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When Gods Fail

By Nelson Lowhim

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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.

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