

After Yellowstone

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(Formerly Titled *Life as We Knew It*)

A novel by

Jeff Thomson

Prologue

“We learn from history that
we do not learn from history.”

G. W. F. Hegel

Okay... I've finished my ride to nowhere on the Crow-Cruiser. My heart is still thumping in my chest, though not as bad as it was – all those years and all those cigarettes. I guess Mom was right. One of these days it'll kill me, if the ash doesn't do it first. Not that it matters. My chest is tight and I can't seem to shake this damned cough. I should be okay, though. The Yellowstone Hack sounds deeper, like gurgling at the bottom of a well, and mine is still dry. Doesn't make it suck any less, but I don't think it's going to kill me – yet.

I took off the snowmobile mask, but I've still got the dust filter and a bolt of Caroline Brown's eight hundred thread-count bed sheet wrapped around my face. It's been there so long I can't even smell her any more. Probably for the best; I don't need the distraction.

I think I've generated enough electricity to charge the car battery and keep this laptop going for a while. I certainly pedaled long enough, and should probably stretch before I go much further, but to Hell with it. Pain is temporary. Writing is permanent. I'll worry about recharging later. By then, I'm sure I'll need the heat. I'm warm enough to remove a couple layers, but it won't last. Volcanic winter is a bitch – so much for global warming.

The light is less than ideal, coming through the high windows dusty, like everything else in this ash-covered ghost town, but it should be enough to get started. I've got a small camp lantern to help with the gloom, but I don't dare use it except during the bright of day for fear the

scavengers will see it. They're still out there – groups like the one I came here with, picking at the carcass of this once proud city. Their intent and conduct could be benign, I suppose, but Murphy's Law being what it is, best not to take the chance. They won't come here, though – probably. You can't exactly eat books, now can you? And if they do, there's always Mom's .357.

Let's get on with it, shall we?

'Tis a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, Shakespeare said. And like so many things he wrote all those years ago, it cuts through the bullshit and slices human nature into easily understandable portions. In any case, it seems an accurate enough description of me, Jake Campbell, your ever-so humble escort on this journey into the history of what came after the Big Boom. This is what I saw and experienced and survived and did during those mad early days and weeks *After Yellowstone*. It is not the Official History as laid down by the New American Government in Boston. It's not what they're teaching in school these days. It's not what you see on the *History Channel*, now that they seem to have it up and running again. But it is what happened.

We like to think we're basically civilized. We like to believe in society and our essential sanity. And in times past, this belief has been warranted and justified by the facts. Not this time. This time we showed ourselves to be not so far removed from our savage ancestors.

What you are about to read is the truth, but it is a subjective truth told with the hindsight of someone lucky enough to have survived the end of life as we knew it, and filled with the half-witted guesses of someone desperate to understand why things went so horribly wrong. The

geological stuff is a matter of record. I include it here because it allows me to ease into the other stuff, the bad stuff, the stuff so terrible every time I try and wrap my head around it, my mind does everything it can to avoid the subject altogether.

What Mother Nature did was what Mother Nature did. We had no more control over it than we had over who our parents were. If it makes you feel any better to blame someone, then blame her. I don't think she cares. What we did in the aftermath of the Big Boom, however, can't be blamed on anyone but us.

Things went bad with a truly Biblical level of insanity. We gazed into the abyss and saw ourselves, as through a looking glass. But there were no White Rabbits, no Cheshire Cats; only Tea Parties filled with Mad Hatters and Red Queens shouting "Off with their heads!"

There was a psychiatrist named Laing who studied schizophrenic patients back in the early Twentieth Century. He once said schizophrenic behavior makes sense to the schizophrenic; meaning that no matter how bizarre or unhinged insane behavior might appear to those not so afflicted, somewhere deep down inside the twisted synapses of the lunatic's brain, it makes sense to the lunatic. So maybe I'm writing this in an effort to make sense of our societal lunacy, if to no one else but myself. Maybe it'll help me sleep at night. I doubt it, but what the Hell? It's worth a shot.

As I sit here snug as a bug in a rug (as my mother used to say) alone in the empty Main Branch of the Public Library in the abandoned city of Boise, Idaho, it's easy to laugh about what happened a little over a year ago, even though none of it was very funny. I've been told my sense of humor is dark and twisted, and more than a few people have suggested I'm sick in the

head, but the truth is: I'm marvelously well-adjusted.

The best explanation I can offer is anecdotal. During roughly half of my eight years in the U. S. Coast Guard (so long ago it seems like someone else's life) I was a Search and Rescue (SAR) Controller – basically a 911 Operator on steroids. Any trained monkey could do the job, but it took a particular kind of monkey to do it without losing their mind, and apparently, I had the necessary simian qualities.

In any SAR case, the beginning phase is mass-hysteria and chaos. You have to do fourteen things at once, come up with a viable plan while three separate phones are ringing off the hook and multiple radios are blaring in the background, and then coordinate it all with the extra-added bonus of having someone's life at stake thrown in just for fun.

This beginning phase was always handled with just two people: a Controller, and whoever happened to be in the Comm Center. In this case, I was the Controller. For historical purposes, the name of the person in the Comm Center was Bill.

It so happens I'm at my best when all Hell is breaking loose. This is not the boasting of my enormous ego; it's simply a matter of wiring. Some people (like my cousin Francine) are wired in such a way they can perform complex mathematical computations in their head; some are wired for sound such that they have perfect pitch (I, myself, have a tin ear); others (like my Uncle Ian) are able to influence people as easily as falling off a log. I, it seems, am wired for chaos.

On one particular day we encountered this freakish weather, featuring dense pea soup-fog, combined with sixty mile-an-hour winds. I've never seen anything like it, before or since. In any event, we conducted no less than seven SAR cases within an hour and a half.

As it happened, our Public Affairs person (one of those too-cute girls with a tendency to giggle and dot her I's with little hearts) videotaped the festivities. I scarcely noticed her presence. I was, after all, a bit busy. She showed it to me later that day, after Mother Nature slurped the pea soup back into her all-consuming maw. I could be heard laughing throughout the entire episode.

My Operations Officer was none too happy about me yucking it up in the middle of someone else's life-threatening situation, and so the tape never got within a mile of the media, but what other choice did I have? Those ninety minutes were so patently absurd, so utterly insane, that it was either laugh or scream. Since screaming wasn't going to help the people we were trying to rescue, laughter won out.

And so I joke about this stuff that isn't the least bit funny. Again, it's wiring. Some people whistle a happy tune to help them tiptoe through the graveyard. I laugh. It keeps the monsters away.

Part One

Fall

“My way of joking is to tell the truth.
It’s the funniest joke in the world.”

George Bernard Shaw

1

“Not that the story need be long,
but it will take a long while
to make it short.”

Henry David Thoreau

Once upon a time, before Yellowstone went *Ker-Flooeey* and ended life as we knew it, Americans took profound pleasure in seeing things explode. At least twice a year – at sunset on Independence Day and midnight on New Year’s Eve – we would flock by the hundreds and thousands to see fireworks detonate the night sky in brilliant blues and reds and oranges and greens and yellows and a plethora of hues not otherwise found in nature.

In Las Vegas, where I lived before the country went to Hell in a hand basket, every time an old casino needed to be removed so that a greater, grander and infinitely more expensive one could be put in its place to dazzle tourists into giving up their money by the bucket-full, surreal block parties would be held to implode the structure with the necessary pomp and circumstance. Crowds would form hours ahead of time, jockeying for position so they were in just the right spot as the aged building collapsed in choking clouds of plaster dust.

And then there’s war. Our nation has been defined by three: the Revolution that began our Grand Experiment; the Civil War that eliminated the primary flaw in our democratic theory – slavery in a free society – and proved to ourselves that the experiment could work; and World War II, which proved it to the world.

A fourth I suppose could be added to the list – the Second Civil War – but since it’s still going on as of this writing, perhaps it would be best to leave the distinction to future historians.

To do otherwise would be premature and just a tad too conceited.

Be that as it may, in his classic book, *The Warriors*, Glenn Gray (an American Lieutenant in the Second World War) talks of three “secret attractions,” two of which are the “delight in seeing,” and the “delight in destruction.” Letters and memoirs from soldiers in all our wars have talked about the joy of seeing things blown to smithereens, just as long as the things being blown up belonged to the enemy.

It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that Americans also enjoyed that most explosive of cinematic genres known as the *Disaster Movie*. Millions flocked to theaters or sat glued to their TVs to watch tales of daring-do about volcanoes and earthquakes and giant celestial orbs falling from the sky and deadly super-storms, and even laughably unscientific things like an overnight Ice Age. Generally speaking, these all had at least two things in common: the obliteration of national landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, and/or the White House; and the almost always male and invariably *American Hero* who would leap into action at the last possible moment and save humanity from certain destruction.

Then Yellowstone happened.

Once upon a time, six hundred and forty thousand years ago, the Earth beneath what would become Yellowstone National Park erupted with a force more than a thousand times greater than Mount St. Helens, spewing trillions of tons of ash and debris and poisonous gas into the atmosphere, creating a Volcanic Winter. When St. Helens erupted in 1980, the ash fall covered a relatively thin swath across the southern quarter of Washington State, bisecting the Idaho chimney. When Yellowstone last blew it’s top, the ash covered Wyoming, Montana,

Idaho, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, all of Southern California, and most of Nevada, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana, to a depth of between two inches and sixty feet thick.

Talk about a really bad week!

The fact this would certainly happen again mattered to we disaster-happy Americans only insofar as it made for thoroughly entertaining specials on *National Geographic* or the *History Channel*. And besides, we knew Our Hero would swoop in to save the day (if not the landmarks). Hollywood had told us so. Imagine the stunned expression on our faces when the real thing happened and there wasn't a damned thing any of us could do about it.

2

“Doomsday is near; die all, die merrily”

William Shakespeare
Henry IV

Much ado (on the *History Channel* and in yet another disaster movie) was made about an ancient Mayan calendar that predicted December 21st, 2012, would be the end of the world. At the heart of the hoopla was a stone tablet covered in hieroglyphs, left behind when the Mayans decided to take a powder.

This calendar was based upon astronomical data they had calculated centuries before a European man named Christopher Columbus “discovered” the land they’d been living on for millennia. At the time he did this, the indigenous people were considered ignorant savages, far inferior to the enlightened and ever so civilized men who suddenly appeared on their doorstep wielding both superior firepower and the Holy Bible. And so for them to have accomplished this bit of mathematical legerdemain was really something to write home about – had they not already been home.

Called the “Long Count” calendar and named *Tzolk’in* (try saying *that* ten times fast – or even once slowly) by the Maya, it was based on the cycles of the Pleiades (or Seven Sisters) star cluster situated within the constellation of Taurus. Each Great Cycle lasted one million eight hundred and seventy-two thousand days or roughly five thousand one hundred and twenty five years.

None of this really matters, of course, but since I’m sitting in a library surrounded by all

these wonderful books, I may as well put them to use. Uncle Ian would have been so proud.

Be that as it may, Tzolk'in predicted the alignment of the Winter Solstice sun with the exact center of the Milky Way Galaxy, which according to their ever-so ignorant and savage scholars calculating so many centuries ago was scheduled to happen on the 21st of December, 2012. At this point the calendar (and the Great Cycle) ended, providing fuel to the fire so gleefully fanned by the multitude of end of the world cult leaders and media moguls alike who catapulted in to take full advantage of the opportunity as the dreaded date drew near.

That said, however, it's not like there was a hieroglyph with a little guy waving his arms in panic and saying, "We're Doomed!" The thing just ended. The fact that use of this calendar stopped after the Spanish occupation of Mayan land began was – I'm sure – mere coincidence.

In any event, their calculations were wrong. They missed the beginning of the end of life as we knew it by two whole days.

3

“Pride goeth before destruction,
and an haughty spirit before a fall.”

Proverbs, 16:18

The most absurd thing (and there are many) about the ever-popular disaster movie depicting this, that, or the other natural threat to all of mankind, is the notion that it takes nothing more than the effort of some great action hero to save our skins. It doesn't matter how big and bad (and grossly overpaid) a person might be. Mother Nature's got us all beat, hands down. When she decides to give us a whuppin', we may as well just lower our heads in resignation and head for the woodshed.

As I said, I was living in Las Vegas when the Great Mother decided we needed a spanking. So was my mother, who in her own small way had reddened my behind more than once when I was a youngster. We were not living together.

I was a construction inspector by trade, specializing in large projects such as high-rises and the like. As for example, I had just more or less finished work on the new *Chicago* casino resort hotel, built upon the grave of the once great *Frontier*, where I used to go for the occasional forty-five ounce margarita. Excess, thy name was Vegas.

They were still adding the miscellaneous accoutrements to the casino and some of the upper floors, but the structure was complete and, therefore, my involvement was all but over. Two years of my life had gone into the place, and I had been looking forward to checking it out

when it opened. Mother Nature, however, had other plans.

Be that as it may, basically, I got paid quite well to stand around and watch other people work while drinking shocking amounts of coffee and smoking far too many cigarettes. Occasionally, I would point at something. At the end of the day I would write a report.

Can you believe they actually paid me for that? *God Bless America.*

They paid my mother, the former Miss Mary Campbell turned Mrs. Mary Perdue, and then back to Mary Campbell again, nowhere near enough money for what she did. She was a nurse, and a damned good one. For twenty-nine years, she worked emergency rooms and trauma centers and even scraped people off the highway and brought them to the hospital in helicopters. And then she spent another month being paid nothing at all to save the citizens of America, one person at a time.

In the end, this last is what killed her. She kept right on working till she died, nursing hundreds back to health while her lungs were filling with thousands of microscopic shards of volcanic glass.

I loved her. I hope that was enough.

I can't quite bring myself to hate the other mother – she of the woodshed whuppins – in spite of everything she did to take out humanity. It wasn't her fault.

This may come as a blow to the egocentricity of *Homo Sapiens*, but I don't think she pays us much mind. In geological terms, we've only been on this planet for the blink of an eye (unless you believe the fundamentalist Christian notion that the Earth has only existed for six

thousand years). Our planet has been shaking, rattling, rolling, and occasionally going *Ker-Floey* for a very, very long time, and will continue doing so long after we ourselves have taken a powder, just like the Mayans.

Nature (or, if you prefer, God) has given us everything we have, from food, to clothing, to the materials with which we build shelter. But like the comedian Bill Cosby once told his children, “I brought you into this world. I can take you out.”

Her effort to take us out began at 4:17 PM, Pacific Standard Time, on December 23rd, 2012, with a magnitude 8.6 earthquake along the Denali Fault, centered eighty or so miles southwest of Fairbanks, Alaska. It lasted four minutes. The seismic mayhem ripped eastward along the fault line at a whopping seven thousand miles an hour, toppling trees, causing landslides, wrecking roads and buildings and people in both Fairbanks and Anchorage, one hundred and seventy six miles to the south.

As if the western United States shuddered, tremors rumbled southward through Juneau, Vancouver, B. C., Seattle (where it was like somebody dropped one of those amusement park wave machines into the middle of Lake Union), Portland and Eureka, finally ending with a 4.9 shaking of the northern San Andreas in San Francisco. Windows rattled as far-east as Fargo, North Dakota, and in Nacogdoches, Texas, the waters of the Attoyac Bayou sloshed around for almost thirty minutes.

Seismographic monitors scribbled their zigzags all along the Snake River Valley to Yellowstone. At the Volcano Observatory there, where the gigantic caldera experienced over a thousand tremors a year, nobody paid much attention. They were too busy being disturbed by

the Old Faithful geyser deciding to stop in mid-gush.

As impressive as all these facts might seem, they were like so many *Coming Attractions* before Mother Nature's own Disaster Movie hit theaters (and everything else).

Beneath the West Coast between Juneau and Eureka, lie a number of massive fault zones. First is the Queen Charlotte Transform fault extending southward past the Alaskan Panhandle to the Olympic Peninsula, long believed to be the greatest earthquake threat in the region. There, the ancient Explorer Plate separates it from the Juan de Fuca Plate that extends from the middle of Vancouver Island down to the Blanco Fracture Zone off Southern Oregon, where it meets the Gorda Plate, which stretches along the coast of California halfway between the Oregon border and San Francisco Bay. These three plates create the Cascadia Subduction Zone, which has waited since the year 1700, building pressure, biding its time. It wouldn't need to wait much longer.

Another TV phenomenon from Before Yellowstone (over and above disaster movies and the *History Channel*) was the twenty-four-hour news cycle and its devil's spawn: *talking heads* (not to be confused with *The Talking Heads*, a quirky rock band from the early days of music video). The *other* talking heads were anchor people charged with spreading the news twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Granted, this was and still is a complex world with all sorts of stuff going on – some of it good, some of it pointless, a lot of it really, really bad. But they didn't give us *all* the news, only the stuff that got the best ratings. And so, for example, we received a veritable warehouse of information about, say, a political figure who couldn't seem to keep his zipper up, and almost nothing about, say, the genocide going on all over the place in

Africa.

There are those who would have argued that the bad news out of Africa had been going on for decades, and so it wasn't *news*, at all. It was old, whereas the dropping zipper was new and shiny and filled with salacious details people wanted to know. But it wasn't enough to mention said fastening device at the top of the hour, or even once or twice an hour. They – every damn twenty-four/seven news station – just had to dedicate *entire* hours to dissecting every single detail over and over again, and they seemingly all had to do it at the same time. And because it was, after all, a single human being with a single human frailty he apparently exercised a scandalous number of times and, therefore, not quite enough information to fill a sixty minute program (even with numerous commercial interruptions) they also had to bring in a plethora of pundits and so-called experts and let *them* dissect every single detail over and over again.

