way.

They got back in the car and buckled up. My dad started the car and quickly got back on the interstate, heading west towards home. We made it back to Busy Corner before we shuddered to a squealing stop behind a line of cars and trucks. They were being held by another blockade of military vehicles, and as we sat there, it looked like everyone ahead wanted to have their own personal argument with the soldiers. All of the vehicles were being forced to exit the highway. We finally got to the front, and a young Hispanic soldier leaned towards my dad's half-rolled-down window.

“Sir, please exit here.”

“Why?” Dad asked tightly.

“Sir, there has been a major accident ahead, and we are diverting traffic until the emergency crew can get it cleared.” The soldier's eyes scanned our car while Tommy and I were peeking over the back seat. He seemed to make some kind of connection about the time my dad snapped.

“Bullshit!” My dad practically sprayed the word on the soldier.

To his credit, the soldier was smarter than average. He looked back at us kids and gestured for my dad to listen closer. The soldier was talking quietly in dad's ear for a few seconds. My dad nodded, thanked the soldier and quietly drove up the ramp. We found ourselves back at the same gas station where we had filled up less than 90 minutes earlier.

Dad told us to wait, and slid out of the car. He talked to a couple by the pumps for a minute, and then marched across the parking lot to a group of people sitting on the hoods of their cars in the shade. They were all shrugging and waving arms in the direction of the highway. Dad nodded a few times and then walked into the store. He talked to the clerk, more shrugging, watched the TV up in the corner for a couple of minutes, and then disappeared behind a rack up against the front window.

Kirk was the first one of us to say anything. “Mom, what is going on? What's all this stuff? What's Dad doing? Why can't we get through?”

Mom was in lockdown mode. “Kirk, I can't tell you much of anything. I'm hoping your father knows what's happening. We'll just have to wait and see.” The phrase “wait and see” was always code for “forget it.”

You could hear the exasperated breath from all of us. Those were the words of a parent keeping us in the dark. Lucy said, “Mom,” in that long, whiny, three syllable way that only teenage girls from the South can pronounce. Lucy looked about to continue, but realized that it was hopeless for the moment and snapped her open mouth shut.

Dad came out of the store with three bags. One was full of convenience store hot dogs and probably 300 packets of ketchup and mustard, another full of little bags of chips, and a third full of cold drinks. We saw dad pull some disposable lighters, some batteries, and a map out of the chip bag before he announced, "Time for a picnic." He pulled the wagon over to the shady area with the other groups, and we got out. He dropped the tailgate on the back of the car, dug Tommy and me out of the pile, and told Kirk and Lucy to sit there. Tommy and I were jealous since they were taking our seat with the cup holders, until Dad lifted us up onto the roof, and we realized that cup holders were not everything. He handed us all a hotdog, chips, and a drink, and then he and mom got back in the front seat. We could hear them murmuring to each other but we were completely distracted by the food, the long line of cars on the interstate, and the weird combination of fear and excitement in the air.

Eventually, Dad got out and brought the rest of the food with him. Kirk and I happily took a second hot dog. We munched while Dad grimly watched the highway. Nobody had the courage to ask any questions. We could hear Mom talking on her cell phone, but could only make out a few words.

I remember looking up when a siren chirped, and I saw a red pickup truck with huge tires drive past the roadblock in the grass median between the two strips of asphalt. I got excited, thinking I was going to see a TV-style police chase. All that happened was a soldier leaned in a Humvee window for a second. The truck was out of sight down the hill in seconds, but soon we heard a loud burst from a machine gun, and a couple of minutes later, the red pickup was back with a gun mounted Humvee following him up the eastbound exit ramp. The truck pulled into our parking lot – it's great to be a kid; we were there for all of twenty minutes and we already thought of it as ours – and the crowd around us began to cheer. A skinny guy with a wispy beard and no shirt got out and started yelling and flipping the bird at the Humvee. A soldier in full battle gear jumped out and made the guy get on the ground. Two more soldiers joined in and pointed their rifles at the man on the ground.

They checked his ID, and the first soldier told him loudly, "Mr. Jenkins. If you try anything like that again, I have about 80 soldiers who would be happy to fill that pretty truck with 50-caliber bullet holes." The soldiers got back in the Humvee and they drove back down the ramp in the wrong direction. At eleven, I can tell you, the fact that they drove onto the interstate using the off ramp made a big impression. I think that's when I knew something big was happening. As I watched the truck guy picking little bits of gravel out of his chest, I began to wonder what it might be."

