

**John Smith**  
**Last Known Survivor of the Microsoft Wars**

Roland Hughes

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## **Prologue**

This is Susan Krowley, reporting for The Times.

This story has been months in its creation but spans decades. Father and mother felt the need to track down the last known survivors of the Microsoft Wars and record their stories for history. We sent skilled hunters out in all directions to counties we knew about and those only rumored to exist.

All this searching expanded our knowledge in ways we did not expect. Some of those places we thought to be only rumor really did exist and some still do. Other reporters will be filing stories in this series to bring you the facts as we found them. What follows is an interview with John Smith, the last known survivor of the Microsoft Wars.



## Frame of Reference

SK: I must first thank you for allowing this interview. It has been so long and so much has been lost; we feared we would never record the real story.

JS: Be careful what you wish for.

SK: Yes, well, I'm sure that is good advice. I must say that you have a lot of interesting art hanging on the walls of your place and odd-looking stuff lying around. I can't really even identify what much of it is.

JS: In both life and science you must take one thing at a time.

SK: Can you tell us why they were called the Microsoft Wars and was there really more than one?

JS: You don't have any frame of reference to ask that question.

SK: The searchers did tell you that we wished to interview you about this very subject to record the history, did they not?

JS: Yes.

SK: May I ask then, why you are so reluctant to answer my question?

JS: I'm not reluctant, you simply don't have a frame of reference to ask such a question.

SK: What do you mean?

JS: What do you know about the Microsoft Wars? Not just the wars but what led up to them?

SK: Just that it was a very dark period in human history. Great atrocities were committed and many world governments fell. Large portions of the world are still considered to be off-limits for humans.

JS: You say that as if you don't know what it means.

SK: Say what?

JS: "Off-limits."

SK: It means we are not allowed to go there.

JS: Thank you for the dictionary regurgitation. Now, why don't you tell me what it means?

SK: I've already told you.

JS: And now you should be getting closer to understanding why you have no frame of reference to ask your question.

SK: The only thing I'm closer to is branding you a fraud and leaving.

JS: You are free to do what you wish. Before you can ask the question you wish to ask, you must first have a frame of reference so a meaningful response can be given. You don't currently have any frame of reference.

SK: <sighs> What does off-limits mean in your mind?

JS: It's not a matter of my mind. Those areas of the world are off-limits because the radiation levels are too high for prolonged human exposure. Nature has attempted to reclaim some of those areas and, due to man's arrogance, has created some creatures that are severe abominations. Many of those creatures will not survive once the radiation drops to a safe level. Man cannot eat what comes from there and a bite of any kind can cause radioactive material, if not venom, to enter into the body, slowly poisoning it from within. We have no method

of removing such radiation. A single bite is usually a death sentence, though that sentence may take years to actually happen.

SK: Oh come on, we've all heard stories about radiation. They are mostly there to scare children.

JS: In the past, when there was a massive nuclear disaster, mankind put in a concerted effort to clean it up. Even when the Chernobyl meltdown happened in a place called the Ukraine, we built a low-quality and hasty tomb around the site and put as much of the waste as possible in safe containment.

The closest my cycle had to the off-limits places you know have occurred on an island nation known as Japan. A plant there failed so completely after being hit by a tsunami that untold quantities of highly radioactive water went into the ocean along with radioactive dust, which covered farmland for miles.

One thing is certain with prolonged radiation exposure: mutation. Sometimes it kills the life form, sometimes it alters it. Enough radiation will kill any known life form but we never studied prolonged exposure to radiation from high-grade fuel rods, or what happens to creatures who drink the surface water containing particles from these rods. We do know that the venom mutates, as well, along with the bacteria, which naturally occurs in the mouths of certain creatures.

If I ask you to travel the direction of the setting sun two days by horse, stay there a day, then come back before completing the interview, will you do it?

SK: No, I'm on a deadline.

JS: You traveled here on horseback. You have no concept of deadline. What is the real reason you won't do it?

SK: It is a forbidden region. I could lose my job going there.

JS: Might I ask you how you got your job?

SK: I'm a reporter. I was assigned to cover this story.

JS: Very good. Now, how did you get your job?

SK: I don't understand what you are asking.

JS: Because you have no frame of reference for the question. You cannot provide an answer because you have no knowledge of Earth That Was. Back then, reporters were simply smiles and haircuts which looked good in front of the camera. They read stories off a teleprompter. Those stories were written by journalists. To become a journalist you had to attend a university or college to obtain a 4-year degree. Then, if you were lucky, you got a job covering stories instead of a job proofreading them. So, let me ask again, how did you get your job?

SK: I still have no idea what you are talking about. What is a college? A university? I was trained for this job by my father who had this job before me. It is how skills are passed to the next generation.

JS: I see.

SK: You see what?

JS: Sadly, how the rest of this interview is going to go. Oh well, it is much too late to wait for another.

The reason you won't go and spend a day where I asked is the same reason it is a forbidden region. Back in the day of Earth That Was, there was a facility there known as the Braidwood Station. It was a nuclear power plant powering much of what was then the northern end of a state called Illinois. It was the largest plant in the state. Like most plants, it stored its nuclear waste on-site because nobody ever put in place a method of recycling the spent fuel rods or eliminating the deadly radiation from them. When the earth spun and the land cracked, the containment facilities all crumbled. Most likely, there are still massive quantities of radiation being given off, since the half-life for that stuff was measured in thousands of years.