So it was that I sat in my living room, comfortable in my favorite chair, flipping from one channel to the next and to the next on my sixty-inch flat screen High Definition TV (complete with surround sound, of course), trying to find out what – other than Governor Von Zipper – was happening in America, when news of the Denali quake came up, complete with screaming headlines announcing what sure looked like the end of the world.

We didn't know the half of it.

4

“I have striven not to laugh at human actions,
not to weep at them, nor to hate them,
but to understand them.”

Baruch Spinoza

A twenty-something talking head came on the screen live from what remained of Fairbanks. Her hair properly coifed, her makeup not looking as if it had been applied with a trowel, and her clothing fashionably nondescript, she appeared to be what she was: a not-ready-for-primetime reporter thrust into the national spotlight. Standing in front of the burning, flattened wreckage of what had been City Hall, she delivered the facts. Her delivery was smooth, precise, concise and professional. But something was off.

I couldn't quite put my finger on it until she threw it back to the anchor desk in New York. There was a moment just before the cut when you could see behind the hair and mascara and practiced façade; when you could see the fear in her eyes.

They were just cutting to some political mouthpiece when my cell phone rang. “Hello, Mother,” I said, seeing her name via the wonder of Caller ID.

“Hey kiddo,” she began, ignoring the fact that I was thirty-three freaking years old. “Dinner tonight?”

“That's the plan,” I replied. “Need me to bring anything?”

“Nope. Six-ish?”

“Works for me.”

“See you then.” Thus, Mom: straight to the point, pass the information, hang up. She said hello, asked a question, got an answer, confirmed a detail, and done; nothing extra, nothing non-essential. Personally, I always found it refreshing, but I may have been in the minority.

Some people are put off by the direct approach. They want the pleasantries and nonsensical flapping of the gums, as if the person on the other end of the phone taking the time to converse somehow validates their own existence. They want the effort. And if they don't get that effort, it offends them somehow.

To be sure, pleasant conversation is, well, *pleasant*, and I've been told on occasion that I give good phone, but it's not something I find the least bit necessary. Not everyone is like that. Not everyone has the time.

I've found there are two fundamental types of people: those who do and those who don't. The distinction has to do with a sense of urgency. And most of the time, during the simple day-to-day of life in general, neither is good nor bad, positive nor negative. But when life gets serious, the value of one outweighs the other by a mile.

Before the world turned, you could recognize those who do by the way they seemed to move with a purpose. At a shopping center, for example, you'd see them breeze into the parking lot, find a space, park, get out and head in. If you followed them, you'd see someone who went straight to the shopping carts, grabbed one, and set a bee-line for whatever they needed. They'd locate the necessary items with minimal searching, check out and exit, keeping to whichever side of the parking aisle their vehicle happened to be. Once their items had been loaded, they'd place the cart in the nearest return corral, hop in their car and leave.

The ubiquitous those who don't, on the other hand, would move with the self-centered aimlessness of the utterly oblivious. Their cars would enter the lot with all the speed of a two-toed tree sloth on Quaaludes, leaving a log-jam of irritated motorists in their wake as they turned into the parking aisle with glacial slowness. Several minutes later, after they'd finally parked, they'd meander down the exact center of the roadway as if on a Sunday stroll through the park. Upon reaching the line of shopping carts inside, they'd stop to consult their list, rummage through their purse, or let their thumbs fly upon their cel-phones as they updated their Twitter page to announce to the world at large they had arrived at their retail destination, all the while standing directly in the way of those poor unfortunates behind them who then must wait to obtain a cart. This ever-important task completed, they'd set about their shopping with all the purposeful intensity of someone with no clear destination in mind, making certain to remain in the middle of the aisle so no one else could get by without creating an avalanche of items falling from the surrounding shelves. This Grand Adventure completed (some hours later), they'd proceed to the checkout, waiting until every last thing had been scanned before digging through their billfold for the necessary method of payment, which always seemed to be whichever would take the longest to complete their purchase. Returning to their car – again meandering through the exact center of the roadway – they'd open all their doors so those unlucky enough to have parked on either side of them couldn't access their vehicles while Those Who Don't took their sweet-assed time loading. And then, finally, they would depart, having left their cart in such a way as to be sure the next person couldn't pull into that spot without either removing the damned thing or smashing it into some other car.

All kidding aside, yes I am talking in stereotypes here. I admit it: I am judging by the

group, which is something you should never do if you wish to maintain intellectual honesty. That said, when discussing a group as large as Society, leaning upon the stereotypical is, to a certain extent, unavoidable. Nothing I say here and nothing I will be saying in the rest of these pages should be taken to mean I am referring to every single person within a given group or category. Individual human beings should be taken in exactly that way, *as individuals*. To do any less would be both dishonest and ignorant.

In any event, my mother was one of those who do. Before Yellowstone, there were far too many people who don't, and those were the ones who'd get put off by the people who do; the people who, because things needed to be done, cut through the crap and solved the problem, whatever it may have been.

And when those people were put off by the actions of those who do, they'd whine and whine and whine to any and everyone who'd listen, until *Someone in Authority* finally got sick of hearing it. Then people like my mother would get in trouble, because it was easier for those in authority to slap around those who were too busy doing instead of whining. And the stated crime for which they'd be condemned was that they weren't kinder and gentler and diplomatic enough to the useless multitude, far more concerned about their own self-absorbed feelings than in solving the damned problem.

Can you sense a little bitterness here?

During the last evaluation I received before leaving the Coast Guard, my Chief took me aside and said flat out that if he were in need of rescue on the ocean, then I was the person he wanted in the Operations Center. But, he said, I wasn't diplomatic enough. And so I told him,

what he and others in the command didn't get was that the reason I was good at what I did was because I wasn't diplomatic at all.

Think about it. If you or someone you care about is in trouble, who would you rather have running the rescue operation: someone kinder and gentler and above all diplomatic who's going to say please and thank you and try his best not to hurt anyone's feelings, or someone who's going to kick ass, take names, and save your freaking life?

Even now, as we grope our way toward normalcy after all we had to go through in those lunatic early days, I can see us slipping back into this insane way of doing business. In trying to make sense of the depths of madness to which we descended, I cannot help but see at its root the twisted dichotomy of a society that catered to those who don't to the detriment of those who do.

To use a work analogy, because it's something for which we all have a common frame of reference, in the basic organizational triangle, there are (of course) three sides: Operations, Administration, Command and Control. The Operations side is the people who get it done, be it saving lives or building a high-rise or cooking and serving a really good steak. The Administrative side makes it possible for the Operations side to do whatever it does. And then the Command and Control side makes the decisions. Ideally, these are three complimentary sides of the same geometric shape, but in my experience, more often than not, it doesn't work that way.

The Operations side always functions under one sort of deadline or another. The customer wants his steak nice and medium-rare, and he wants it sooner rather than later, so the chef endeavors to make it right and the waiter dashes across the crowded restaurant to bring it to the table (preferably without spilling it in someone's lap). The high-rise has a firm completion

date, so the owner puts pressure on the general contractor, who puts pressure on all the sub-contractors, who then scream and shout at their laborers to get a move on. The explanation for saving lives should be obvious.

Things need to get done when they need to get done, and the Operational people – those who do, those who have that sense of urgency – move like they've got a purpose and make things happen. The same is essentially true for the Administrative people with one major exception: they *don't* have it. And to be fair, for the most part they don't need it. If they don't get some guy's personnel record updated in the next ten minutes, his life will still go on. But if the same guy has been in an accident and someone – say, a nurse – doesn't stop the bleeding in the next ten minutes (or five, or less), then that guy is going to die.

I always knew Mom loved me and would do anything for me. I also knew that if I were unfortunate or dumb enough to be between her and someone whose life she was trying to save, she would knock me flat on my ass to get to them, without a second thought. Over the years, I became really good at staying the Hell out of her way.

The Administrative people don't have the same mind set. They don't have the sense of urgency. And why should they? For them, life will go on.

As for the Command and Control side, in a perfect world they are supposed to be a balanced combination of the two. As this is not a perfect world, however, most of the time the people in charge lean one way or the other.

Perfect example: the Union Army in the (first) Civil War had all the advantages: manpower, materiel, logistics, transportation, etc. You name it, they had it, whereas the Confederate Army marched with no shoes on their feet or food in their bellies, and yet time and

time again in battle after battle, they kicked the Union's butt. And the reason was who they had in charge. The Confederacy had Robert E. Lee, and the Union had a long succession of losers.

The chief loser was George B. McClellan. His soldiers loved him because they were well-fed, well-equipped, and well-trained. Abraham Lincoln hated him because he could never make up his mind when to fight.

Every army everywhere has exactly one purpose: to engage and destroy the enemy – to fight. An army that doesn't fight may as well be a summer camp.

And so the President went through a succession of loser generals until he finally got to Ulysses S. Grant, who (like Patton in World War II) couldn't have cared less about administration, but had no problem whatsoever fighting. And that's when the Union, after four bloody years and thousands of young men who probably shouldn't have died, won the Civil War.

In a twisted bit of historical irony, it was also US Grant who (years later as President of the United States in 1872) created Yellowstone as the first National Park, thus allowing us to enjoy the beauty and grandeur of the place that would later wreck everything. But I digress.

Operations and Administration – those who do and those who don't – two sides of the same human coin; both are necessary when everything is going just fine and dandy. But when things go bad, the people we need are those who do. People like my mother. As for those who don't, well, it's best they just get the hell out of the way.

5

“I can trace my ancestry back to a
protoplasmal primordial atomic globule.
Consequently, my family pride is something
in-conceivable. I can’t help it.
I was born sneering.”

W. S. Gilbert

Mary Elizabeth Campbell (AKA “Mom”) was 49 years old when Mother Nature decided we needed a trip to the woodshed. She vacillated between hating this fact, being amused by it, and not caring one way or the other. More often than not, she was the only one who paid any attention.

Standing five-foot-six-inches tall and weighing a trim one-thirty-five, her body was lean, fit, muscular, and devoid of the scary veins popping out over her biceps all-too often found in women who worked out (as she did) virtually every day. Her bright green eyes sparkled behind black-framed rectangular glasses perched upon a nose sitting in the middle of an alabaster, thoroughly freckled face, with tiny laugh-lines at the corners of her eyes and lips, which she hated and I loved. That night, she wore jeans and an old blue t-shirt with a cartoon helicopter on the front.

Her hair (at the moment) sported three different colors: mostly auburn, with blond highlights and touches of purple here and there. She colored it to hide the ever-increasing encroachment of grey. Its short crop framed the face of someone who smiled easily. This is not to say her face couldn’t just as easily let someone know her displeasure – the reality of which I was at the moment all-too aware.

“You need to quit smoking.”

“Yes,” I agreed, both because she was right and because not doing so would have been pointless. She was on a roll.

“It’s a filthy, disgusting habit...”

“Yes.”

“...that costs way too much money...”

“Yes.”

“...and is going to kill you...”

“Yes.”

“...if I don’t do it first.”

“All-righty then,” I replied. “What brought on this latest homicidal tendency?” I asked her this because every now and then, what she was actually mad about wasn’t what she was saying. My mother, the walking dichotomy: a painfully direct, cut through the crap kind of person, who could (when it suited her) obfuscate with the best of them.

“Smoking is bad for you,” she mumbled, knowing I had her number.

“Uh-huh.”

“Shut up,” she replied. This was always her answer when she wanted to avoid whatever we were discussing.

“Uh-huh.”

“Change of subject,” she deflected, proving me right and not looking me in the eye. “Are you all packed?”

“Ah ha!” Now I knew what was going on. “This is about going home tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Shut up.”

“Uh-huh.”

We were both supposed to fly out in the morning to spend Christmas with the family a little ways west of Crater Lake, at Uncle Ian’s house in the bustling metropolis of Gunter’s Gap, Oregon (population twenty-five hundred in summer and six hundred fifty in winter), where my uncle served as town mayor.

She’d been born and raised there with her brother. I’d been born there shortly before the two of us moved away for good. But we always went back, and every time we did, it was like flipping a switch inside her independent, strong-willed, stubborn brain and *whammo*, she was right back to being the baby sister again.

Their mother died when my mother was in grade school and Ian was a freshman in high school. And their father, well, their father had just kind of been there, going through the motions of paying the bills and keeping a roof over their heads. Whether from a lack of energy or interest or due to the fact he was missing whatever made a good parent, in the end it didn’t really make any difference. The result was the same: two kids with minimal adult influence.

And so Mary had looked to her big brother for the father-type stuff she lacked. And Ian had taken full advantage of it, poking and prodding at her, meddling in her life in spite of

knowing nothing about being a teen-aged girl, and giving new meaning to the word *overprotective*. Or so *she* thought, anyway.

The reality (ignoring her protestations to the contrary) was that her brother loved her more than words. He would have died for her, and I suppose in a round-about way he did. He would have killed for her, if I hadn't done it first. But this was before any of it happened; before any of it needed to happen – the proverbial calm before the storm.

“Mom... You know I love you, right?”

“I suppose,” she said, to which I replied by beaming her with a dinner roll. We were sitting at the oval wooden table that took up about a third of her kitchen, with dinner having progressed from the gobbling to the nibbling stage. A small eighteen-inch color TV sat muted at one end. Apparently, the talking heads were back to the zipper again, so I remained content in my blissful ignorance.

“When are you gonna pull your head out and realize Uncle Ian loves you?”

“Then why does he make me feel like a loser?”

“No, *you* make you feel like a loser,” I countered. “You’ve convinced yourself you are, and so you twist every single minutely negative thing he says to fit your delusion.”

“I’ll pass on the psychoanalysis, thank you very much, Sigmund Fraud.”

“Truth hurts, doesn’t it?” I teased. “You’re bound and determined to make this seem far worse than it is.”

“Shut up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I feel like a red-headed bastard step-child when I’m around him,” she whined, dropping her face into her hands with a frustrated sigh.

“You are kind of a red-head,” I observed. “And blonde... and purple...” She returned the dinner roll to the vicinity of my breastbone, but I carried on undaunted. “But you are neither a bastard nor a step-child. You are a very strong, very dedicated, very skilled pain in the ass, who I happen to adore. So don’t make me have to kill you. We’re going, you know we’re going and you know you love your brother, so pull your head out and stop whining, because I don’t want to have to listen to it for the entire holiday.”

“Talk to the paw,” she replied, holding up her hand, ever the dog person. As if on cue, her four year-old golden retriever, Miss Molly Noodle, trotted into the kitchen to present herself to anyone willing to give her a good petting. As she was in my proximity, the honor fell to me.

“Look at it this way,” I began, giving the dog a two-handed scratch behind the ears. “You’d do anything to keep Molly safe, right?”

“Duh!”

“And you’d scold her if she looked like she was about to step out of line and do something stupid.”

“Of course.”

I switched to scratching her butt just above the wagging tail. “Get where I’m going with this?”

“Shut up.”

I was about to retort with something witty and filled with sarcasm when Molly’s ears pointed toward the ceiling as she gave a sharp yip and backpedaled. Mom and I both stared at her as if she’d lost her mind (not an unusual occurrence with this animal) and I was about to pointlessly ask the dog to explain herself when we heard the clatter of plates in the cupboard. The floor rumbled, the windows rattled and the house felt like someone had taken it by the shoulders and given it one good shake. And then it stopped.

I glanced at Mom and her eyes the size of ping pong balls, but then the TV, flashing an angry red as the words *Breaking News* shouted at us from the muted speakers caught my attention. She reached over and turned up the volume.

“...A 9.2 magnitude earthquake has rocked the West Coast, causing massive destruction from Juneau, Alaska to Portland, Oregon. Authorities at the United States Geological Survey say...”

I looked back at my mother as she stared at the staggering images of smoking wreckage shot from a helicopter over Seattle. “My God...” she swore, with her voice just above a whisper.

“Looks like we’ll be driving to Oregon.”

6

“Work out your own salvation
with fear and trembling.”

Philippians 2:12

There’s somewhere around two hundred thousand earthquakes recorded worldwide every year, an average of over five hundred a day. Most are too mild to detect with anything short of a seismometer. Roughly every three days, however, a magnitude 6.0 or greater is recorded somewhere in the world.

A 6.0 will rattle your pots and pans rather efficiently, knock a few pictures off the wall, and maybe cause some minor to moderate structural damage. A 7.0 is ten times that. An 8.0 is a hundred times that. And a 9.2 is more than one thousand times as destructive.

The Cascadia Subsidence Zone would have rattled plenty of pots and pans back in 1700, the last time it let rip, but there wasn’t anybody there – at least nobody capable of writing home about it. Lewis and Clark didn’t get out that way for over a century.

Which begs the question: if a massive earthquake wrecks six hundred miles of coastline and nobody’s there, does it make a sound? But I digress.

Scientists knew there’d been one, based on the geological evidence, but it wasn’t until they discovered a Japanese scroll telling of a tsunami hitting the home island that they learned the exact date. Good thing somebody was taking notes.

The 2012 Cascadia quake would be sending another tsunami to visit Japan, first stopping off in Hawaii.

The Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 that drowned much of the coastal areas in Indonesia, Sumatra, Thailand, and parts of India, was caused by a 9+ subsidence zone quake so strong it triggered tremors in the San Andreas, nine thousand miles away. It killed tens of thousands, and it did it with water.