Terry had to shake his head back to reality when he realized that Bill had stopped talking. He had never heard a firsthand account of the beginning of the Breakdown, and he was fully absorbed in the tale. "Wow. That's amazing, sir."

"Call me Bill, ok? I'm not sure why I'm telling you this story. I don't think I've even thought about it for years."

"Well, sir... uh, Bill. I'd appreciate it if you would keep going."

Bill took a deep breath, and said, "Ok, it's not much of a tour, but if you really want to hear it..."

"Definitely."

"Two hours later, every parking lot at busy Corner was crammed full of cars, trucks, RVs, and

motorcycles. We had seen a few try to use the secondary roads to get around the road block, but they always came back with a sheriff's deputy following them. Our car was buried in the lot behind at least six or seven cars, so we weren't leaving any time soon. Tommy was napping in the back seat. He was only seven at the time. Mom always called him her happy little accident. I never knew what that meant until much later. My parents came around back and walked us over to the narrow strip of grass by the trees. By that time, we were totally familiar with the territory and the people around us. Everyone had grown tired of socializing and swapping stories and lots of folks were following Tommy's lead, taking naps in their cars, or wherever they could find a quiet patch of shade. The end result was that we had enough space to talk without being overheard.

Dad pulled us in close and said, "Listen, Tommy doesn't need to know this yet. Agreed?" We all nodded, knowing we were finally about to get some answers.

"Here's what I know. You guys know about satellites?" We nodded again.

"Ok, well the Chinese launched a bunch of missiles to shoot down our satellites. They got a lot of them, ones that we use for military communications, phone and TV, taking pictures of the planet, and the ones that make my brand new dang GPS work. All of these satellites are very important to us. They make it possible to do a lot of the stuff we have to do every day. You guys with me so far?"

More nodding.

"Our leaders seem to have taken the Chinese attack very seriously, and we have shot back. We shot down their satellites first, and then launched a full-scale nuclear attack on China itself. We are sure that we got all their satellites, but we are not sure if they have nuclear missiles they can fire back at us. If they do, they will attack as many cities and military bases as they can. Any place they hit with a nuclear missile is gone, ok? Even if anything is left, people will get sick and die if they are too close, and nobody will be able to move back into those areas for a very long time."

Lucy spoke up. "So, Daddy, does that mean we killed a lot of Chinese?"

"I'm sorry, honey, but yes. Millions probably."

Lucy was quiet for a minute, and then said, "But Daddy, I thought you and Mom said that people are way more important than stuff, like satellites."

"That's true. I still say that, but the reason is that we didn't know why they shot our satellites. They could have just been trying to take over the satellite business, or they could have been doing it to blind us so we wouldn't see their missiles coming until too late. I'm sure our leaders thought that it was safer for America if they made sure that couldn't happen. Either way, terrible things are happening right now."

"Why can't we just go home?" Mom asked.

"Well, the soldier I talked to told me that they were blocking the freeways off in case they needed to move the Army around. He also said that no city is safe until we know what's really happening, and that was a good point. If Nashville is a target for nuclear missile, we don't want to be anywhere close."

I kinda doubt that, but there's another reason. If people get too upset about what might happen, they will do all kinds of crazy stuff. People might panic. If that happens, it's much safer out here in the country, just because there are less people. You can't tell that right now though." Dad looked around at the crowd.

Lucy was chewing her lower lip, which she always does when she's worried. Kirk looked like he was ready to go fight the Chinese himself if he could join the Army at age 13. I wasn't really too concerned myself. I understood from everyone else that this was bad, but for me, it was just an adventure on the side of the highway.

About that time, two patrol cars pulled up in the middle of the road. Four deputies got out and switched on a megaphone. "Folks, sorry for the inconvenience today, but we have been told to take steps to ensure your safety. We'd like to ask anyone who can move their vehicle at this point to please drive right up here," he pointed to the west, "To North Elementary. It's right up there. We'd also like to remind you, for your safety, to make no attempt to drive anywhere else. We are setting up the school as a temporary shelter, and the shelter will be able to accommodate your needs. We hope to resolve the situation and get everyone on their way as soon as possible. Thank you for your cooperation."