SK: So, were there really multiple wars and why were they called the Microsoft Wars?

JS: I can see that you have no intention of recording anything useful for your readership or posterity. What is your current circulation?

SK: We are the most trusted newspaper in the country. We have the widest circulation and most frequent distribution cycle: 5,500 readers look to us for information about the world, twice monthly.

JS: It sounds more like you provide them entertainment instead of journalism.

SK: Why is that?

JS: You are looking for the headline instead of the story. The same thing happened to the supposed news services back in the days of Earth That Was.

SK: Earth That Was?

JS: That picture hanging on the wall to my right. When you came in, you commented on it being a piece of art. Do you know what it really is?

SK: A painting of some kind.

JS: It's a map of Earth That Was printed out on an engineering printer, which took four-foot-wide rolls of paper and used what were called ink-jet cartridges. Once it was printed, it was run through a process the elders called lamination, which sealed it in some kind of clear substance to help preserve it. Otherwise, it would be yellowing like those books stacked to your left.

SK: That still doesn't explain Earth That Was.

JS: The seven continents.

SK: What are you talking about? There are twelve continents!

JS: Today, yes. Back in the day of Earth That Was, there were only seven continents and that is a map of them. The picture hanging beside it is a picture of Earth That Was taken from outer space on a clear day. As you can deduce from the map, it shows much of the North and South American continents.

SK: American?

JS: <sigh> What is the first continent you encounter today when heading in the direction of where our sun sets?

SK: Dians.

JS: What is the country we are in right now?

SK: Rica, but shouldn't you already...

JS: Back in the day of Earth That Was, Canada was a country occupying the northern portion of the North American continent and the United States of America occupied the lower portion of it before you got to this skinny connecting piece. The sun traveled from this edge to that edge of the continent each day.

After the events of 2013, or during, depending upon how you look at it, part of Canada became the land mass you now call the Dians continent. The rest of the North American continent also turned and split up. Some say it simply had an ocean form over part of it. The difference between split or sink doesn't really matter. Today, you cannot walk from one chunk to the other, so they are considered separate continents.

The country we live in now was once called America. Several other chunks floating around the globe were also part of America. You are having trouble believing what you have been told because some big pieces that are at the root of the story are under the ocean now. As a country, we no longer have any means of getting to them or taking pictures for others to see. At some point, perhaps we will regain that but not at this point.

SK: Do you really expect me to believe that you have hanging on your wall a picture taken from outer space? A beautiful picture in full color that was somehow taken while someone or something was in outer space and then given to you?

JS: It wasn't given, it was downloaded by my grandfather. Many people had them back at that time.

SK: Downloaded?

JS: Yes. With a thing called a computer over something called the Internet. America had some kind of organization known as NASA, which sent ships, satellites and people into outer space.

SK: Internet? People in outer space? I don't know what you've been drinking but it would have been polite to share!

JS: <chuckle> Do you see that black rectangle resembling a book sitting over there?

SK: Yes.

JS: On the front of it is a little ridge, which you can push to the right, then lift the top portion of it to open it. Good. Now near the bend where the two pieces come together is a button with a circle and a line sticking out of the circle.

SK: I see it.

JS: Press it.

SK: It is making noises. There are lights flashing. Things are appearing and disappearing on the top piece that feels like glass. What is OpenVMS?

JS: It is the most robust computer operating system ever created by man. Here, let me log in.

SK: Log in? Computer operating system?

JS: Yes. Computers with operating systems, which could support multiple users, assigned each user a user name and password. When you tried to gain access to such a computer, it would prompt you for the user name and password. If you provided values it recognized, it would allow you to sign onto the computer. It would also write information to a computer log file somewhere, much like a ship's manifest or a store's receipt, indicating who signed onto the computer, from where,

what they did, etc. Eventually, the culture surrounding these devices shortened the name to “log in” or sometimes “log on.”

SK: I have never seen or heard of such a thing. Is this some kind of witchcraft or peddler's trick?

JS: Earth That Was had a great many wonderful things. It also had horrible things. In the end, the Microsoft Wars were good for the planet because they eliminated the excess population and many horrible things. Oddly enough, the planet was about to do the same all on its own.

SK: What are you talking about?

JS: As I said, nothing I tell you will be of any use without a frame of reference. Here, now that it is booted, let me click on this slide show.

SK: Slide show? Oh, pictures. What are these?

JS: A series of photos of, from and about the international space station.

SK: The international space station?

JS: The cost of building, launching and assembling a new space station became too much for one country to bear. NASA teamed up with the space agencies of other countries, even those in countries that had not yet gone to space themselves, in order to build a series of modules, which could be launched into orbit and connected together to provide an ever-growing laboratory in space. Every country that participated managed to get some scientists assigned to the ISS for at least one tour of duty conducting experiments in zero gravity.

There! That picture is the same one you see on my wall. It was taken from the ISS on a clear day by one of the scientists.

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