The tsunami sensors the USGS set up all over the place following the 2004 disaster would be telling them Hawaii was about to get munched as we were cleaning up the dinner dishes. They'd evacuate the coastal areas by and by, but there isn't much you can do against a seventy-five foot wave moving at over five hundred miles an hour. Their goose was fairly well cooked.

A similar event in late 2009 had demolished a good portion of Pago Pago, American Samoa, including a little place called Tisa's Bar and Grill. During my time in the Coast Guard, I served on two buoy tenders: one in Alaska, one in Hawaii. The ship I was on during my two years in Hawaii went to Samoa annually to – you guessed it – work on the buoys in the harbor.

Tisa was an ex-madam who'd set up this little place near her house on the coast just outside Pago Pago harbor. The liver damage I caused while visiting her establishment had been both extensive and entertaining. She always took care of us, and we always took care of her, including fixing the bar after a typhoon wrecked the place back in 1991. I wasn't there then, but heard all about it and reaped the benefits of her continuing gratitude, up to and including a semi-drunken game of slap and tickle in her bedroom one fine afternoon. And so I found it rather depressing to hear the 2009 tsunami had wiped that section of coast clean. I don't think they ever found her body.

I remember back in 2005 or 2006, a 7.2 or thereabouts hit a ways east of Los Angeles.

After Yellowstone

From what I recall, only one old woman died. A week later, a quake of the exact same magnitude munched either Iran or Turkey. Ten thousand died. The 2010 series of quakes that hit Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the largest of which was roughly the same magnitude, effectively eliminated the city. I doubt they'll ever figure out the death toll. And then a couple of months later, an 8.8 hit Chile, who had stronger construction and was better prepared for a disaster than the Caribbean island nation had been. The death toll still reached into the thousands. It could have been worse.

There are a number of factors beyond building methods that contribute to the level of destruction, such as duration of the quake, movement of the earth, makeup of the ground, etc. None of these can be controlled, except perhaps whether or not to build on unstable ground like, say, landfill, but again, it all comes back to construction.

In the United States, we used to follow the International Building Code (IBC), with all of its seismic restrictions. As we slowly rebuild, I hope we will again. We shall see.

In Haiti and Iran (or Turkey, or wherever the Hell it was) they don't. As a result, when the Earth moves, we in America get minor injuries and relatively few tragic deaths (or we did before Mother Nature decided to take us to the woodshed), while in other countries, the casualty rates are mind-numbing. So we get bragging rights for our construction techniques, and well we should, but it creates a false sense of security.

The great fallacy has been that our high-rises are designed to remain standing after a major earthquake. This is only partially true. They are designed to remain standing for about twenty minutes – long enough to get everybody out – and that's it. 9/11 and the World Trade Center was an extreme case. Buildings aren't designed against the possibility of a bunch of

religious nut jobs flying airplanes into them.

The unfortunate thing is that these codes – or more to the point, the enforcement of them – are a relatively new phenomenon. When they rebuilt San Francisco after the 1906 disaster, they started following the codes, but that soon went out the window as the need for immediate housing became apparent, and so, for example, they began building out of unreinforced brick on landfill – pretty much the worst kind of building to be in during an earthquake.

The same thing happened after Seattle burned to the ground in 1889. And so on December 23rd, 2012, at 7:02 PM Pacific Standard Time, when the Cascadia Subduction Zone (after patiently biding its time and building pressure for three hundred and twelve years finally got what it had been waiting for) Seattle's Pioneer Square, Qwest Field, Safeco Field, the waterfront district, Harbor Island and the industrial district were all effectively obliterated.

The Great Mother hadn't even finished her warm-up.

Prior to the quake, the northwest corner of Portland, Oregon, sat wedged between the Columbia River on the north and the Willamette River on the south. The entire finger from the Expo Center to Kelly Point Park, including the University of Portland and the Portland International Raceway, doesn't exist anymore. It's gone; sucked out to sea with the ebbing tide.

The rest of Western Oregon wasn't spared. I'll be getting to it in due time. There's a lot more damage to get through first.

As if God grabbed one end of the continental plate about halfway between Seattle and Portland and snapped it like a bed sheet, the Earth rippled to the northeast, east, and southeast, triggering fault lines at all points. Earthquakes rattled pots and pans in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, where the fifteen patrons of the Moose Jaw Diner died when the roof collapsed,

and Winnipeg, Manitoba, where a fire started by a ruptured gas line at the Western Canada Aviation Museum killed twenty-three.

At the Dakota Zoo in Bismarck, three badly frightened Great Northern timber wolves released when the plate glass display window of their enclosure shattered, took shelter at the Wal Mart in the Kirkwood Mall and scared the crap out of all the last-minute holiday shoppers.

In a bizarre act of karma, the Chief Administrator of the Museum of Geology in Rapid City, South Dakota, a gentleman named Dwight Reginald Montgomery (who, according to the article I read about him here in the Boise Library, was a martinet nobody liked very much) received his just desserts when a display case filled with geological specimens toppled over and killed him instantly.

The windows they'd just replaced in the Courthouse Museum and Haybale Church in Arthur, Nebraska, imploded, showering the cleaning lady, Mrs. Henrietta Tomlinson, with glass. It took thirteen stitches to close the cut above her left eye.

In the Peaks Ice Arena at the 7-Peaks Resort, just south of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, six of the twenty-three members of Charlene Waters' skating class (ages 9-11) were injured when a twelve inch crack bisected the ice just as they were executing the line-abreast maneuver they'd been practicing for two weeks in preparation for the city finals. They'd been the odds-on favorite to win.

At the American International Rattlesnake Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, three people suffered snakebites when a number of live specimens got loose. One woman died from cardiac arrest after reaching the hospital.

In Lubbock, Texas, the Buddy Holly statue was decapitated when a 4.2 tremor knocked it off its base. Two people sustained minor injuries and a third needed to be taken to the Emergency Room at the Texas Tech University Medical Center following a four-car pileup caused when the deceased singer's head rolled out into traffic.

An estimated one thousand three hundred people sustained injuries in the greater Reno-Sparks area of Nevada. At the Four-Aces Casino and Hotel in Reno, sixty-three people were injured by tumbling slot machines, including one gentleman who died. He'd just hit a Royal Flush when the video poker machine he'd been playing for three solid hours fell over and crushed his skull. I guess it wasn't his lucky night after all.

Vast areas of Northern California, as if Mother Nature laughed at their greater adherence to the building code, were just flat destroyed. The Hayward Fault near San Francisco, which hadn't had a "big one" for over one hundred and forty years, and over which two-point-five million people lived, let rip with a magnitude 7.3, toppling buildings, collapsing roadways (even though retrofitted after the quake in 1991), and causing an estimated twelve hundred fatalities.

Not to be outdone, that part of the San Andreas Fault cutting through Santa Clara Valley and most susceptible to liquefaction because of the relatively shallow water table, cracked with a 7.4, turning the ground to goo with a staggering level of mayhem.

An article I found here in the Boise Library in an old issue of *Science Daily* (Feb. 2, 2009) defined liquefaction thusly: "... a physical process that takes place during some earthquakes, causing loose soil to act like water rather than a solid. The liquefied sand or soil may flow and the ground may move and crack, causing damage to surface structures and

underground utilities, as it did in the valley during both the 1868 and 1906 earthquakes.”

As I said, it turns the ground to goo.

Another six thousand names in Santa Clara were added to the casualty list. Four thousand more were created in Sacramento (including fourteen members of the Governor’s staff), as well as three hundred in Redding, eleven hundred in Eureka (including forty three students at Humboldt State University in nearby Arcata who died when the lecture hall in which they were studying seismology collapsed), six hundred in Lodi, eight hundred and fifty in Modesto, eighteen hundred in Stockton, sixty-eight in Merced, and on, and on, and on.

No landmarks (save Buddy Holly) were harmed in the production of this catastrophe.

But if all this wasn’t bad enough, and if Mother Nature hadn’t already given us one hell of a whuppin, she had one more trick up her sleeve. As if she’d taken the Snake River Valley and cracked it like a whip right at Yellowstone, a 7.9 ruptured the ground from the Norris Geyser Basin to the Fishing Bridge at the northern tip of the lake, right across the top of the behemoth caldera which had been waiting and building for six hundred and forty thousand years.

7

"Insanity in individuals is something rare -
but in groups, parties, nations and epochs
it's the rule."

Nietzsche
Beyond Good and Evil

I dragged Mother's butt out of bed at Oh-My-God-It's-Freaking-Early the next morning, shoved her, a few pieces of luggage, three boxes of Christmas presents, and Miss Molly Noodle into my Gigantor black Cadillac Escalade (I told you they paid me well) and hit the road, following a brief stop at the gas station. I had gone to one of those desert toy stores filled with sand buggies and ATV's and the like the night before on my way home and picked up two five-gallon jerry cans, just to be safe. She asked me about those as I was filling up.

"We're heading into a disaster area, Mom."

"I talked to Ian last night. He said everything was fine," she said with a half-asleep voice; never a morning person.

"In Gunter's Gap, sure; it's the middle of nowhere. To get there, we have to drive through the middle of somewhere, and it's the somewhere that's wrecked."

"Oh, it's not that bad!"

"You obviously haven't been watching the news."

After Yellowstone

I'd been up since about midnight. I'm a freak that way. Between the bizarre hours the Coast Guard made me keep and the schedule that is no schedule involved in concrete construction, I had gotten used to getting up in the middle of the night, whether or not I'd had anything vaguely resembling a "normal" amount of sleep. If the military taught me nothing else, it's that you can get used to anything – even Pork Adobo made in large greasy quantities while the ship is rocking and rolling in heavy seas. After that, the rest of life is a piece of cake.

And so I'd spent the time fueling my body with curl-your-toes strong coffee and taking advantage of the twenty-four hour news cycle. It proved to be an eye-opening experience.

One by one, talking heads from across the western United States added their two cents (and casualty lists) to the growing story of seismic apocalypse. Some kept it together, relaying the facts in a calm and reasoned voice. Others were visibly stunned by it all, their carefully coifed hair mussed as if they weren't able to keep from running their hands through it just to make sure their heads hadn't exploded. And one jerk looked as if he were actually enjoying himself with a sick kind of glee. I felt like reaching through the TV screen and slapping him.

And so it was with a growing sense of the scale of this madness that I arrived at her house at four in the morning and let myself in with my key. Molly met me at the door with furiously wagging tail in spite of the early hour, and I sent her straight into Mom's bedroom to perform the wake up call.

I heard Mother mumble some unintelligible curse and throw the covers off, as I discreetly waited out of sight in the hallway. No one needs to see their mother crawling out of bed. She told Molly to "get out of the way," then stumbled into the bathroom. I took the opportunity to surreptitiously retrieve the .357 Magnum and a box of shells out of her bedside table.

The notion of my mother “packing heat” always cracked me up, and in the past I had taken advantage of every opening to give her a hard time about it, but now I was damned glad she had the thing. Something told me we were going need it.

I wandered into the kitchen, retrieved her keys off the counter and unlocked the trigger guard, marveling at the fact she kept the gun in her room, which made sense, but the key on the other side of the house, which pretty much defeated the purpose. My mother: prepared but absent-minded. As I heard the shower come on, I slipped outside and stashed the gun in my truck.

The upshot of the news I watched as I slurped my coffee was that for all intents and purposes, every major city along the West Coast from Fairbanks down to San Francisco had been wrecked. Like the seven SAR cases in ninety minutes, the idea seemed so patently absurd, so utterly insane that all I could do was laugh. I’ll bet I was in the minority that morning; I suspect most people were screaming.

And if the reports were true, no small amount of them were looting. Most were self-absorbed mental midgets stealing TV sets and stereos and the like, which wouldn’t be serving any purpose whatsoever for quite some time to come, but a lot were raiding the grocery stores.

If Fairbanks, Anchorage, Juneau, Vancouver, Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco were all disaster areas, it meant one hell of a lot of displaced people; all of them needing food and water, and all of the food and water needing to be delivered over a road network of collapsed bridges and overpasses.

The utter botching of hurricane Katrina notwithstanding (and mind you, had I handled my SAR cases with anything resembling the negligence and incompetence with which the President and his political cronies had fumbled that one, my ass would have been in Leavenworth), the system existed to get relief into any one effected area. In a pinch, they could probably make it into two or three. But with seven major cities and countless minor ones, along with small towns and unincorporated areas shattered, the system was overwhelmed before it even got started. People would be fending for themselves.

We like to think people are smart, but the idea is predicated on the word *people*. An individual person is smart. Small groups with intelligent leadership might also qualify. But in my experience, people, *en masse*, are stupid, scared, self-centered and vicious, and they will turn on each other the first chance they get.

We're talking post-traumatic stress on a gargantuan scale with literally millions of afflicted people (and soon to be tens of millions). Had we known how close to bedlam things would get, I suspect this beginning phase would have been much, much worse.

For the first day or so following any great catastrophe, as Katrina and the Indonesian Tsunami and the earthquake that flattened Port-au-Prince, Haiti, showed, most people are too stunned to do much of anything. The magnitude of what's happened is too astonishing to wrap their head around, and so they mill about, directionless, going through the motions just to be doing something, *anything*. Granted, there are those who will get right to work, solving the problems at hand, but they are in the minority. Most will simply wait for someone else to come along and do it for them.

There is an odd bit of anecdotal evidence from the Second World War. In account after account from American soldiers, of all the many and varied European people they met, the ones they admired most at the end of the war were the Germans. When the Allied forces were done shelling the crap out of a town in France, say, the French people would just sit there and wait until somebody came along to rebuild the place for them. The Germans, on the other hand, would start to rebuild the moment their own army went out one end of town as the Americans came in the other. Quietly, stoically, they would get to work.

And in past generations, such as the one who fought what may very well have been the last honorable war, Americans would have behaved just as the Germans did. They would have gotten to work. But in 2012, after the Nifty Fifties, and the Psychedelic Sixties, and the excess of the Seventies, and the Me Generation, and Generation-X, and whatever the Hell came after that, we Americans as a group, as a people, had become soft, self-absorbed whiners who in case after case, time after time showed we were far more concerned with placing blame than with fixing the damned problem.

Yes, I am making a sweeping generalization here. I do not and cannot mean all Americans. I do not even mean the Americans we are today, after all that's happened. We're a resilient bunch and if the past year proves anything, it is that we are more than capable of pulling ourselves up by our boot straps, just as we have always done throughout our history. But at the end of 2012, we seemed to have forgotten it.

Once the stunned phase of post-trauma has faded, people – as a group – tend to fall into one of three categories: the *Doers*, the *Waiters*, or the *Takers*. The Doers are those who get right to work, thinking of the group (whether that group is family or their friends and neighbors, or

society in general). The Waiters, as should be obvious, wait around either for someone to tell them what to do, or to come in and do it for them. The Takers – and this is a shockingly large group – are those who think only for themselves, operating under pure self-interest, and they will take, often violently, to feed that interest.

The Doers are too busy doing, and so you don't see much of them, in part because they don't draw attention to themselves. Granted, there are those who *seem* to be Doers, but they always manage to find a way to be wherever the limelight is. In my mind, these are Takers of a most insidious sort, because everything they do is designed for their benefit, and they will not hesitate to throw you under the proverbial (or actual) bus if it is to their advantage. Politicians, for example...

The Waiters are everywhere, the lost, shell-shocked multitude; ubiquitous in their directionless nature, and so after a while they become part of the hellish scenery. Past a certain point, you don't notice them anymore, except in those solitary moments when you let your guard down. But the tragedy of it is so overwhelming that you have to go back to ignoring them again, just to preserve your sanity.

And the Takers? They hide, acting like Doers or seeming like Waiters, but the moment you turn your back, their knife is at your throat. They are the ones who, in times not involving disasters on a Biblical scale, are the people who play the system, taking advantage of every weakness, every loophole, and making things harder for the rest of us as a result.

They are the reason our legal system was so screwed up Before Yellowstone; the ones who, as politicians, would cater to special interests, rather than the people they were elected to represent; the ones who, as religious leaders, would preach the word of a man who owned

nothing, all the while lining their pockets with gold. They are the scammers and the liars and the cheats.

And when things get bad and the world turns ugly, they are the ones who will kill you for a bottle of water, whether they are thirsty or not.

And so it was with this sobering thought – the idea we were venturing into a world of chaos filled with desperate people thinking only for themselves – that I prepared to head for Gunter’s Gap. I stopped at the grocery store (thanking God for the twenty-four-hour nature of Las Vegas) and picked up four cases of bottled water, a couple dozen cans of soup, vegetables and some pretty disgusting chili, and four large bottles of multi-vitamins.

While rolling through the aisles, trying to get this done so we could get on the road, my olfactory senses picked up the pungent and delightful aroma of coffee. I hadn’t even thought to add this necessary elixir to my mental list. I could have smacked myself upside the head for being such an idiot.

I turned my already-laden cart into the coffee and tea aisle and marveled at the plenty before my eyes. Dozens of brands and hundreds of containers lined the shelves: medium roast, dark roast, French roast, ground and whole bean, decaf and instant; anything anyone could possibly want or desire in terms of legal speed. God Bless America. I added one three-pound can to my cart.

Then it struck me: how long would this abundance last? With the road network smashed, relief going to the areas most affected (which Vegas wasn’t) and shortages of everything,

including the fuel required to transport it all, how long would this aisle of plenty last? I added four more three-pound cans and three jars of instant.