Two of the deputies, one on each side of the road, began directing traffic and the cars slowly filtered out of the parking lot. Another deputy was on the radio. After about half of the cars were gone, he waved at Deputy Megaphone, who picked up his loudspeaker. "Folks, we just got a report that North Coffee is full. The rest of you good folks are asked to follow the military truck down there..." He pointed the other way. "...to Hickerson Elementary. It's a little farther down the road, but will be a well stocked as the other shelter very soon. Please proceed carefully. Thank you again for your cooperation."

With fewer cars remaining, the lots were draining rapidly. Dad sent us back to our seats, where we had to burrow under all the stuff from Wal-Mart. He started the car and eased out into the long line heading down Highway 41. After a few minutes, we took a right, and then shortly, another left. Next thing we knew, somebody in an orange vest was waving us into the school parking lot. We followed the cars in front of us to a parking space on the grass, all the way into the back corner of the fenced school yard. Since we were trained from birth to despise sloppy parking, I remember thinking what a lousy parking job Dad did, but I quickly realized he was one step ahead of the crowd again. He left almost a full space between the station wagon and the back fence, and left the car sticking out so that there was at least a ten foot gap in front of the car.

"We were lucky. This is the best spot in the whole place," Dad announced. We were baffled, of course. How could we possibly park any farther from the playground we had seen on the way in? "Let's just wait a few minutes."

When our corner of the yard was full and traffic was directed to another area, Dad started the car again and painstakingly turned it around, so that the back of the station wagon was facing the fence. Since no one was watching, he took the opportunity to cheat even more space on the fence-facing side of the car. Mom watched him in wonder, until he told her, "No way they have cots and stuff here yet. I wanted more room to camp. And if we need to make a quick getaway, we're facing in the right direction." Mom still looked confused, and decided to compensate by rolling her eyes at him. He w

kind of famous in our house for doing things that made no sense to the rest of us.

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Dad said, “Kirk, you come with me. Everyone else, stay in the car. If anyone comes close, lock the doors and talk to them through a crack in the window, ok?”

A ragged chorus of agreement from the rest of us, except for Tommy, who was awake, but he still looked bleary-eyed and confused.

“Beth, try the radio and see if you can learn anything. We’re going to go see what the deal is, and we’ll be back as quick as we can.”

It was late in the day, the sun had just set, and we were beginning to wonder about the things kids do. Where’s dinner? Where do we sleep? Where can we get some TV or video games around here? Stuff like that...

We listened to the radio, hearing news that we didn’t understand about the Chinese, the North Koreans, Iran, Israel, the Middle East. Mom was taking notes on a little yellow pad, preparing for the details my Dad would surely want to know. People were out and walking around, but no one came close to us in the back corner. Thinking back, I imagine that what my dad saw as the best place in the park, they saw as the darkest and scariest corner, the wild outback of the schoolyard, and maybe more importantly, the farthest from the restrooms and the unconscious feeling of security that indoor facilities provide. It was peaceful sitting as a family, windows down, an evening breeze stirring the few insects that had emerged early in the season, listening to the crispy murmur of the radio. We did not know it was the last peaceful evening we would have for years.

Dad and Kirk came back to the car. Mom pushed the lock switch and the electric locks chunked heavily. Dad waited until Kirk had burrowed into the backseat, watching the roaming people in the field before he got in himself. He first looked at my mother and held her eyes for a beat longer than normal, shook his head just a bit, and then he turned to all of us and made another big announcement. “Well gang. Looks like we’re going to camp out here tonight.” He smiled like it was another good time family adventure, but we already knew better.

As twilight settled in, Dad pulled a bundle out from under the tarp on the roof and started assembling a big green and yellow tent. There was a fair amount of fumbling, grumbling and what my mom called ‘no-words’ being said, but Mom held the flashlight patiently and pretty soon, the tent was up. That’s when we understood that no matter how much we had heard our father complaining about people who could not park straight, he was always thinking about the next step. The tent fit between the side of the car and the back fence with about 3 feet to spare. Dad leaned in on Kirk and Lucy and pulled out some rolled up bundles. He tossed them into the tent, one by one until we counted eight bundles. Then he came around to the back, where Tommy and I were, and pulled our normal gym-bag luggage out from under our feet, and threw them on the grass. We thought the whole deal was weird. We had been camping before, but we thought of camping as a gravel patch in a state park with a picnic table, fire ring, water tap, and an electric outlet for each campsite.

When he was done, he had Kirk go in and roll out all the pads and sleeping bags. Dad tossed in our duffle bags and directed Kirk to line them up at the head end of the sleeping bags. We understood from previous camping that those were our pillows. Dad dug out a little LED lantern and had Ki



hang it from a loop in the top of the tent. We were itching to get in the new tent and rummage around but Dad had other ideas. He took us up to the school building in two groups and had us use the restroom. He said it might get really crowded later on. Cars were still trickling into the schoolyard as the evening progressed. When he had us all back at the car, he gathered us around.

“Ok, kids. First thing...” He handed each of us a little Maglite flashlight, each in a different color. Mine was silver. Each light had a little belt pouch made out of black cloth. Dad said, “These are your lights. You keep them with you wherever you go from now on, no matter what. You can keep them in your pocket, you can use the belt holder, or you can hold it in your hand, but you will not leave them anywhere. Ok? And by the way, I know each of your colors, so if I see your light sitting alone somewhere, I’ll know who broke the rules.”

This was serious. Gifts in our family usually came with fun and joy; this came with a threat from our mild mannered father. It had the aspect of a church service, all solemn and serious. We were struck by the tone and took it seriously. He continued, “And these are your knives.” Dad handed Kirk and me a small belt knife. We could barely resist the male urge to pull them out and start cutting something. Lucy got a black Gerber folding knife, and Tommy got a traditional little three-bladed folding pocket knife. It was small, but real, and as his first real knife, Tommy took it with great seriousness. Dad said, “The same rules apply. These knives are not toys; they are tools. If I see you messing around with them, you will lose yours. Keep them with you at all times. If you are wearing your clothes, these knives are with you. If not, they better be where you can reach them.” We thought it was getting a little overboard at that point, but hey, we got knives! We didn’t realize how important those rules would become.

Mom took Tommy into the tent and lay with him while Dad continued his talk. “Things are ok right now, understand? But...” He looked at all of us in turn, “They could get bad. We’ll talk more about what that means soon, but for right now, you should know that we hit China very hard. China had a lot of short range weapons they used against some of our friends, like Japan. North Korea, which is a friend of China, sort of, is trying to fight us and their enemies in South Korea at the same time. Our friends in Israel, in the Middle East, caught wind of some of their enemies planning to attack them, so they did what is called a pre-emptive strike, which means they hit first with nuclear weapons. The entire Middle East is a wasteland now. Most of our oil comes from that part of the world, so at the very least, gas is going to get very expensive, and very hard to find. People in our country are going to get upset.”

We must have looked confused, because he said, “Listen guys, I know it doesn’t make much sense right now, and that’s not even all of it. Maybe we can find a map so I can show you where all these places are. For now, don’t worry, we’ll be ok. I know it’s early for you guys, but I’d like to try and get some sleep. I think it’s going to be a long day tomorrow.”

We were dumbfounded. Kirk was always the no-nonsense one, so when he stood up and went straight to the tent, Lucy and I gave Dad a quick hug and followed. When we were all in our sleeping bags, and Tommy was sound asleep, my Mom switched the little lantern off, and went outside. She zipped up the screen door, but left the solid cloth door open. We watched for a while as Mom and Dad took everything off the roof of the car, and locked it in the back. Then they got in the front seat, turned on the radio, and started talking. I remember wondering where they were going to sleep as I drifted off to sleep myself.

I woke up confused about where I was, but as soon as I saw my brothers, I relaxed and then it came back. The next thought was about where my parents were. Someone had zipped up the door panel, and I could only see the early light filtered through yellow cloth, which made it seem sunny, but when I unzipped the door, I realized it was very early, and the sun wasn't even up yet. My movement woke up Kirk and he followed me out of the tent. Mom and dad were lying on the front seats of the station wagon, which were folded back as far as the seats would go. At least my mom was. My dad was still tuning the old chrome knobs on the two radios to pick up as much news as possible. The back of the wagon was packed to the ceiling, which made me think for a moment that Tommy and me were going to be left here, traded for goats or something, but then I saw that the back seat was clear now, so the plan was probably to pack us all into the back seat. Dodged a bullet there, I guess.