I pulled as much cash out of the ATM as I could and added it to the wad I'd pulled out the night before. And I made sure Mom packed her medical kit. I would have stopped off and picked up more ammo, but number one, it was too damned early, and number two, I wasn't quite ready to let Mom know I took her gun.

The Coast Guard's motto was (and I suppose still is) *Semper Paratus*, Always Ready. I had learned my lessons well – or so I thought. I wasn't ready for what would come. Nobody was.

There are three ways to drive between Vegas and Gunter's Gap. The first is not to do it at all. That's the one I like, but since the only flights into either Klamath Falls or Medford (the nearest airports) connected through San Francisco, which had been demolished, flying had not seemed a viable option. The second is to go through Reno, which while not as ruined as Frisco, was still fairly wrecked, so it didn't seem like the best idea in the world, either.

The third is to drive through the middle of freaking nowhere from Lost Wages to Tonopah, Battle Mountain, and Winnemucca (and believe me, those are the highlights of the four-hundred and sixty-five some-odd mile trip through Nevada), and thence to Lakeview, Oregon, and then to Klamath Falls. From there it's only an hour of sometimes bone-jarring driving over crappy roads to get to the bustling metropolis of Gunter's Gap, just to the west of Crater Lake.

Either driving option takes about eighteen hours. I can do (and have done) it in one shot provided I have enough coffee and the occasional fast food joint along the way. But with a woman and a dog in the truck needing to stop every two hours like clockwork, it makes the run a shade over twenty hours. With that same woman bitching and that same dog barking and a .357 tucked under my seat, a straight run didn't sound like a good plan.

But as we set out at five-thirty in the morning on Christmas Eve, 2012, I didn't have the slightest idea what we'd run into. It could be nothing. There was an awful lot of it out there, which I suspected would be to our benefit. The truck was in good shape, so I knew we'd make it. Finding gas could be a problem, but I didn't think the Nevada portion of the trip had received much if any damage. Oregon was going to be another matter, but I'd worry about it when the time came.

So, on we went, hopping the 95 north off the 15. We didn't know it then, but it'd be the last time either one of us saw Las Vegas.

8

“God is a real estate developer
with offices ‘round the nation.
They say one day he’ll liquidate
His orders up on high,
I say it’s all speculation.”

Matt Fox, Michelle Shocked
God Is a Real Estate Developer

At first, the trip progressed in companionable silence. This may have had something to do with Mom being sound asleep and quietly snoring in the passenger seat. I took the opportunity to plug headphones into my MP3 player and rock out as the miles flew by.

She woke up about an hour out of Tonopah as we were passing the Nellis Air Force Base Test Range, where they practiced blowing things up. Imagine their chagrin later when Mother Nature demonstrated what a *real* explosion was like.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“The middle of nowhere,” I replied, pulling the headphones off my head.

“Could you be a bit more specific?”

“We’ll be in Tonopah in about an hour.”

“Any chance there’s a rest area between here and there?”

“None whatsoever.”

She thought about this for a moment, possibly weighing her need against any potential

public humiliation, and then: “Pull over so I can find a cactus.”

I debated whether or not to tell her the truth, perhaps seeking a bit of revenge for some of the numerous times she’d embarrassed me as a youngster, but then decided to take pity on her. “Squeeze your legs together, Mother. We’re about fifteen minutes away from Gold Strike.”

“Thank God,” she replied, unaware of how prophetic her proclamation would be.

Gold Strike, Nevada was pretty much what you’d expect from a roadside ghost town in the ass-crack of the world – two gas stations (one of them – Gold Strike Gas-n-Gro – doubling as a grocery), Bob’s Truck Stop Diner, Uncle Buck’s Mineral Curio Emporium, a few nondescript buildings and desert-faded houses, and – the biggest building of all – the Strike It Rich Casino and Roadhouse. I fully expected to see tumbleweeds rolling across the street as we got out of the truck in front of the Gas-n-Gro on stiff legs, but alas – no such luck.

A strong cold breeze stirred up the dust that covered nearly everything. The aroma of pancakes wafted over from Bob’s, but mixed with the airborne debris it smelled more like the dust bunny breeding ground under my bed than anything I wanted to put in my mouth.

Mom scurried toward the grocery, tossing a quick “Walk Molly,” as she headed in to relieve herself. A disembodied voice from what had to be a radio or TV floated ghost-like through the door as she entered, and then snapped off as it closed behind her. I heard the words “Judgment Day” and then nothing but the swirling wind.

Chuckling at the appropriate, yet disconnected comment, I escorted Molly as she took care of business in the empty lot alongside the colorless adobe building. Whoever had said it

wasn't far wrong.

Afterwards, as she finished slurping water from her bowl, I meant to top off the gas tank but was halted by a handwritten sign declaring *Cash Only*. I wasn't surprised. Credit card machines (especially older models like I just knew this place had) run through the phone lines – a significant number of which must have gone down from all the rattling and rolling.

When Molly looked up at me with that “you may take this away now,” expression on her furry face, I guided her into the back seat, disconnected the leash, and shut her inside after tipping the bowl and what was left of the water onto the dusty ground.

“... brought down the wrath of God for the sins of abortion, homosexuality, pornography and rampant atheism,” the radio voice declared as I entered the shop. “We have mingled the races and shunned the Church. Hollywood routinely takes His name in vain and treats Christianity as a joke. This has been a long time coming, folks. God is a great landlord and the rent is due.”

Another male voice cut in as the applause from the studio audience swelled through the radio speakers. “The Reverend Thomas Jericho and Jericho Ministries needs your help in this time of tribulation. Send your offering of support to...”

“Funny how it always comes down to money,” Mom commented with no small amount of sarcasm. She leaned against the counter alongside two crusty old codgers, both wearing faded chinos, and one middle-aged man with a *Jack Daniels* ball cap on his head. An older woman in red stretch pants approaching maximum density and a green sweatshirt festooned with Christmas

elves stood behind the counter next to the cash register.

“Reverend Jericho is a great man,” the woman declared, as if daring Mom to dispute her, which it looked like she just might do, so I stepped in.

“Can I get twenty-five bucks on...? I don’t know – whatever the pump is out there?”

She gave Mom what I’m sure was her version of a stern glare, and then turned to me and smiled. “Cash only, honey.”

I handed over a twenty and a five and then took mother by the arm and pulled her toward the door. The last thing we needed there in the middle of nowhere was for her to go off on one of her anti-religious rants.

I sent her off to pump the gas as I wandered over to the refrigerated cases along one side of the store. There were two one-gallon jugs of water. I grabbed them both. As I was paying for those and what turned out to be the last two cartons of cigarettes I would ever buy, the Reverend Jericho carried on with his sermon.

“As we all know, friends, God works in mysterious ways and through His servants to get what He wants. And what He wants now is a Reckoning for all the Godless iniquity running through America like a rabid dog. And what do we do with rabid dogs, my friends?”

The people there in the Gold Strike Gas-n-Gro looked right at me as the question was asked. I didn’t wait around to hear the answer.

The Reverend Thomas Jericho was by no means the first of the Ecclesiastical Finger

Pointers. Within two days of the terrorist attack on September 11th, 2001, the Reverend Jerry Falwell issued a statement blaming the attack on “the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians,” who’d been attempting to turn America “into a secular society.”

A group calling themselves the “Columbia Christians for Life” claimed that Hurricane Katrina looked like a six-week old fetus and so (in their infinite logic) it must therefore mean that God was punishing abortionists. That the storm killed Pro-Life people right along with Pro-Choice people apparently didn’t matter.

Televangelist and one-time Presidential candidate Pat Robertson agreed with them about Katrina and with Jerry Falwell about 9/11, adding the American Civil Liberties Union to the list of those to blame. He also blamed the flattening of Port-au-Prince on the fact that the Haitians had “made a pact with the devil” in order to get out from under French rule, and so had been “cursed” ever since.

In 2010, he said God wouldn’t be blessing the United States of America that year because of His anger over abortion *and* homosexuality. And in a 1992 fundraising letter, he actually said: “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It’s about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.” All-righty then...

Do I really need to point out the obvious absurdity of this unmitigated, preposterous rubbish? Apparently I do, because when these things were said over and over again, few if any people called these monumental purveyors of intellectually bereft nonsense on their bullshit. And so it continued.

Pastor John Hagee, a star in the Religious Right who supported the Nation of Israel for the singular Biblical belief that its existence would bring on the End of Days, claimed in the late 90's that Hitler and the Nazis had been doing God's will when they chased (can you say "exterminated?") the Jews out of Europe and shepherded them to Palestine, presumably because God wanted to spark Armageddon. One wonders what the reasoning was for the Gypsies, intellectuals, Bolsheviks, and anyone who didn't agree with Adolf. Was that God's will?

And couldn't this all-powerful God have simply done the job Himself? Did He really need a bunch of goose-stepping lunatics to do it for him? Oh yeah... That's right... I forgot... God works in mysterious ways.

It seems it's always somebody's fault when God fires up his wrath and lets loose the dogs of righteous retribution – somebody *else's* fault, that is. Never their own; never the people they agree with or who agree with them, but always the *other guy*, as if God is somehow picking and choosing whom to obliterate whenever a catastrophe occurs. And when you point out the obvious – that the death toll is random and indiscriminant – they simply counter the argument by quoting Matthew 5:45; "*He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*"

To me, it's too convenient, like so many other things involved with religion. Something bad happens, it's "God's will." If you question the validity of this, that, or the other bit of dogma, and demonstrate how it flies in the face of all evidence to the contrary, the ready-made answer is "God can do as He pleases." Sure, great, how convenient – especially considering that these religious leaders gain power from the ecclesiastical blame game.

As Carl Sagan said in his novel, *Contact*, "Anything you don't understand...you attribute

to God. God for you is where you sweep away all the mysteries of the world, all the challenges to our intelligence. You simply turn your mind off and say God did it." A cynical person (or simply someone who knows history) might suggest this is by design.

While stumbling about here in the library, I found an interesting book called *The Timetables of History*, by Bernard Grun, and based upon the German work by Werner Stein, *Kulturfahrplan*. No real reason for including this information about the source material; I just like saying *Kulturfahrplan*.

In any event, there is a fascinating, if unstated, fact that appears if one reads between the lines. As the title suggests, the pages are set up in tabular form, with the horizontal side split into years and the vertical divided into a number of topics, such as History/Politics, Literature/Theater, Religion/Philosophy/Learning, Visual Arts, Music, Science/ Technology/ Growth, and Daily Life.

During the Dark Ages (500 to 1000, CE) predictably, there isn't a whole lot in the Science/Technology/Growth column. What there is of it, however, comes almost exclusively from the non-Christian world. For example, while mathematics, book printing, surgical techniques, the discovery of sulfuric and nitric acid, astronomy, chemistry, algebra, the creation of the Arabic numerals we use today, and the all-important discovery of coffee were being developed in the so-called heathen Chinese, Hindu, and Arab worlds, the Christian world was developing pretty much nothing except the Christian religion.

Another book I found, *The Dark Side of Christian History*, by Helen Ellerbe, points out that technology in Europe all but disappeared while the Orthodox Christian Church flourished and grew. The aqueduct and plumbing systems – probably the greatest invention of the Roman

Empire – crumbled and vanished, taking toilets and indoor plumbing with them. Meanwhile, Christian Orthodoxy was teaching the people to “revile all things of the flesh,” and so washing was discouraged. Hygiene and sanitation went right out the damned window and epidemics ran rampant throughout Europe. Naturally, of course, the Church found a convenient scapegoat to blame: the Jews.

While the economy of the western world was collapsing, the Church somehow managed to get filthy rich. As anyone today knows, money equals power, and so it should come as no surprise that during the Dark Ages, while the people could barely afford to pay attention, no less than forty Popes managed to *buy* their way into the papacy. By the time this period of history came to a close, the Church owned as much as one-third of Western Europe. The inconsistency inherent with this great confluence of wealth in an organization supposedly representing a man who owned the clothes on his back and not a whole lot else prompted the Pope later in 1326, to proclaim it heresy to suggest Jesus and the Apostles were poor. Again, how convenient.

Education outside of the Church became virtually non-existent. Purely by convenient coincidence (I’m sure), the burning of any books found to disagree with Christian dogma was all the rage. And those few books they allowed to remain were, by the close of the Seventh Century, all translated into Latin, which no one outside the Church could speak or read. In fact, possession of a Bible translated into any language average people could understand was punishable by death.

As long as people were convinced that God could do whatever He wanted, and as long as the only path to understanding God was through the Church, who controlled all knowledge and thought of Him, then whatever they said God said – regardless of whether it made any kind of

sense or flat-out flew in the face of the teachings of Jesus Christ (you know, the guy the religion was named for) – was treated as Gospel and, therefore, their power was absolute.

The novelist Tom Robbins has called religion – not spirituality or belief or faith, but *religion* – “the politics of the divine.” The nature – the point – of politics is the acquisition and maintenance of power. Forget about doing good things for “the people.” that most transitory grouping, which uncannily moves from issue to issue wherever the popular wind might blow. Politics is about getting and keeping power, and so the politics of the divine is about getting and keeping power by using religion.

Human history has so many examples of this you could start an entire library wing. But as Hegel said, “We learn from history that we do not learn from history.”

Fear and blame have long been methods of manipulation used by the religious and the secular alike. It feeds into the lizard brain still residing within our grey matter; a leftover gift from millions of years of evolution. Unless you don’t believe in evolution, and that we (in the immortal words of the movie *Inherit the Wind*) “were planted like a geranium.”

So the Reverend Thomas Jericho, though a relative newcomer on the Ecclesiastical stage, was by no means alone. His ilk had been spouting their nonsensical poison for a very long time. It would not be the last we heard from him – not by a long shot.

Volcanic Interlude #1

Americans like to compare things to other things, and we like it best when our things are the biggest in the world. We want the bragging rights.

Prior to Yellowstone, the biggest volcanic thing we had was Mount St. Helens. The 1980 eruption killed fifty-seven people and thousands of animals, caused almost three billion dollars in damage, dumped somewhere around two-thirds of a cubic mile of ash and rock and pumice, and made for some really cool video tape that was shown time and time again, pretty much whenever an American TV special discussed any kind of natural disaster. But as for bragging rights, we were nowhere close.

Mount Pinatubo (1991), in the Philippines, was ten times bigger, with a whopping five cubic miles of material ejected, which circled the globe and caused worldwide temperatures to drop a full degree for five years. One degree doesn't sound like much, but it was believed to have contributed to the damage caused by hurricanes Andrew (Florida) and Iniki (the Hawaiian island of Kauai).

In 1815, the Indonesian volcano, Mount Tambora, reduced the size of the mountain by 4000 feet, dumped 150 million tons of volcanic crap into the air and caused 1816, the so-called year without a summer, where New York State experienced blizzards in the middle of June. It effectively eliminated the entire 1816 growing season, and was the last time Western Europe ever experienced widespread starvation – until 2013.

And then there was Krakatoa. This contest entry from Indonesia (the Asians absolutely

kicked our butts when it came to volcanoes) blew its stack in 1883, was seventeen times the size of Mount St. Helens, and erupted somewhere around ten cubic miles of ash and debris into the atmosphere. It generated the loudest sound in recorded history, and was heard all the way in Perth, Australia, more than a thousand miles away. Over thirty-six thousand people were killed, including every single one of the three thousand inhabitants of Sebesi, an island a little over three miles away. Worldwide, it screwed up the weather for five years. The famous 1893 Edvard Munch painting, “The Scream,” with the weird shaped guy screaming on the bridge in front of a multi-colored sky, painted ten years later, was supposed to be an accurate depiction of the way the sky looked over Norway – on the other side of the planet – as a result of Krakatoa.

And the last so-called Super Eruption, a term coined by the BBC when they created the made-for-TV movie called *Supervolcano*, a fictional account of what Yellowstone might be like, was also an Indonesian competitor. Toba erupted seventy-five thousand years ago, and is believed by some to have caused an evolutionary bottleneck. Something drastic happened in human history, reducing the amount of genetic variation in our species – something around seventy-five thousand years ago. It is possible, they say, that all of modern humanity are the direct descendents of the Toba survivors.

Hiya, Cousin!

But now, *After Yellowstone*, all of those are mere pretenders to the throne. Once again, we get the bragging rights – *Hooray for Our Side!*

I read an article in the *Boise Bugle* about the lone survivor of the Yellowstone Volcano Observatory (YVO), Charlene Marshall, a lowly grad student and the only living eye witness to the beginning of the end. I found it at the edge of a collapsed section of the Boise Library roof,

fittingly covered with ash. It contained a transcript of her testimony in front of the United States Congress. That night, after she testified, she went back to her hotel, took a knife she'd gotten from Room Service, and cut her wrists.

What follows is an excerpt.

Q: What was the first indication?

A: You mean other than the Magnitude 7.9 earthquake?

Q: Miss Marshall, we're only trying to sort through the facts. There's no need for sarcasm.

A: You're trying to assign blame. It won't work. You want to blame somebody? Try Mother Nature on for size. I'll bet she doesn't even request an attorney.

Q: Please, Miss Marshall...

A: Fine... Whatever... The first indication was increased levels of Sulphur Dioxide throughout the Park system, but centered primarily in two areas: the northern tip of Yellowstone Lake, and the Norris Geyser Basin, where we also saw ground uplift.

Q: And what is that?

A: Exactly as it sounds – the ground lifts. (pause) Yeah, yeah, okay... Pressure is exerted by expanding hot water, gasses, and surging magma, causing the ground to swell and lift up.

Q: And then...?