My dad must have seen us moving around. I saw him turn his face to us, and the look on his face—red eyes, dark circles, and something else in his eyes, was a sight I could never forget. Then it changed back to his dad face. He reached down, cranked the window a few turns and quietly said, “Morning boys. Sleep alright?”

Kirk replied, “Yes, Dad. Don't you and mom have a tent?”

“Yes, son. We've got one, but right now, the important thing is to figure out what's going on, and to keep an eye on you guys.”

“Oh, ok...” Kirk looked around, trying to decide what to do next.

Dad got out of the car, trying not to wake up Mom, but as soon as the door latch clicked she looked over at us too.

Dad gave her a sheepish look. “Sorry, hon. I was trying to be quiet.”

“I know, but who can sleep in a car anyway?”

“Good point. Maybe we'll do better tonight.”

They were both out now, and stretching some obvious kinks out of their backs. Lucy crawled out of the tent, looking like sleeping on the ground was her least favorite activity ever invented. It still is, for as I know.

“Beth, could you take Lucy up to the school? The boys and I will guard the car until you get back. Lucy, don't forget your flashlight and knife,” Dad said with a stern look. Lucy rolled her eyes and climbed back into the tent. We had enough time to see that Mom and Dad were both wearing a couple of new pouches on their belts. It wasn't a do-as-I-say thing, then. Lucy came out again with a light in one hand and a folded knife in the other and made a dramatic show of stuffing them both into her blue jean pockets. She and Mom started winding their way up to the building in the faintly drifting morning mist.

As soon as they were gone, Dad said, “Ok boys, we've got a job to do. Anyone need to go number two?” Bathroom talk was way off our normal list of topics, so I doubt we would have admitted it even

if we did, but we both shook our heads and hoped that Tommy would agree. Dad pulled a big pair of pliers out of the toolbox he kept in the car, and walked to the post on the very corner of the fence. I looked around, told us to stand behind him, then squatted down and started cutting the chain links on the back fence wire as close to the post as he could. Kirk and I looked at each other. Dad kept cutting until he was about four feet off the ground. Then he pulled some come coat hanger wire out of the toolbox, and bent it to make a clip. He tried the clip on the bottom of the fence he had just cut, and then made a few adjustments. When he was happy with his results, he pulled the clip off again, and held the wire open for us.

“Let’s go, boys.”

We ducked through the opening and into the heavy brush on the other side. Dad took his belt knife and cut some of the brush in a way that we didn’t understand, but when he was done, it still looked like impenetrable brush, but we could walk through to a tiny clearing about ten feet from the fence. Looking back, we could barely see the schoolyard, and Dad seemed satisfied.

“Ok, guys. This looks like a good spot.” He faced away from us, and started to urinate on a convenient bush. We looked at each other again, trying to understand this latest bonding ritual, and followed suit. After we were all zipped up, he led us back through the fence, clipped the bottom of the wire so that it looked more or less normal, and walked back out to the small open space behind our car.

“Good job, boys.”

Kirk asked, in his usual direct way, “Why did you cut the fence?”

“Escape hatch. If we need to get out of here, we won’t have time to cut through the fence, so we’re doing it now, while everyone is still asleep. I clipped it at the bottom so hopefully no one will notice.”

Kirk was not satisfied. “Why would we need to escape? Won’t we just drive out the way we came in?”

Dad paused for a long few seconds and replied, “That’s tough one to answer, since we really don’t know what will happen, but it’s better to play it safe, don’t you think?”

“I guess...” was Kirk’s answer. He clearly couldn’t imagine such a problem. I couldn’t either.

“Anyway, we’ve tested it, and we won’t use it again unless we need to. Ok?”

Tommy crawled out of the tent before we could answer, and immediately asked Dad where Mom had gone.

“She’ll be back in a minute, bud.”

Right on cue, Mom and Lucy showed up. Mom said, “Honey, they’ve got a TV set up in the front hall. You might want to go watch for a few minutes.”

“Ok. I’ll take Tommy for a potty break. Can you scrounge up some breakfast?”

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The word “breakfast” immediately set my mouth watering, and I remembered that we hadn’t had any dinner last night. You can only go so long on convenience store hotdogs.

“Ok. I think I can find something.”

Dad and Tommy headed for the school, and Mom stood there with her finger on her lower lip, lost in thought. Then she opened the back of the car and started digging around. Kirk and Lucy and I started looking around, but Mom quickly told us to stay close. We took that as an excuse to go sit in the tent and to talk about the situation. The problem was, none of us understood any of it. On a normal Saturday morning, we would be in front of the TV, watching cartoons and thinking about how we could talk our parents out of all the cool toys we saw on the commercials. Even today, we expected to be sitting in front of our cousins’ TV, doing pretty much the same thing. Here we were, in a tent in a schoolyard, half way between home and who knows where, trying to decode the mystery of the world in a whole new way.

By the time Dad made it back with Tommy, we were well into a game that involved calling each other the worst names we thought we could get away with, and Mom had come up with a breakfast of oatmeal cooked on a camp stove, bananas and some kind of granola bars. Dad shrugged and figured it was better not to comment. We munched on our breakfast as Dad told my mother his assessment of what he had seen on TV.

“...and the people in cities have figured out that they are not allowed to leave. The president has declared martial law in a bunch of them where people are rioting and looting. I never expected that to happen so fast. I guess they think they are big fat targets for whatever missiles come our way. He also publically announced the shutdown of the entire interstate system until further notice, but he said that he expected things to be back to normal in two to three days. He said that we have won the war with China already, and the surviving government has agreed to terms, so that’s good, I guess.”

“The downside is that Mexicans have taken the opportunity to pour over the border and they are fighting with people in the Southwest and Texas. I wouldn’t want to pick a fight in Texas... Anyway, FEMA says that they have mobilized shipments to the problem areas, but no one can claim that they have seen any aid arrive. It’s a mess.”

Mom asked, “Do we know what they are going to do with us here?”

“No one is saying. People were sleeping on the floor last night, and they are feeding the people with food from the cafeteria. No telling how long that will last, and no telling how long people will be that uncomfortable without getting really angry. Now that people are getting up, they are mostly sitting on the floor against the walls, and trying to get close to the televisions. The line at the bathroom is getting long and the mood is already pretty bad in there. The guard folks keep saying that supplies are coming, but nothing about how long this will go on. I’d say we need to be pretty low-key about the fact that we have food though.”

“Ok, so what do we do?” Mom was getting wound up. “And by the way, how are we going to pay for all the stuff we charged at Wal-Mart?”

Dad just looked at her and quietly said, "If we need it, it won't matter."

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Dad spent the rest of the morning going through the giant pile of stuff they had bought, and packing it into six backpacks. We could almost tell which pack was ours just by the size. By the time he was done, the tent was down, the sleeping bags were packed, and the packs themselves were leaning up against the back side of the station wagon. The car itself was basically empty. Then, Dad put the full packs back into the car, keeping them low so that from a short distance, the car still looked empty.

He rolled up all the windows except for the driver's, and told us to settle on the grass. He switched on the both radios and sat with us on the ground. "Nothing to do but wait," he said. That being the case, I fell asleep until Dad told us to move out of the sun. The morning mist had cleared away, and we were baking in the clear May sunshine.

The radio was talking about mop-up operations in China by US Marines, and my Dad was scribbling something on the same pad my mom had used. She was standing in the shade fifty feet away, leaning against the fence and talking on her phone with an attitude that looked very agitated from our own shady spot.

"Who is Mom talking to, Dad?" Lucy asked.

"Probably everyone we know. I told her to let people know where we are, and to tell anyone in cities to get away if they can. They probably think she's gone crazy. That's why she's waving her arms around like that."

Mom kept calling for a few more minutes, until we heard her say, "Hello? Hello? Louise? Hello?" She pulled the phone from her ear, and looked at the display. She got to her feet, and walked back over. "Signal is gone." She said.

"Let me see that, Honey."

Mom handed Dad the phone. He messed around with it for a minute, and gave it back to her.

"Not even the hint of a bar," Dad said. "I wonder what that means."