A: We started to record increased seismic activity – magnitude one to two range – centered over

After Yellowstone

Norris. In a three hour time period, we recorded twenty-three tremors at a depth of approximately five miles, each with a duration of three to five seconds.

Q: And then...?

A: And then nothing. Seismic activity stopped, Sulpher Dioxide levels went down. Nothing.

Q: What did that indicate?

A: We had no idea.

Q: You mean to tell me that the experts American taxpayers rely on for information had no idea what was going on?

A: Congressman, nobody would have been able to tell you, because the last time anything like this happened was seventy-five thousand years ago, and anybody who saw it happen was incinerated. They died, Congressman. They all died.

9

“Were such things here as we do speak about?
Or have we eaten on the insane root
That takes the reason prisoner?”

William Shakespeare
Macbeth

We stopped in Tonopah for fast food, the biggest cup of coffee I could find, and long enough for Mom to try and pull some cash out of the bank. It was “closed temporarily due to computer problems.” I took that to mean the DSL lines were down, presumably damaged by all the earthquakes, just like the phones. Whatever the reason, we were stuck with the money we had on hand.

Tonopah is the halfway point between Vegas and Reno, and that’s pretty much all it has going for it. The 95, which shoots more or less due north all the way from the Mexican border, cuts west/east toward Reno to the west, and the vast nothing that is Eastern Nevada. We turned east briefly, then north again on the 376 through the Big Smoky Valley. If the middle of nowhere has a middle of nowhere, this was it; miles and miles of blasted landscape, with nothing to look at but more of the same.

Our radio choices seemed limited to a country station of the *I-love-my-wife-but-I-won’t-let-her-drive-my-truck-because-she-drinks-too-much-and-she-ran-over-my-dog* variety, and more of the Reverend Thomas Jericho. Neither sounded appealing. I wanted to hear the news, so I could find out what I was driving into, but apparently the country station was pre-taped with no DJ’s and canned commercials, and I would hardly call the Jericho Ministries news. I could have thrown in a CD, I suppose, but it wouldn’t have mattered much. Mom was too spun up

about the good Reverend.

“They irritate me, Jake.”

“No. Really?”

“How can people who are supposed to be preaching the word of a man who was, if nothing else, tolerant be so intolerant?”

I could have answered, but the question had been rhetorical and wouldn't have made a difference in any case because she was on a roll. I just let it slide off me like the *Peanuts* version of adult-speak: “*Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah*,” because I was on a roll of my own about harsh realities.

To be a SAR controller, you kind of have to think in terms of worst-case scenarios, because then if the worst does happen, you're ready for it – at least in theory – and for the most part, it works in practice. The down side is, after doing it for a number of years, you catch yourself doing it when you're not at work, or long after you've stopped being a SAR controller altogether.

For example, when I'd go to a movie theater or a concert or any kind of public event before Yellowstone, the first thing I'd do was look for all the exits, and then run through a series of “what would I do if” questions. Mom used to do the same thing after so many years of emergency medicine, and she claimed a number of firefighters and cops did it as well.

And so as I drove through miles and miles of cactus and sage brush and sand and rocks, and as Mom went on and on about “the problem with religion” (something I'd learned long ago it was best to nod and say “you're absolutely right”) I thought about just how bad things were

going to get. It kept me amused.

Let's face it, *best*-case scenario the western United States was in a world of hurt. Any time disaster strikes one city, it's bad. This had struck seven and countless small towns, etc., so even the rosier outlook had to be pretty grim. Millions of displaced people, hundreds of billions of dollars in damage added to an already piss-poor economy, road networks wrecked, broken or unreliable communication lines, emergency services stretched way beyond the breaking point, dogs and cats living together; no matter how you looked at it: bad news. Bad times bring out bad people. That to me was the most worrying.

I did my time as a SAR controller in the little town of McKinleyville, just outside Eureka in Northern California, working a twenty-four hour shift every three or four days (depending on how many people we had). It left me with a lot of down time, and after working an ugly case, I needed it. But after those shifts when nothing happened, what I needed was something to do, beyond sitting on my ass and staring at daytime television, so I went to school at Humboldt State University.

I majored in psychology, if for no other reason than people fascinate me, and minored in history, because real history isn't about dates and events; it's about people. In any case, a girl once told me that my particular genius (if I have one – and even *my* enormous ego isn't convinced), was in simplifying complex issues. So to simplify psychology, or more to the point, psychotic people, sometimes it boils down to this: screwed up people do screwed up things.

If you look at someone like John Wayne Gacy, beneath whose house were found something like twenty-nine dead bodies, you'd be hard-pressed to argue that he wasn't insane. I mean, who in their right mind would do that? And therein resides my point. If you're looking

for reasons, then you need look no further than the notion that he was one screwed up individual, and screwed up people do screwed up things. There *is* no other fundamental reason.

This is not of course to say he should have been spared the death penalty or found not guilty, by reason of insanity. Sure, what he did was insane, but so what? No amount of therapy or anti-psychotic drugs would have changed the fact of his being the human equivalent of a rabid dog. As the Good Reverend would say, “And what do we do with rabid dogs?” Granted, it shouldn’t have taken *thirteen freaking years* to put his ass down, but that’s beside the point.

There are a lot of messed up people in the world. Some are sad, lost souls who as human beings deserve our help. We’re supposed to be a Christian nation, right? Even after all that’s happened, people’s faith is still strong. Not sure I could offer an explanation, but it hardly matters. The fact remains. And what did Jesus do but help the helpless?

Some of those screwed up people, however, are deeply, deeply dangerous, and when all Hell breaks loose they can turn rabid. And when the person they turn rabid on happens to be your mother, what else can you do?

10

Murphy's Law:
Whatever can go wrong, will,
at the worst possible moment.

Axiom

Mom used to call me her “favorite accident.” In other words, I was not the result of a planned pregnancy. She had just turned seventeen, tired of the tedium of small town life, sick of what she thought of as her brother’s oppressive over protectiveness, and ready for something more; in short, a rebel without a clue. And then she met Mick Fincham, my so-called father. He was twenty-five, with a cool car, a leather jacket, and exactly one thing on his mind. As soon as she gave it to him, he headed for the hills, never to darken our door again. She was pregnant.

I’ve never seen a picture of him, and I look like her, so for all I know the guy could have had a third eye in his forehead. He must have been tall, though, because Mom was a good seven inches shorter than I am, a fact I pointed out whenever possible by calling her “my favorite midget.” Her patent-pending reply: “Yes, but it means I’m closer to where it hurts.”

It was 1980, so I suppose she could have gone to Portland and taken care of it, but for whatever reason, she decided not to. It wasn’t from any moral objection to abortion. My mother was a stubborn, strong-willed, independent woman. There’s no way in Hell she would ever allow any man to tell her what she could or could not do with her body. And since she believed it for herself, she saw no reason why every other woman shouldn’t have the same choice. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, right?*

But then she was left with a bun in the oven in a small town and a brother who did not

approve. By this point, their father had been three years in the grave and so Ian, twenty-three and well on his way to his first of three Master's degrees at the University of Oregon, was all she had. Of course he gave her a hard time about it, because that's what siblings do. It's like a law. But let's be realistic here. Getting pregnant at seventeen with no job, no husband and an incomplete high school education wasn't the wisest move.

He never turned his back on her. Even though he was working like mad to finish his Master's, four hours north in Eugene, he came home every single weekend. And as she got close to having her fantastically handsome and brilliant baby boy, he left the university and took a teaching job at a high school close by in Medford so he could take care of her.

And so she had me, and her brother bent over backwards to take care of us, but she couldn't shake the shameful idea that he somehow looked down on her. So six months later, after getting her high school diploma and being accepted with a full scholarship to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas School of Nursing, she walked away, taking me with her.

For seventeen years and eight months, it was the two of us. We'd return to Oregon for Christmas, and every couple years we'd spend two weeks there getting out of the hellish summer heat of Las Vegas. She had boyfriends, but nothing serious; I had regular friends and, by and by, girlfriends. I got in the usual amount of trouble, I suppose. Smoked a little pot, ditched school a few times, did this and that, but never enough to me in any real trouble. It was a life, and life is what it is.

And then shortly after my eighteenth birthday, I joined the US Coast Guard and got the Hell out of there. This had nothing to do with her. I adored my mother. In my book, she was the greatest thing since sliced bread. Las Vegas, on the other hand, was a lousy place to be a kid.

Back in the Nineties, they foolishly tried to make it “family friendly” – a doomed experiment from the word go. They didn’t call Vegas “Sin City” because it sounded catchy. Las Vegas existed for exactly one reason: sin; an adult playground, centered on the six or so square mile *Strip*, filled with casinos and alcohol, legal strip joints and (sort of) illegal prostitution.

All you need to do is look at what happened there after Yellowstone to see it was no place for kids. In a city with little limit on the level of debauchery in which you could engage – even with social order completely intact – once that order broke down it turned into Babylon.

So I bailed first chance I got, and as far as I’m concerned, it was the right thing to do. But in the self-absorption of adolescence, I forgot about one thing: Mom.

She had her friends, to be sure, and a job she loved, but when I left, the center of her world left with me. This is not to say her life revolved around me. Once I got old enough to fend for myself without getting electrocuted trying to discover the strange and mystifying world behind the outlets (or otherwise setting fire to the house), she stopped hovering and allowed me to become me.

As I said before, I’m marvelously well-adjusted.

What I mean is, when I hit the road, a big part of what her life was, had suddenly gone. Call it Empty Nest Syndrome; call it whatever you like, but you can’t fill a void that size in the blink of an eye, not if you have a soul.

And then she met Freddy Perdue.

My thoughts regarding my mother's ex-husband go so far beyond biased as to be rendered predictable, but this doesn't change the fact that he was a prick. Can you guess I didn't like him?

I joined the Coast Guard in 1998. She married him in 1999, in a typical Vegas wedding. I never did get her to tell me one way or the other if she'd been drunk at the time. Whenever I asked, her answer had always been, "Shut up." In any case, I was otherwise occupied fixing buoys up in Alaska and did not attend. Not that I tried very hard.

I'd met Freddy once, briefly, about three months earlier, while home on leave after navigation school, and didn't think anything about him; just one more of the boyfriends she went through every so often. The last thought in my mind (and possibly hers) was that they'd end up married – so much for my powers of pre-cognition.

Who knows? Maybe she was happy. Mom was a smart enough woman drunk or sober not to do something so big (or stupid) entirely on a whim. Whatever the case, it didn't turn out well.

He'd been in the Air Force, doing Secret Squirrel stuff out at Area 51. I like to picture him performing anal probes or maybe animal husbandry on aliens or something equally disgusting, but I think the reality was some kind of engineering project having to do with the base itself. In any event, supposedly, security was sphincter-tight – tighter, as it happened than he himself had been wrapped – and I guess the pressure got to him. Maybe it was nothing more than a matter of him being screwed up, and screwed up people... You see where I'm going?

Roughly eight months into their marriage, he snapped, beat the crap out of her, and left her in the hospital with broken ribs. The Air Force tucked him away somewhere safe, and it's a

damned good thing.

One advantage to having Mom work emergency medicine was that she knew all the cops and firefighters. Had they gotten hold of Perdue's worthless ass, it would not have been pretty, but I bet it would have been fun. By the time I got there a couple days later, he was long gone, and I suppose it's just as well. I'd have ended up in jail.

As we approached Carvers, about a third of the way through the Big Smokey Valley and roughly two hours past Gold Strike, like clockwork, Mom had to pee. The gas station (pretty much the only reason for the town's existence) seemed about as unremarkable as it gets, with a single three-pump island in the middle of a dusty parking lot, alongside which I ground to a halt.

Two cars sat in front of the faded red adobe building: one, a newer model blue sedan sporting a *Palin for President* bumper sticker, the other, a rusted beater SUV from back when Clinton sat in the Oval Office, doing strange things with Cuban cigars. The bumper held a faded and dusty US Air Force sticker, but it meant nothing until a few minutes later.

She rushed into the station through the flimsy screen door, once again "asking" me to walk The Noodle. Molly seemed indifferent about the need, but delighted to get out and move around, so we trotted to wherever her nose led, as Mom did whatever she was going to do. The golden fur ball tired of it after a few minutes, apparently not finding enough interesting smells in this middle of nowhere, so I escorted her back to the truck and filled her bowl. The dry air felt cold, the kind of chill that cuts through to the bone if you're out in it long enough. I had no intention of being so, but as the minutes crept by with no sign of Mother, I started to wonder.

I put Molly and her bowl back into the truck and was about to close the door and walk a safe distance away from the gas pump to have a cigarette, when the screen burst open, falling to the ground as the hinges ripped from the rotted door frame. Out came my mother. She was not alone.

Freddy Perdue, all five-foot-nine of him, older, thin to the point of being emaciated, with close-cropped dirty hair and a face that hadn't seen a razor in at least a month, shoved her out ahead of him, his left hand obscenely squeezing her breast as his arm locked her tight to his torso. He held his right hand behind him.

“Hiya Kiddo!” he exclaimed in a drunk-sounding voice. “Surprised to see me?”

Without taking my eyes off them, I reached into the truck and pulled out Mom's gun. Molly growled deep and low and I shut the truck door just in case she got any wild ideas. “Let her go, asshole,” I said, easing toward the nose of my truck and cocking the pistol, keeping it out of sight.

“Now, is that any way to greet your Daddy?” He pulled his right hand out from behind his back. It held an automatic, probably a nine-millimeter, but I couldn't be sure, and it wouldn't have mattered in any case. He held the barrel against my mother's temple.

I answered by pointing the .357 at his head. Mom's eyes grew to the size of Frisbees, but I couldn't pay any attention. “Let her go, asshole,” I repeated through clenched teeth.

Lest I sound like some B-Movie tough guy, let me just say my testicles were somewhere up around my aorta. I was scared spit-less, and if my elbows hadn't been leaning on the hood of the truck, my hands would have shaken so hard I'm sure the vibrations would have set off the

gun. But that was my mother.

“Such foul language,” he replied, moving so that Mom’s head was between him and the bead I had on his eyeball. The top of his skull peeked over the top of hers, but nowhere near enough for me to risk a shot. “Didn’t you teach him any manners?” He said into her ear.

“You are such a shithead!”

They say necessity is the mother of invention. I disagree. Necessity is the mother of cold, iron will; of seeing what needs to be done and doing it, without passion, without emotion, without giving it any attribute that isn’t absolutely necessary.

I used this belief as a SAR Controller. On one moonless foggy night – the kind when no one in their right mind should be out doing anything, especially not piloting a sailboat in unfamiliar waters – we received a mayday at around three-thirty in the morning: a father and son on a sailboat aground on the rocks with no clear idea as to their location and zero visibility with which to spot landmarks. The phone rang in the duty room, jolting me from a sound sleep. I heard Bill’s voice saying “Babies in the surf,” and I knew we were in for an ugly one.

We launched the helicopter as Bill and I tried to get some fix on where to send them. The best guess we had was to the south. Off they went, four men: pilot, co-pilot, mechanic, and rescue swimmer, all of them known to us. We were not friends, did not hang out, but we knew them, particularly the pilot and co-pilot, and I liked them. About forty-five minutes later, they located the vessel at a remote part of the coast called Shelter Cove. The pilot radioed he’d be swinging around for a closer look, and we never heard from them again.

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They were supposed to check in every fifteen minutes. With no word after thirty minutes, we initiated lost comms procedures. At forty-five minutes, we brought in the standby crew, and at approximately one hour and fifteen minutes, we sent them out to find their friends and co-workers. By this time, we knew something had gone horribly wrong.

A helicopter is not like an airplane. It does not glide. When it stops working – for whatever reason – it drops from the sky like a rock.

And the ones we had were plastic pieces of shit. We called them *Whistling Shitcans*. We knew our crew had been at best seriously injured or at worst killed. This knowledge did not relieve us of the responsibility to work the case. We had to keep going.

I sent them on that mission. I did; nobody else. And yeah, okay, I was common enlisted scum who had to run everything I did through the Operations Officer, and his was the final authority, but I'm the one who gave the order. I'm the one who told them where to go. I'm the one who had to continue working the case knowing I might very well have sent them to their deaths. And so I did. Without passion, without emotion, without a single thought other than whatever lay directly in front of me, I kept working the case. Even after we discovered that they had smashed into the high cliffs of the cove, and that all of them were dead, I kept right on working the case – actually two cases, because we still had the original problem of a sailboat aground on the rocks. I did not stop to feel the emotion, the loss, the guilt.

When it was over, I went home, took a shower and went to sleep. When I awoke, I did what I always did: cleaned the house, mowed the lawn, watched TV, lived my life. The next morning, I returned to work, ready to do it all over again. I did not feel remorse, I did not feel guilt. I did not feel the slightest bit of hesitation in sending out another crew.

Some might call it denial, I suppose. I call it acceptance of reality.

Everyone – you, me, everyone – lives life by a core philosophy, whether they think deeply enough to realize it or not. And in general, it's a complicated mess; a mish-mosh of this, that, and the other thing, loosely tied together with experience and upbringing.

If I were to distill mine down to a couple of sound bites, it would consist of two Christian ideas, although I am not religious. The first is the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* The second is the Serenity Prayer: *Grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference.*

I could no more change the fact of their tragic death than I could change the reality of the dangerous nature of Search and Rescue. The good people within the Operational side of the US Coast Guard routinely went (and still go) where no one in their right mind had any business going, either because some dumb son of a bitch went there or in an effort to stop others from going there in the future.