The tone of the announcer on the radio changed. Dad jumped up and leaned in the window to turn up the volume. We could hear it clearly as the announcer was saying "...just received reports of a large explosion in Washington D.C. They're telling us it was a nuclear explosion, and... Wait, our network has lost contact with D.C." The announcer was silent. Then he started again, "Folks, I don't know what is happening, but we now have reports of nuclear explosions in D.C., New York, Chicago, and... Where? And Los Angeles!" He was breathless now. "We assume it was a coordinated terrorist attack. We are trying to get more information... The news wire reports claims from multiple groups, and another claim via the internet that this was China's insurance policy. Now we're hearing warnings of multiple missile launches from East Asia... North Korea... Northern China... Heading this way."

The radio continued a string of frantic warnings, but we were no longer listening. A wave of distress rolled across the schoolyard as people ran from the building. Guardsmen got on loudspeakers and tried

in vain to keep the crowd calm. People were jumping into their cars, and trying to leave. The gate was closed, but one guy drove his El Camino through it and plowed right into one of the two Humvees parked just outside. Guardsmen scattered and reformed around the other Humvee. It quickly became clear that other cars were planning the same maneuver and the Guard ran across the road to escape the impact. The last Guardsman on the heavy machine gun rolled off the Humvee just in time to avoid a series of cars that crashed into the vehicle, and each other.

“Idiots!” My dad said through clenched teeth. He was trying to watch everything at once.

One of the cars burst into flames right at the gate, and the fire spread quickly. We ducked instinctively, expecting a big fiery explosion. We got the fire, all right, but the TV style explosions we expected turned into deep “whump” sounds as tanks ignited and sprayed fire all over the gate area. The Humvee loudspeaker inside the fence was still yelling for calm, and amazingly, it worked. I guess the sight of people burning to death made a big impact. This wasn’t a TV show anymore.

“The safest place to be is inside the building, people!” The loudspeaker yelled.

Since it was perfectly clear that no one would be getting through the gate, what with the huge fire and all, the majority decided to go back inside, and maybe watch some TV. A couple of guys tried to scale the fence. The Guard soldiers just watched. Thanks to the level of American fitness in those days, they didn’t even make it to the barbed wire across the top. They climbed back down and slumped into the school building. Thinking about the escape hatch, I gained a new understanding of my dad’s brains in those brief, disastrous moments.

Dad was telling us to stay down behind the car. I was wondering why we weren’t in the building that was the safest place. It never occurred to me that the government might lie to us or give us bad information. The radio announcer was still talking fast. We heard a litany of government pleas to stay in our homes and to seek shelter in the basement if possible. We learned that twenty-nine missiles were in the air, after Navy ships managed to knock down sixteen. We listened as reports described the missile strikes on the West Coast cities and military bases, and the reports of our own second strike heading in the other direction. We learned that Israel was practically bristling with nuclear missiles firing at targets everywhere, even as they were overrun by Muslims enraged by their first strike. The last thing we heard was that the remaining missiles targeted at us were harmless, clearly off target heading for space. Then the radio stopped talking. We saw the sunny day get much brighter, and a weird sensation of multiple shadows on the grass.

Our first urge was to look up, but Dad cried, “Don’t look! Whatever you do, don’t look!”

We huddled on the ground expecting, I guess, to be blown to smithereens, but it never happened. The light went back to normal daylight and we never heard a sound. It still seems strange to me that the entire world can end without a sound.

It only lasted for an eternal second or two. We heard a lot of nearby explosions; some like firecrackers and some with deep thundering echoes. They seemed to come from everywhere.

“Transformers,” Dad said.

Then a new swell of panic and outrage came from the school. Schools built in that era were not much for windows. It must have been cave-dark in there when the emergency lighting failed to activate. Dad opened the back door, frantically threw the packs out, ran over to the hole in the fence and shoved them through. He held the wire back as we all scrambled into the brush. Then he went back to the car, and pulled out some guns from under the front seat. We had never known they were there. He tucked two pistols into his belt, and handed the long guns through the fence to Mom.

“Be careful. They’re loaded,” he said, and crawled through himself. He shoved us back into the bushes, and threw the packs in after us. He went back to the fence and clipped the bottom close, twisting the wire to make it hard to remove. We all huddled in the little clearing while dad strapped the packs onto our backs. Mine was much heavier than we had ever taken camping. It took a few steps to get my balance. When we were all loaded, he gave one of the pistols to my mother, and had her put the shotgun on his pack, fastened to some straps and webbing. He kept one pistol in his belt and the rifle in his hands.