This, by its very nature, is dangerous. It is a calculated risk, made less risky by proper planning and training, but it is a risk nonetheless. Sometimes they go out and don't come back.

Nothing I could do would change it, so the only rational response was to accept it and move on. Getting mired in guilt and emotion would not help one bit, so I didn't; it's that simple.

Another thing I could not change was the axiomatic “sure thing” Ben Franklin left out when he quipped about death and taxes. We all know with sufficient money and a good enough

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accountant, taxes are not certain. We also know, although it seems we don't often think of it (perhaps because we like to believe in the essential goodness of people) that another sure thing in this world is that there will always be assholes.

Before Yellowstone, their presence was so constant and prevalent it seemed as if they ran the world. The jerk who cut you off on the freeway, the pencil-necked bureaucrat who screwed you because of a technicality, the inconsiderate nimrod who left his shopping cart in the middle of the closest parking spot, the bully who used to pick on you in the schoolyard simply because he could; all by their very nature and every deed assholes. The fact of their existence could not be changed. The only thing that could be was your reaction to them. All it takes is courage and cold, iron will.

When I was a freshman in high school, I, along with a number of my classmates, suffered the plague of a Neanderthal named Rex Hansen, who made it his mission in life to cause pain and suffering whenever possible. He did all the usual things: wedgies, stealing lunch money, knocking precariously balanced books out of hands, the stuffing of weaker kids into lockers – the standard accoutrements of the school bully. And every now and then, when he was feeling particularly sadistic, he would corner defenseless kids out in the school yard and beat the crap out of them. I, myself, was the victim of two such beatings. By the time he deemed it necessary to give me a third, I had had enough.

Like most people I suppose, I have a line beyond which I will not be pushed. For some, this line seems to change under the pressure of fear or intimidation or physical limitations or the certainty that if they decide to fight back, the severity of the ass kicking will increase exponentially. I, on the other hand, have always had an ornery streak.

So, on the occasion of my third scheduled beating, when the ever-present asshole, Mister Rex Hansen, cornered me in the east parking lot of Abraham Lincoln High School, I did the virtually unheard of: I fought back. This was a calculated move.

The reasons behind the fight have been lost to the vagaries of time and memory, and in any case were arbitrarily decided upon by my opponent. For whatever reason, he had deemed it necessary to kick my ass, and so, in full view of a sufficient number of witnesses to ensure word would spread throughout the school, he decreed the time and place of my future demise.

I could have ditched my last class and run, I suppose. Certainly, others had created precedent for such a move, the price for which would be shame and humiliation for at least until the next poor unfortunate became the object of universal scorn. I chose not to. And so, when the assembled crowd formed the obligatory circle of death, with Mister Hansen and I in the center, we squared off to wage what everyone felt certain was to be a one-sided battle with a pre-ordained conclusion. As it happened, they were half right.

There was at that time (1995) at my school (which while not in one of the “better” parts of town, was still not quite “the hood,”) a strange dichotomy wherein – on the one hand – the concept of a “fair fight” was held sacrosanct, while – on the other hand – someone the size and physical prowess of Rex Hansen fighting someone the size of me had been deemed perfectly (if hypocritically) acceptable. As such, the rules of a fair fight, such as no eye-gauging or hitting below the belt, were supposed to be observed at all times. In other words, the system was rigged in such a way that if I played by the rules, I didn’t stand an ice cube’s chance in Hell.

I had two choices: I could accept my fate, take the beating and live to cringe another day; or I could summon up my inner son of a bitch and ignore the rules completely. I chose the latter.

And the first rule I chose to ignore was the absurd notion of a fair fight.

There's no such thing. There's nothing fair about one person pummeling another, particularly not when the person scheduled to be pummeled is me.

The second so-called rule was that the stronger man wins. Strength (while an advantage in physical confrontation) is nothing unless it's backed by the cold, iron will to do what's necessary. Any putz with a functioning arm and fist is capable of socking someone else in the jaw. This is where strength comes in handy, because the harder the punch, the greater its effect. This works fine (if you happen to be the stronger guy) and is well within the rules of a fair fight. If, on the other hand, you have the misfortune of being the weaker opponent, you're screwed, unless you have the will to ignore the rules and take the fight to the next level.

And so there we were, squared off within the confines of the howling mob. He advanced on me with all the confidence of someone who firmly believed he possessed all the advantages, right up until I kicked him in the nuts. As an astonished gasp rippled through the crowd, Rex Hansen, self-appointed tormentor of so many, dropped like a sack of potatoes. With the fury born of countless acts of abuse at the hands of that son of a bitch, I leapt upon his chest and vented my rage upon his face.

He never bothered me again. Neither did anyone else.

“You are such a shithead!” Mother growled from behind clenched teeth.

“Is that any way to talk to your one true love?” As if to prove his affection, Dupree began dry humping her butt. “You still got a nice ass, baby.”

That was it; time to take things to the next level. “Mom,” I said, not looking at her. “What’s the advantage of being a midget?”

They both stared at me like I’d lost my mind. And then Mom smiled. “It means I’m closer to where it hurts.” Having said so, she reached down, grabbed his crotch and squeezed.

There is nothing more debilitating to a man than testicular trauma. All you need to do is mention a ball sack injury to a guy and his reaction will be both predictable and immediate: he will wince, because once he’s had the experience, he’ll never forget it and never want it again.

A choking, girlish squeal escaped Perdue’s lips. I could sympathize, but when Mom wriggled out of his suddenly loosened grip, it didn’t stop me from shooting the son of a bitch.

Nobody messed with my mother.

Volcanic Interlude #2

Transcript of Congressional Testimony;

December 27th, 2012, (cont'd)

Q: If you've quite gotten yourself together, Miss Marshall, shall we resume?

A: Fine.

Q: At what point did your team realize there was going to be an eruption?

A: Norris went quiet for about five hours. No tremors, no uplift. Nothing. And then approximately one pm on the 24th, the tremors resumed, and cracks started to appear in the ground. Approximately 30 minutes afterwards, we experienced a massive hydrothermal event.

Q: This was at the geyser Basin?

A: Yes. As I said, at Norris. All the geysers seemed to go at once, shooting super-heated water hundreds of feet into the air. Four people were killed, including Doctor Leibgott, the project Director, and...

Q: And what, Miss Marshall?

A: And George Nelson. My fiancé.

Q: We are so sorry for your loss.

A: Oh please. You couldn't give a damn, and you know it.

Q: There's no need for that, Miss Marshall.

A: What difference does it make? Spare me the platitudes and get on with it.

Q: Very well. What did the...I believe you called it hydro...

A: The hydrothermal event.

Q: Yes. What did it indicate?

A: Again, we had no idea. Even with a small volcano, there are often periods of activity – even violent activity – that indicate nothing more than the volcano is restless.

Q: It must have indicated something?

A: Yes. It indicated that people I cared about were dead. Is that the kind of thing you're looking for, Congressman?

Q: This is pointless. I must protest!

A: Harmonic tremors.

Q: What?

A: Harmonic tremors. That's the only sure indication of an eruption. And about an hour after the hydrothermal event, we started picking up harmonic tremors.

Q: And that meant...?

A: That it was only a matter of time.

Q: And what did you do then?

A: I got the Hell out of there.

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Q: And that's how you came to be the only survivor?

A: Yes. I abandoned everyone and everything and ran like a scared rabbit. And now I have to live with it; live with the guilt and the shame and the knowledge that I'm nothing but a coward.

Q: Miss Marshall, I don't think—“

A: Oh, shut up! Don't you get it, Congressman? Don't any of you get it? None of this matters! It's done! We're done! Everything we knew, everything we were is over! It ended the moment that first vent erupted. The end of the world is nye, Congressman! Take my advice: leave town. Leave the country. If there's room on the International Space Station, go there. Because America's goose is officially cooked.

11

“The web of our life is of a mingled yarn,
good and ill together; our virtues would
be proud if our faults whipped them not;
and our crimes would despair if they
were not cherished by our own virtues.”

William Shakespeare
All's Well That Ends Well

I made it almost fifteen miles before I had to pull over and throw up. Chalk it up to post-adrenaline crash, or whatever the Hell it's called. It had nothing whatsoever to do with feeling guilty about what I'd done, especially after I looked inside the station.

The guy behind the counter, who couldn't have been more than about twenty-two, and a middle-aged man in slacks and a dress shirt (presumably the owner of the sedan) were both shot dead. The only way to read the scene (which I felt I could do after watching hours and hours of forensic cop shows on TV) was that Mom had walked in at the worst possible moment, shortly after Freddy had killed them and was in the process of cleaning out the cash register.

The place was a bloody mess. Even if I hadn't thought the guy was a prick for breaking my mother's ribs way back when, and even if he hadn't held a gun to her head, the s. o. b. deserved what he got. I had zero qualms.

I suppose I should have called the County Sheriffs, or whoever had jurisdiction in that no-Starbucks town, but something told me I should just keep going. I rationalized I could always turn myself in once we got to Gunter's Gap, but that was a load of convenient horse-pucky. At

that point, I was pretty much moving on auto-pilot.

Outside, Mom knelt over her ex-husband checking for a pulse. She looked up at me with the blankest, most unreadable expression I've ever seen on her face. "He's dead." I looked down at what remained of his skull and wasn't surprised. She glanced from my face to my right hand. It still held the pistol.

"Let's go," I said, and headed toward the truck.

I got back in after washing the gross taste out of my mouth with a bottle of water. Molly stuck her nose up alongside my headrest and licked my ear. I gave the good dog an absentminded scratch behind one of hers and pulled back onto the road. We drove in silence for what seemed like an eternity (more like twenty minutes), and then Mom said, "Thanks."

"For not barfing inside the truck?"

"No. That's not... Are you okay?"

"Yeah I'm fine."

"You know what I meant."

"Yeah."

And that was it. Nothing more was said, except: "When did you steal my gun?"

12

“Human history becomes more and more
a race between education and catastrophe.”

H. G. Wells
The Outline of History

We stopped again so all three of us could pee (the coffee having finally gone through me) in Austin, at the northern end of the valley, where the 376 dead-ends and, just outside of town to the west, becomes the 305. I topped off the tank, once more having to pay with “cash only.” So far our re-fueling luck had held.

The patrons inside the station had been clustered around a small television watching the news – all of it bad. The looting continued up and down the western seaboard, still largely of the mental midget variety, although from the images, it appeared the larger items, such as big screen TVs, had already been picked clean and the geniuses had progressed to the more mundane microwave and toaster oven selections.

Many, however, had descended on the grocery stores, or at least that’s what the coverage keyed on. You could never be sure if what we were being shown was the most prevalent, or just the most popular. Nevertheless, I decided a trip to the local market would be a good idea.

The aisle normally reserved for bottled water, a staple in Nevada because of the high mineral content (and crappy taste) of the stuff in the ground, had been picked clean; ditto, the coffee supply. They hadn’t quite started on the canned goods yet, so I filled a shopping cart with whatever I found, and then headed for the vitamin aisle.

After Yellowstone

The ship I served on in Hawaii, the one that used to go down to American Samoa (and Tisa's), would stop at these rinky-dink little islands along the way. At some of them, like Kapingamarangi (took me a while to learn how to pronounce that one) people were living in honest-to-God grass huts. In any case, among the things we'd drop off (medical supplies, generators, water purification tablets, etc.) were vitamins.

As you can imagine, the diet on a dot of land a thousand miles from nowhere is pretty limited. They had plenty of the basic nutrients (A, C, D – which you can get from the sun – Potassium, Calcium), but they were missing a lot of the others, and so were prone to a number of ailments far too disgusting and unpronounceable to chronicle here. We'd give them a case or two of multi-vitamins and various other supplements, and with only a couple hundred people on the island, it would last them about a year.

So it was with this experience and the knowledge from it locked into my head that I stocked up on bottles of the stuff. Once again, I didn't know what we were driving into. Uncle Ian had said everything was hunky-dory in Gunter's Gap, but he – number one – may have been saying that to keep Mom from worrying, and – number two – couldn't possibly know how long something on this massive a scale would last. And, you know, *Always Ready*.

What can I say? You do anything for eight freaking years and it becomes part of who you are, especially if it happens to be something so fundamental. And who can argue the common sense logic of it?

Even before Yellowstone, this was an uncertain world, no matter what part of the country you lived in. On the East Coast you had bitter cold and blizzards burying cities and towns alike during the occasional "bad winter," (and every old timer, no matter how adverse the current

conditions were, could tell you about the “big one back in...” effectively cutting them off for indeterminate periods of time. Throw in the odd terrorist attack, and I’m sure you see where I’m going.

In the Midwest, you had those same winter conditions plus the extra-added bonus of tornadoes every spring and summer. Insert torrential flood-causing rains every few years and you ended up stuck at home with whatever you had on hand until the thing was done.

In the Gulf States, you had hurricanes. Can anyone say Katrina, or Andrew, or Camille?

And in the West you had earthquakes and brush fires and mudslides and floods and, who knows, swarms of locusts? So no matter where you were in this country Before Yellowstone, it was always a possibility you’d have to hunker down and wait out this, that, or the other natural calamity.

But with the rare exception of things like the Y2K hysteria, where everybody seemed to think modern technological society would blink out of existence because of an arbitrary date on a calendar, Americans took for granted that everything would be hunky-dory. They simply didn’t stock up on the basics, in spite of all public governmental admonitions to do so.

Not surprisingly then, when things did go bad, when the proverbial excrement hit the rotating cooling device, most Americans were not ready. And this fact became accentuated to the nth degree following the December 23rd, 2012 earthquakes.

And then Yellowstone happened. Nobody was ready for that one; nobody could be.

13

“Do not try to find out –
we’re forbidden to know –
what end the gods have in store
for me, or for you.”

Horace

We made it to Winnemucca without running into any more religious zealots or crazed and homicidal ex-husbands at around five in the afternoon. In between the post-adrenaline-rush wrung out feeling in my brain and the basic numbness of my butt after twelve hours of driving, I felt ready to call it good.

First, though we needed to fill the tank, both in my truck and our bodies, so we found a likely gas station/diner just off the highway at the junction of where we briefly regained the 95. My wad of cash had gotten steadily smaller, but I figured we’d make it to Gunter’s Gap, if nowhere else. Getting there was all I focused on. Anything more would have made my head explode.

Mom, on the other hand, who’d been conspicuously silent on the subject for the last four hundred or so miles, decided she needed to talk about it. “I can’t believe what’s happening, don’t want to believe, but I suppose there’s no point in ignoring it.”

“We could try.”

“Would it do any good?”

“None whatsoever.”

“How bad do you think it’s going to get?”

I debated whether to tell her my real opinion, mainly because I suspected she’d get spun up, but then decided to, if for no other reason than I felt too drained to try and come up with a convincing lie. “Babies in the surf.”

“Babies in the what?”

“Surf, Mom,” I replied. “It’s an expression me and Bill came up with when I worked SAR.” Bill was the Radioman – excuse me, *Telecommunications Specialist*, in the politically correct gender-neutral military – with whom I always seemed to end up working my ugliest cases. He’d been a good friend, once upon a time, and I’d even brought him to Vegas with me twice, so Mom knew him.

“We needed something he could say when he had to call me in the middle of the night and wake me out of a sound sleep,” I began. “It wouldn’t matter if I was completely brain-dead and drooling on myself, all he had to say was ‘babies in the surf,’ and I was wide awake.”

“There’s something seriously wrong with you.”

“And yet you love me anyway,” I replied. “So what’s that say about you?”

“I need my head examined.”

“I could have told you that.” We were exchanging insults to avoid the topic at hand, and both of us knew it. But with that topic blaring away at us from three different TV sets above the bar at one side of the dining area, it proved to be a pointless exercise.

“You really think it’s going to be that bad?”

“Who knows? Maybe. Maybe not,” I said, dropping my head into my hands and rubbing my road-red eyes. “I think it’s safe to say it’s not going to be good.”

She watched the TV screens for a moment before replying. “I’ve been thinking about triage for hours. The casualties are astronomical. I’m amazed the Trauma Center hasn’t called me to come back in and help with the overflow I know we’re going to get.”

“For all we know, they have. We’ve been driving through miles and miles of nothing. Haven’t exactly seen a whole lot of cell towers, have you?” She shook her head. “Probably some out here, though. Why don’t you check your phone?” She did, and low and behold there were a half-dozen missed messages. “For the record, we’re not driving back to Vegas. Not till this thing is over.”

She seemed about to protest, but I cut her off. “Most of the oil refineries are on the coast, Mom. Once these stations run out of gas, how long do you suppose it’s going to be before they get any more?”

“I didn’t think of that.”

“It’s okay. I did,” I said. “I didn’t want to say anything, but we’ve been really lucky so far.”

Our food arrived and I waited until the waitress left to resume. “As long as I don’t drive like a maniac, we should have just enough gas to get us to Ian’s, even without tapping the jerry cans.”

“See that you don’t then, Kiddo.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I said – famous last words.

During dinner, we decided to call it, find a hotel for the night and continue on in the morning. At the time we made the decision, I didn't think there'd be enough coffee in the world to help me make it the rest of the way. As it happened, I was wrong.

Mom went out ahead of me to take care of Molly as I was paying for our food. I took my sweet time meandering back to the truck so I could have a cigarette. The last colors of the sunset were fading to black in the west. The time was 6:47 pm.