Dad led us through the brush until we emerged in rough pasture about 50 yards from the schoolyard fence. He pointed at a patch of woods about 100 yards across the field. “That’s where we’re going. Move as fast you can.” He waited until we had all passed and walked backwards behind us. We were walking fast, and Tommy was right in front of me, trotting along to keep up. We made it to the trees and as soon as we were in the shadows, Dad turned and jogged in behind us. The woods were not very big, just the top end of a wet-weather drainage down to the river, but Dad seemed satisfied for now. That was good because we were all winded like we had run a mile. In reality, we were probably less than 200 yards from our car.

We could hear the panic in the schoolyard. Dad made sure we stayed behind a rotting log, which was itself behind a row of bushes and cable briar. He was out on the edge of the cover, lying on his stomach with the gun pointed towards the school. We waited and he watched, talking quietly to us the whole time.

“Nobody is coming this way. People don’t seem to think outside of roads and cars. This is about when they realize their cars are gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” Kirk asked loudly.

“Be quiet, guys. It wouldn’t take much to let people know we are here. And if they know that, they may decide this is a good way to go. Kirk, the cars are still there. They just don’t work anymore. Some of the diesels might, depending on how much electronics they have to control the engine, but our car has a solid state ignition, and the rest of the gas powered cars are probably dead.”

“Why?” Kirk spoke softly this time.

“EMP. Electromagnetic pulse... Somebody just exploded some nukes in space over America. The explosion didn’t reach us, and neither will the radioactive debris, but the pulse fried most everything electronic in the whole country. Car ignitions, phones, radios, computers, everything... If I had to bet I’d say we did the same thing to them. Bottom line... It’s the end of the world, more or less.”

Lucy was crying. Mom looked stricken, and finally asked, “What about our car?”

~~“Forget the car, Hon. If we were at home, I could probably get the parts to fix it, but we don’t know anything about this area. It’s at least five miles back to town, and even if we could make it there and find a parts store, they probably won’t sell to strangers, at least not for anything reasonable. We don’t have much cash, and I guarantee no one will take credit cards when the machines that authorize them stop working, which they just did. And think about it. If everyone’s cars are dead, and ours isn’t, we’ll be the easiest target in town. We could never get it out of the schoolyard anyway.”~~

Now Mom was crying too. “How do we get home?”

“Well, if we had to, we could walk back to Nashville from here. It’s only sixty or seventy miles. There are two problems with that. One is that every single person from here to there is now a potential threat. People will be scared and either trying to defend what’s theirs, or they’ll be the other guy trying to take it. Every place we pass will have to assume we are looters, and might shoot us before they can find out that we aren’t. And two, I’m sorry to say, is that by the time we get back, we will almost certainly wish that we were somewhere else.”

“Our friends are there, our neighbors...”

“They’re in the same boat. The power is out everywhere. It won’t be back on anytime soon, if ever. The factories are dead; lots of the trucks are dead. If it were just Nashville, then yes, we could expect things to recover, but right now, everyone we know is either trying to buy food at the stores, which will be empty by tonight, or if they are smart, they are trying to get to some place like this in the confusion. No help is coming. If the government still functions, which is doubtful given the bomb in D.C., they may be able to use the military to distribute food in warehouses. But all that does is extend the time until Nashville runs out by a couple of days. When we had the floods a few years back everyone pulled together because in the grand scheme of things, it was a small number of people affected, and the rest of the country was fine. Now imagine that flood, but it floods the entire city at once and every other city at the same time. There will be no one in the entire country who doesn’t need help. Even if there is help to give, who gets it? I’m pretty sure Nashville is way down that list.”

Mom was ready to shoot the messenger. “All right then, Mr. Sunshine. What do we do?”

“For now, we stay out of trouble, and we survive. That’s all we can do.”

And thanks to my Dad, we did.

The sun had already set on Bill and Terry. Terry’s arm was asleep from leaning on the gate. He shook himself back to the present, and saw the tears in Bill’s eyes. Bill snapped back to the moment himself, blinked hard, and turned to Terry.

“Sorry about the long winded speech. I guess I needed to get it out. Anyway, that’s how it started less than two miles from here – for us, anyway. That was the Breakdown.”

“That’s ok, Bill. I appreciate it.” Terry felt like he had been a part of something religious, the most meaningful church service of his life, except better, and more real.



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