The sound started low – more like something I felt than heard. The three other people in the parking lot besides Mother and I all stopped and looked toward the east at the same time. No mistaking it by then. Like deep thunder going on and on, it rolled across the miles toward us; sounding like a heard of bison driving bulldozers; unforgiving and inexorable and enormous. I swear I remember seeing a reddish glow far away to the east, but that has to be the vagaries of memory seen through the horrible knowledge of what happened.

I didn't immediately know what it was, but I suspected. Somewhere in the unfathomable depth of my gut, that part of the human psyche that just *knows* when something has happened to someone you love, I suspected.

“Get in the truck!” I yelled to Mom as I raced back to the diner. By the time I'd gotten to the door, she still hadn't moved, was still staring towards the east. “Do it now!” I shouted again, and then flew through the door and inside.

The TVs behind the bar confirmed my worst fears.

“...We repeat. The Yellowstone supervolcano has erupted...”

14

“Who can run the race with death?”

Samuel Johnson

I shoved Mom and Molly into the truck, slammed the thing in gear and proceeded to drive like a maniac, roughly thirty-five miles up the 95 (where I almost lost it on an S-curve), and then veering west on the less-than ideal 140, where I had no choice but to slow down. Both women were fairly well freaked, but I had no time to observe the niceties.

The 140 was pitch-black dark, but more or less straight until just south of the Oregon border. Being the middle of nowhere, there was hardly anyone else on it. We hit the megopolis of Denio Junction a little before nine-thirty. I pulled into a small gas station, feeling sure it'd be a fool's errand, but surprisingly enough, I found it open and selling gas – at twenty bucks a gallon. I slapped five twenties down on the counter, topped off the tank, and got back on the road.

We skirted the border for about seventy miles of hell-and-gone from straight road and entered Oregon about midnight. I tried with minimal success to dial in some kind of radio broadcast without taking my eyes off the winding highway as we cut through the darkness, our world limited to the extent of my high-beams. We heard mostly static, but every now and then I'd pick up a few disconnected sentences. The news was all bad.

I knew, from having watched *The History Channel*, and the *Discovery Channel* and *National Geographic* and every other damned thing shouting “the End is near” through the TV set, that if Yellowstone ever erupted, the first hundred miles in all directions would be

obliterated. Nothing would survive. This, we later found out, proved to be true.

So as not to increase the panic already started in the wake of all the rocking and rolling the West Coast experienced just over a day before, no evacuation alert had been issued, even after the hydrothermal event and subsequent harmonic tremors left little doubt of what was coming. Tens of thousands of people gone within a matter of minutes, incinerated as super-heated pyroclastic flocs scoured the landscape at several hundred miles an hour.

I knew we were a long ways beyond that mark, but the knowledge didn't make me slow down one fraction of a mile per hour more than the screwed up highway and the laws of motion and physics forced. It was going to get much, much worse. And as we cut through the night toward a future where our immediate destination was the only certainty, my mind started to tick off what the next few days were going to be like.

Once people realized what happened, everybody and their grandmother within five hundred miles would be jamming the roads headed west, strangling the highways with traffic the like of which hasn't been seen since Woodstock. And this time, the people weren't going to have all those good drugs to keep them calm. I wanted to be in Gunter's Gap well before the mass exodus began.

Soon, the eruptive column coming out of Yellowstone would be filling the sky with hundreds of millions of tons of ash shooting more than thirty miles into the stratosphere. Air travel routes crisscross the area like an aerial game of Cat's Cradle. Any planes flying through it would start dropping out of the sky as their engines simply stopped working.

Within a matter of hours, over half of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho were going to be buried under several feet of ash and pumice, falling like a deadly, choking blizzard, killing

hundreds of thousands within a day or so and trapping something like three million. For them the end would be every bit as certain as those within the first hundred miles; it'd just take more time.

Long before that happened, the rolling blackouts would start; one by one the power transformers would be getting their intricate works gummed up by all that volcanic crap, plunging another ten-plus million people into darkness, and with the darkness would come chaos.

All those red and green and white and blue holiday lights, strung across the eaves of thousands upon thousands of houses – where children waited snug in their beds like so many Yule tide insomniacs – would be winking out. There would be no blinking, flashing trees to be opening presents under; no *Hallmark* store-bought *Star Trek* space shuttle ornaments; no Mr. Spock telling people “Happy Holidays,” or “Live long and prosper;” not this year, maybe not for a lot of years.

It looked like Christmas was going to be officially cancelled.

Sure enough, when we rolled into Klamath Falls about two in the morning, we found no street lights, no stop lights, no beckoning signs from convenience stores or gas stations, just an eerie darkness, made all the more sinister by the fact we knew what was supposed to be there. We could see the dim outlines of the buildings as we passed, and the streets as they branched off to one side or the other, but little else. I almost missed the sign pointing to the turnoff for Highway 97, where we cut north toward Crater Lake.

Of course it didn't help that my road-weary eye sockets had a couple of lead filled ping pong balls in there, or that my brain was well on past numb, both from the enormity of what was happening and the not inconsiderable fact that I'd been up for over twenty-four hours. And I performed this feat of endurance without benefit of coffee, which I didn't think would have been possible. By the time we hit the fork onto the 62, my cerebellum was pretty much flat-lining, but at that point I could afford to go into auto-pilot. I'd driven this road on many, many occasions. My body knew the way, even if my gray matter had turned to goo.

Gunter's Gap sat nestled in the crook of a small valley created by the Rogue River as it cut through the forested mountains of Southern Oregon. In 1700, when the Cascadia earthquake ripped through the Pacific Northwest, it changed the course of the river, leaving behind a waterlogged gash in the earth's surface. By 1890, when Gunter discovered his Gap, the waters had all drained into the ground, creating a large aquifer and the verdant, more or less flat valley in which the town now sits.

Most of the area was so rugged as to make any kind of construction impossible, which is probably why the majority of the territory had been turned into either National Forest, State Park, or Recreation Area, because the land isn't good for much else, unless you want to perform clear-cut logging. And if you do, you end up stuck with a way to get it out of there, with or without members of the Sierra Club chained to your equipment. That aside, Old Gunter (whoever the Hell he was, and I've long since forgotten) managed to find a spot flat enough that he could build on it without chopping off half the mountain. And so he did what humans have seemingly always done: he found a piece of buildable land and he built on it, and a town was born.

What he neglected to do, however, was cut an easily accessible way to get in and out.

The gap portion of Gunter's Gap sat along an east/west axis, with a one hundred foot cut in the ridge to the east, and a three hundred-fifty foot cut in the one to the west. A road went in one end, looped around the town square, and exited on the other end. The eastern exit led to the Rogue River National Forest, which is to say nowhere.

The western entrance, due to its proximity to Highway 62, received most of the traffic, but even in broad daylight it was nearly impossible to spot the turnoff until you were right on top of it – unless you knew it was there. Happily, even in my sleep-deprived, stress-created, brain-dead condition, I did know, and so managed the maneuver without thinking, which helped, because the capacity to do so had long since left the building.

We pulled into Ian's driveway a little past three-thirty in the morning. I put the truck in park, turned it off and sat there listening to the engine tick as it cooled. Higher cerebral function proved impossible. After a few moments, I glanced over at Mother and saw her staring forward through the windshield at nothing in particular. She finally looked at me through bloodshot, barely focused eyes. We sat like that for about minute, saying nothing, thinking less.

"We're hee-er," I said finally, doing a bad imitation of the little girl from *Poltergeist* announcing the arrival of the ghosts in the TV set.

She chuckled. Then she did it again. I joined in. So did Miss Molly Noodle, barking and wagging her tail, though she could not have known just what we found so hilarious. We three snowballed into hysterics. And so it was that Ian, awakened by our headlights shining through his bedroom window, found us sitting in his driveway laughing our asses off at the beginning of end of life as we knew it.

Jeff Thomson

Part Two

Crawl

“I can’t understand why people
are frightened of new ideas.
I’m frightened of the old ones.”

John Cage

The Pause That Refreshes

March 16, 2014, Boise, ID, Public Library (Main Branch)

I just returned from picking through the remains of Boise, Idaho. I never in a million years thought I'd see an honest-to-God abandoned city that wasn't a couple thousand years old. That's what I get for thinking.

I would suppose the residents of Pompeii, nestled against the beauty and grandeur of Mt. Vesuvius, never thought their city would one day be a tourist attraction filled with people marveling at how well preserved a place can be if it's been buried under volcanic ash for several centuries. And I'd bet good cash money (even though it's still not worth a whole lot) they couldn't possibly have imagined they'd get to host the making of a really cool Pink Floyd movie (*Live at Pompeii*).

I wonder if some day, centuries into the future, their version of that classic band will be playing in the equally well-preserved graveyard of this place; *Magenta Reginald; Live at Boise!* I wonder what it will sound like. I'm sure I couldn't guess, any more than the ancient Romans, in their wildest dreams, could have conceived of the ethereal synthesizers and soaring guitar solos of something like *One of These Days*.

"One of these days I'm going to cut you into little pieces."

All of which is pointless intellectual meandering, of course. And none of it matters. Why should I care what someone will be thinking a thousand years from now?

After Yellowstone

When I came here two weeks ago as a member of yet another in a seemingly endless series of foraging missions, I had reached the conclusion that I no longer cared about much of anything. And why should I? Mom was dead. Ian was dead. And what of the people in Gunter's Gap?

They were plenty glad to have me around there for a while. And then the reality, the harsh undeniable truth of what they'd done – what I'd led them in doing at what has become known as the Battle of Rogue River – began to creep in, gradually at first around the edges; growing more insistent in its nagging pangs of guilt and shame. I served a constant reminder. And they no longer needed what I had provided.

I started to feel, as Kurt Vonnegut had been fond of saying, like something the cat dragged in. Screw it, and screw them, too, I suppose. I don't really mean that, but I can't help thinking it sometimes. And in any case, this maudlin crap is what brought me here in the first place.

You see the plan – what I'd formulated of it, anyway – was to cast off this mortal coil; to say to Hell with it all, just as I'm sure the sole survivor of the YVO had decided to do after testifying in front of Congress. And now? Now I'm not so sure – not after finding this library, and all these books, and this damnable laptop.

I discovered the place buried under eight feet of ash fall and drift the day after we got here. When I realized what I'd found, it felt like something I'd heard about in an old John Cusack movie called *Grosse Pointe Blank*. There's a scene where his long lost love is suggesting that what he needs is a *Chaka Buku*, at least I think that's what it's called and how it's spelled. She says it's a spiritual swift kick to the head that turns your life around. In any event,

it fits. Something seemed to be calling to me from inside the darkened edifice, and so I entered. I wasn't in there more than thirty seconds when I literally stumbled upon the laptop. In other words, I tripped over it and fell flat on my face.

After suffering all that pain and embarrassment, the least I could do was see if the damn thing still worked. I fumbled with it for about a half-hour and finally hooked to it a car battery through a simple cigarette lighter adapter, and lo and behold, it did. Eventually, of course, I had to root around town and find somebody's discarded exercise bike and pull an alternator out of an abandoned car and then build my own Crow Cruiser, but the point is: I got the damned thing working.

I played around a bit, found the word processing program, clicked on it, and up popped a blank page. The tiny black vertical cursor line blinked at me from the midst of all that white, as if daring me, taunting me, mocking me. What else could I do? And what else was there to write about?

Shall we continue?

15

“Familiarity breeds contempt –
and children.”

Mark Twain

About nine the next morning the rich aroma of good strong coffee pulled me out of my coma. I staggered downstairs and stumbled into the kitchen then poured the elixir of life, all without benefit of higher brain function. Steaming cup of legal speed in hand, I wandered out to the back porch to have a cigarette.

The temperature couldn't have been more than about thirty-five. Even so, Ian, tall and thin, graying around the temples of his short brown hair, with his ever-present reading glasses over hazel eyes perched upon the end of his nose, sat bundled into a large woolen coat and gloves, sipping his coffee and staring out into space. One of those tall, mushroom-looking propane heaters roared next to him at full blast, casting its relative warmth in a roughly six-foot diameter. I, like a dumbass, had come out wearing nothing but a hooded sweatshirt. I slid my chair a bit closer and marveled at the lengths I'd go to smoke a damned cigarette.

“Morning Jake! Sit yourself down and let us discuss the vagaries of life,” he said, his breath coming out as fog.

I did as he suggested, but cut him off before he could get started. “Need coffee,” I said. “Brain not work yet.” I didn't bother with the obvious “What the Hell are you doing out here in the cold,” because I knew my uncle. Rain or shine, hot or cold, you'd find him on his covered porch reading the morning paper.

Ian carried on, undeterred. I should have known better. “So tell me all about the trip.”

I glanced over my cup at my uncle. “Let me see,” I began. “Twenty-two hours with a woman and a dog, world coming to an end, we’re all doomed, religious wing nuts beginning to crawl out of the woodwork, gasoline price-gauging in Denio Junction, and...” I paused before dropping the bomb. “Oh yeah... I killed Mom’s ex-husband. Merry Christmas!”

Ian stared at me gape-mouthed. We sat there in silence for a few moments – me nonchalantly sipping coffee and smoking, and Ian gaping. He shut his mouth and shook his head as if to clear it, but still didn’t say anything at first.

“You better explain that one,” he said, finally.

“Which part?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” he replied.

“We were at a gas station in this nothing in the middle of nowhere called Carvers. I guess Perdue was robbing the place and Mom walked in on it. He held a gun to her head. I shot him. The end.”

“You’re serious?”

I met his stunned gawk but said nothing. Ian shook his head again and blinked. The impasse could have gone on indefinitely, had Mom not stumbled out onto the patio, holding her own cup of coffee and likewise ill-dressed for the elements.

“Mary,” Ian began, breathlessly. “He just told me about... what happened. Is it true?”

Mom stopped in mid-stride, glared wide-eyed at her brother for a moment, then turned

and went back into the house. I was on my own.

“It is what it is, Ian. The son of a bitch had a gun to my Mom’s head,” I said.

He blinked, shook his cranium again, and blinked rapidly, apparently trying to wrap his head around what I’d said. Finally: “What about the police?”

“We didn’t stick around.”

“You what?” Ian gasped.

I laughed. “Do you really think it matters now?”

“Of course it does. There are serious legal ramifications. There are—“

I cut him off. “Do you honestly think anybody gives a damn about Freddy Perdue? Today? Now?”

“But...”

“The end of the world hath come, Ian”

He sat back into his chair. I could tell he was struggling, but the thing about my uncle (and his brain) was that once confronted with logic, his mind became incapable of denial. He steepled his fingers against pursed lips and leaned forward, then back, then forward again as if doing intellectual sit-ups and then breathed in deep, let it out slowly, placed his hands onto the table and sat back. “Okay.”

“I’m glad we settled that,” I replied.

“Oh it’s far from settled,” he said in a calm voice. “You and I will be having a come-to-

Jesus meeting in due time. But perhaps you're right. We have more important things to discuss.”

“Lighten up, Ian,” I heard Mom say from behind us as she snuck back onto the patio, this time dressed more appropriately in a winter coat. She gave me a maternal pat on the head, hugged Ian and sat down. So...” she began. “What shall we talk about?”

16

“The Christmas Spirit is not what you drink.”

Ian Anderson
The Christmas Song

The cliché about families and holidays is one of general chaos, confusion, hate and discontent. They gather out of some masochistic sense of responsibility, dreading the prospect and despising the event. And then they eat massive amounts of food, drink shocking quantities of alcohol, and get the Hell out of there as quickly as possible. Toss in a catastrophe of Biblical proportions and what you’ve got is the recipe for disaster. Unless, that is, you like your family.

Christmas is supposed to be a religious celebration. If you ignore the astronomical data (the birth of Jesus took place in April), the fact that the early Christian Church commandeered the pagan festival of Mithra marking the Winter Solstice, and that in America this day has somehow been transformed into one involving a bearded fat guy in a red suit, what you’ve got instead is a great excuse to get together with the people you love. And since Jesus loved everybody, how better to celebrate his birth, regardless of whether or not you believe in his divinity?

For me, the answer to the divine question of whether Jesus was the actual, accept no imitations Son of God or just the son of a carpenter doesn’t matter, because it doesn’t change the essential truth of what he taught. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* If you don’t want somebody doing something to you, then you can’t justify doing it to anyone else; simple stuff you cannot argue unless you’re being intellectually dishonest.

A lot of what he taught stems from that one axiom. *Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Judge not, lest ye be judged. Let he that is without sin cast the first stone.*

Or, if you want a second opinion: *This above all: to thine own self be true.* That's Shakespeare, by the way, another person writing a long time ago, whose work is still around because of its essential truth. If you are true to yourself – if you are not blowing smoke up your own butt – then you cannot deny the logic, reason and big-t Truth of *Do unto others....*

As to the belief in God, well, that's not so simple or clear cut, but I suppose I should say something about it since a lot of what follows is of a negative nature when it comes to the subject of religion.

There is a book called the *Tao te Ching*, the central tenet of Taoist philosophy. The first line in it (depending on which translation you read) goes something like this: *The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao*; meaning the moment you try to speak of something infinite (such as God or a higher power or whatever) with something finite like language, you are no longer speaking of it at all, because you simply do not have the proper frame of reference. We are finite creatures, you and I, and as such are limited by the finite nature of our minds and existence. We are simply incapable of wrapping our heads around the infinite, but this fact has never stopped religions from trying.

And if that were all there was to it; if religions did no more than try to define something indefinable, then I would have no problem with them whatsoever. But what they actually do is decree their definition of the indefinable to be the right and true definition and, therefore, everybody else's is wrong and, as such, they deserve to be tortured and killed in some grizzly fashion. I've never seen the sense in that, and so I do not – for myself – believe in religion.

What I do believe in is...*something*. I choose not to define what this something is, which, thankfully is my right as an American. It works for me and I do not try to force it on anyone else.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of assholes out there who hide behind the shield of Christianity (and other religions) or who use its power for their own ends without understanding (or ignoring) the simple point Jesus tried to make. What they do understand, however, is just how easy it is to manipulate people.

We sat in Ian's front room, awash in pleasant, post-gluttonous comfort, watching the television. Ian and I each occupied one of the two overstuffed reclining chairs, and his daughter, my cousin, Francine (Frank) sat curled upon the long couch beneath the picture window adjoining the front door. Mother was out preparing drinks.

We still had power. How long it would last was anybody's guess. The outgoing President, who would be passing the democratic torch in a little less than a month (or would have if he hadn't suddenly disappeared in a mushroom cloud), had already been on the TV asking for calm and imploring us to all work together, while simultaneously declaring martial law during this national state of emergency. He ordered all public utilities – water, sewage, gas and electricity – to remain operational, and promised help was on the way.

Most every channel was broadcasting the news – all of it bad – and at the moment, the local station was airing a speech by none other than the Reverend Thomas Jericho.

“...We cannot allow the secular atheist heathens who have been running things for so

long to lead us down the primrose path to Hell. These are the End Times, my friends. The Lord hath opened the heavens and shown us the path to righteousness. It is time for the soldiers of Jesus to rise up and take back our country. No more can we allow wolves wrapped in the sheep's clothing of Civil Liberties to usurp the Will of God.

“They are the ones who have allowed abortion and homosexuality to flourish, jamming it down our throats in the guise of liberty and freedom. They have denied our children the right of falling to their knees and praying to the Lord our God in schools that teach the blasphemy of evolution, while making sport of the righteousness of Creation. They have made us hide the Virgin Birth of our Savior – the Nativity – claiming a separation of Church and State that does not and cannot exist if, as I believe, we are a Christian Nation. And we *are*, my friends, we *are*. And it is time we rise up and proclaim our Righteous Cause; to plant the flag of Jesus once more upon the Promised Land of America.

“Join me for a Christmas candlelight vigil,” he exhorted, “as we pray for the salvation of the Jericho Ministries headquarters in Boise, Idaho. Let us beseech the Lord to spare us from the Hell on Earth He has unleashed.” This seemed a tad disingenuous, since he had evacuated Boise hours before, leaving many of his followers to their fate in that doomed city. He had somehow found his way to Medford, Oregon, just to west of us, where he all-but commandeered the local TV station.

“Will you please turn that crap off,” Mom whined as she came into the room bearing adult beverages.

There's a wonderful scene at the end of the movie *The Adams Family*, in which the

clueless ex-wife of the sleazy former family lawyer, escorted by none other than Cousin It, arrives at the Adams' home dressed as a fairy princess for Halloween. Wednesday Adams (played with dead-pan brilliance by a young Christina Ricci) comes downstairs wearing the same clothes she always does, and so the woman asks where her costume is, to which Wednesday replies: "This *is* my costume. I'm a homicidal maniac. They look just like everyone else."

It'd be easy if people like the Reverend Thomas Jericho were wild-eyed freaks you could see coming a mile away. Unfortunately, they usually look more like John Wayne Gacy, who I'm sure his neighbors thought was a real swell guy, right up until they found the dead bodies under his house.

The Good Reverend appeared well-dressed and manicured in the obligatory conservative suit, with his wind tunnel-tested white hair slicked back and his dazzling (and no doubt expensive) white teeth shining outward at the television audience. His eyes shown clear and bright and he was neither frothing at the mouth nor barking at the moon. All things being equal, it would have been better if he'd hopped up on stage wearing a black uniform complete with Death's Head insignia, jack boots and a red swastika arm band. In the end it would have saved us a lot of trouble.

I suppose people could say my characterizations of the Good Reverend are unflattering at best and down-right prejudicial at worst, especially considering the fact I never personally met the son of a bitch. And to those detractors who would disparage my methods, I say you may feel free to kiss my ass. The things he did and the number of people he did them to do not warrant a single iota of my respect.

The dishes were done (which Ian and I happily escaped as we were having our obligatory – if misogynistic – after-dinner Cuban cigars, courtesy of a friend of mine in Vegas), the food had all been put away, and the dessert, coffee and alcohol were being served in the comfortable livingroom of the comfortable house that had been in the Campbell family for over seventy-five years.

“Believe it or not, this crap *is* the news, Mom,” I informed her.

Amidst the ongoing coverage of the end of the world, the Good Reverend somehow managed to garner the spotlight, at least for the time being. And as Mom sat down next to Ian’s daughter, Francine, the scene on Ian’s flat screen changed to yet another talking head; there to tell us all about what we’d just seen.

I’d always found the media’s lament of the intellectual decline of America interesting, given that they were to a large degree responsible for dumbing us down. I suppose it’s a side-effect of the twenty-four hour news cycle. They had to fill the time somehow, and so whenever one public figure or another said something, they had to have someone else come along and explain what they just said, as if we were idiots who couldn’t figure it out for ourselves. And we were willing participants in this assault on our national intellect.

Another side effect of the constant barrage and round-the-clock availability of the twenty-four cycle, coupled with the immediacy of high-speed Internet and cel-phone technology, was the feeling of instant gratification. You were able to get whatever you wanted whenever you

wanted any time of the day or night.

This sounds good and instant gratification is, well, instantly gratifying. The problem, however, is that it doesn't leave a whole lot of time – or motivation – for reflective thought. Thinking is hard. You have to take in information, process it, combine it with other information previously obtained, and then make an actual decision based upon reason and the available facts. It's so much easier to let someone else tell you what to think. No muss, no fuss, no responsibility; all you need do is allow your brain to turn into easily manipulated mush.

“That man scares me,” Mom said.

“I want to be just like him when I become pathologically full of crap,” Francine agreed in her own dry and sarcastic way.

Francine was a tall and thin wisp of a twenty-five year-old girl, with strawberry-blonde hair and striking blue eyes behind round spectacles. As her cousin, I took great pains to mock her with the obligatory “four eyes” and other such epithets at every opportunity. I called her Frank, primarily because it annoyed her. Okay, let's be honest. That was my only reason. In any event, just as Frank and I viewed our world through a sarcastic filter, my mother and uncle each had their own way of coping with the crap hand they'd been dealt.

Ian had gone internal, reading everything he could get his hands on, learning all he could about life and the world and the way things were supposed to work; but having spent so much time reading about life left him with almost none for actually living it. His world essentially consisted of the mysterious soup within his massive brain. He'd had friends, to be sure, but

they'd been less like people to him and more like characters from a favorite novel; familiar but not quite real faces to be taken off the bookshelf and enjoyed from time to time, only to be placed right back on it when something else came along.

Mom had gone external, throwing herself into schoolwork and athletics and outside activities. And she'd excelled at it, flying through school with a drive and intensity that made her a force to be reckoned with. But it hadn't left a lot of time for people stuff, life stuff, the ribbons and bows and dances and gaggles of giggling girls. There'd been a certain amount of it; the naturally occurring accessories to childhood and adolescence one runs into as a matter of course, provided they're even nominally receptive to socialization. But that's all it had been – extras to be enjoyed when she wasn't otherwise too busy becoming whatever she was driving toward. And so she'd sprinted headlong through childhood and adolescence like a juggernaut, until loneliness and teen-aged hormones had run her smack into Mick Fincham, my father.

So Ian had gone inward and Mom had gone outward. And then she and I hit the road for Sin City, leaving Ian with an empty house, an unfinished education, and a job teaching “low-grade morons” (as he called them) a bunch of white-washed balderdash, better known as high school American History. He'd finished the school year on auto-pilot, all but phoning his lessons in, and then drifted back up north to Eugene, where he met Alice Templeton, a librarian at the university. Beautiful, intelligent, and witty, she delighted in their all night discussions of every subject under the sun.

They'd dated for three years before Ian finally worked up the courage to pop the question, and then remained engaged for another year before he'd at last agreed on a date. Two months after the wedding, she was pregnant. Nine months later, Francine Templeton Campbell

was born. One year later, Alice died suddenly of an aneurism hidden deep inside her brain.

Frank and I liked to joke that between the two of us we had one complete set of parents. Sometimes – if there’s love – it’s all you need.

There came a knock at the front door, just off the livingroom. As Ian opened the wooden portal, we could all see it was The Crow. His actual name was Jackson Cromarty, but everybody (except Ian) called him by the other one because he bore a strong resemblance to the ubiquitous bird: tall, thin, with a beak-like nose on his dark-skinned face. One might suspect this was a not-so subtle reference to the thoroughly idiotic *Separate but Equal* Jim Crow laws of the Fifties, but it couldn’t be further from the truth. Everybody in town loved him.

“Jackson!” Ian said, proving his non-conformism.

“Crow!” the rest of us greeted.

“Mayor Campbell,” the man replied, acknowledging my uncle’s preeminent position as mayor of Gunter’s Gap. “Merry Christmas, sir,” he said. “And a Merry Christmas to all of you” he waved into the livingroom at the three of us.

“Will you come in for a nice adult beverage?”

“No, thank you,” he answered. “Actually, I came by to tell you we’re all headed up to The Ridge.”

“Oh?”

“I guess you can see the volcano.”

The Ridge was a promontory on the north side of town, often used for picnics and such because it afforded an excellent view of the surrounding countryside; basically a long, thin, bald hilltop with enough flat spots to make it suitable for benches and barbecues. It also served as an outstanding place to park at night with that special someone. Rumor has it I was conceived there, but Mom neither confirmed nor denied.

A narrow hard-packed dirt road you'd never be able to find unless you knew it was there, wound through tree-lined switchbacks to the top. People had been known to take those curves a bit too fast (or under the influence of too much alcohol) and go tumbling down the hillside until they wrapped themselves around a tree, but we managed it just fine. And we had a thoroughly enjoyable time doing it, right up until we saw the massive dark cloud to the east.

Volcanic Interlude #3

A plinian eruption is considered one that's similar to Vesuvius, the volcano that provided us with such an excellent venue for Pink Floyd. It is so named because of a letter written by Pliny the Younger in which he described the death of his father, Pliny the Elder. Ultimately, of course, it doesn't matter what the Hell the thing is called, only what it does.

Plinian eruptions send massive columns of smoke tens of thousands of feet into the stratosphere, and eject millions of tons of pumice and ash via violent and continuous gas explosions. They are louder than the most ear-bleeding Heavy Metal concert imaginable and can last anywhere from a day to several months.

Mount St. Helens was a small one. The eruption of Mount Mazama, something like 5000 years before Christ, on the other hand, was so ferocious, it blew the thing to pieces and created our very own Crater Lake.

St. Helens is an example of the typical volcano, featuring a large cone that over the course of hundreds of years turns into a lovely, snow-capped mountain providing excellent photographic opportunities. But when the explosion is so violent it obliterates the mountain (and everything else), it collapses and creates a caldera, so named because it looks like a giant caldron. Crater Lake is one. Yellowstone is a caldera on steroids.

The mechanism of an explosive eruption is simple. Magma is melted rock, superheated by the beating heart of our Earth's core. Basic physics: apply cold to water, a liquid, and you get ice, a solid; apply heat and you get steam, a gas. Magma is hot rock, and when you superheat the

crap out of it, you get enormous amounts of gas, as if the earth ate way too much five-alarm chili. Encase that gas in millions of tons of solid rock and you get pressure.

Anyone who's ever tried to open a radiator cap when it hasn't cooled enough to dissipate the steam knows what happens when you release that pressure quickly. But if the radiator cap in question has an area of fifteen hundred square miles, and if instead of opening it you poke a hole in it, what do you think will happen – other than melting the skin off your face and upper torso?

Like any liquid, magma follows the path of least resistance and so when it finds cracks in the Earth's crust it works its way upward toward the surface. Areas like the Marianas Trench notwithstanding; there aren't a whole lot of gaping cracks in the surface, so the magma finds voids somewhere below and pools, creating a magma chamber.

When Mount St. Helens erupted, it spewed somewhere around two-thirds of a cubic mile of magma, ash and pumice, and so its chamber was relatively small. The one beneath Yellowstone, however, had the capacity to hold *thousands* of cubic miles, and so when the first vent went *Ker-Floey*, it was nowhere near big enough to release all that pressure. Predictably, then, a second one opened; and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth, and on and on, like a gigantic zipper until it had opened a fifteen hundred square mile caldera.

Any explosive eruption is bad, and anyone caught too near it dies. There is no escape. Your number is officially up.

Pyroclastic floes ripping at four hundred miles an hour and wielding a temperature of five hundred degrees incinerated everything and everyone in Jackson and Cody, Wyoming, Billings, Bozeman and Butte, Montana, and Idaho Falls and Pocatello, Idaho; gone, see ya', buh-bye. But this was just the beginning.

After Yellowstone

Cities up to three hundred miles from Yellowstone were buried under ash and pumice from the Devil's own blizzard. This included: Missoula, Helena, Great Falls, and Miles City, Montana, Mt. Rushmore, Rapid City, South Dakota, Sheridan, Gillette, Casper, and Rock Springs, Wyoming, Provo and Salt Lake City, Utah, Twin Falls and Boise, Idaho, Cardston and Milk River, Alberta; trapping and killing hundreds of thousands.

The Reverend Thomas Jericho got out of Boise, mores' the pity. Over twelve hundred of his faithful parishioners did not. And still, the eruption went on, and on, and on.

Out to five hundred miles to the west and a thousand miles downwind to the east, the ash layer grew six to twelve inches deep. This area included: Medicine Hat, Alberta, Maple Creek, Regina and Winnipeg, Manitoba, all of North and South Dakota, the western third of Minnesota, Sioux City, Iowa, Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island, and North Platt, Nebraska, Selina and Dodge City, Kansas, all of Colorado, all but the SW Corner of Utah, the northeast half of Nevada (including Winnemucca and Carvers, where I can imagine Freddy's carcass buried for all eternity), the eastern half of Washington and Oregon, and the southeast corner of British Columbia.

To someone in Denver or Chicago, or Buffalo, New York, six inches of snow would barely rate their attention. Ash, however, is a different kettle of fish. When added to water from rain, six inches is plenty enough to collapse a roof. It will get into anything mechanical or electronic and stop it cold. When that happens, and when the sun is blotted out by the ever-expanding volcanic cloud, you're in the dark and walking. And with every step you take, the ash on the ground puffs back into the air you breathe, sending microscopic shards of volcanic glass into your lungs, where it mixes with your body's fluids and turns into cement.

But wait! There's more!

Six hundred miles to the west and fifteen hundred to the east, the ash layer is two inches. That's the rest of Nevada, northern Arizona and New Mexico, all of Kansas, Iowa and Minnesota, and the western halves of Illinois and Wisconsin. That my friends, is the Grain Belt, where the food is, or rather was.

Volcanic ash is sterile. Nothing will grow in it. And while a couple of inches sounds fairly easy to get rid of, try removing a two inch layer from a million square miles of land after it has rained and mingled with the soil beneath. Good Luck!

That two inch zone also included the state of Washington out to Mount Rainier and another big chunk of Oregon, past Bend, to a mere fifty miles east of Gunter's Gap. We'd be getting our share in due course.

By the time Yellowstone finished releasing its gas, magma, ash, pumice, rock and assorted geological crapola, nine days later, everywhere else in the United States, except coastal California, Arizona south of Phoenix, Texas south of Austin, Florida, and New England north of Philadelphia, had been covered to about four-tenths of an inch. It takes a tenth of that to shut down an airport.

Worse still, volcanic ash and pumice floats, and, therefore, contaminates any fresh water source. Every major river except the Rio Grande and the Hudson, along with half the Great Lakes, and tens of thousands of tributaries, creeks, ponds, and not-so great lakes had ash in them. There went the water supply.

Several years ago in Nebraska, the fossilized remains of hundreds of animals – including

elephants, rhinos and camels – were discovered buried under several feet of volcanic ash deposits, which originally was thought to have killed them. Instead, most fossils were found to contain bone deformations indicative of Marie's Disease, a rare lung condition from inhaling large amounts of dust or (you guessed it) ash. Most suffocated from the ash within one week – all from a volcano a thousand miles away.

This time, cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys and horses, along with deer, elk, moose, bear, squirrels, rabbits, dogs and cats – anything and everything that could not get and stay out of the ash fall – was dead by the time the eruption ended. There went the meat.

As if that weren't enough, the vertical column bursting upward at twice the speed of sound contained millions of tons of poisonous sulphur dioxide. Mixed with water droplets in the stratosphere, this deadly cloud hit us with a double whammy. First, it came back down in torrential acid rain, causing massive flooding in the rivers and streams already clogged with floating ash and pumice and debris, swatting aside bridges, levees and earthen dams like they were miniatures on a Hollywood disaster movie set. The ash covering hillsides everywhere wasn't compacted like normal dirt, and so when it mixed with the rain, it turned to mud and raced downward as *lahars* – immense mudslides – wiping away whatever lay in their path. And second, not all the sulphur dioxide fell back to Earth. Much of it remained, acting like an all-encompassing mirror and sending the sun's warming rays right back out into space. The temperature, already cold due to the winter season, began to plummet.

Mother Nature had done her work. Our goose, as the sole survivor from the YVO had said before slipping off her own mortal coil, had been officially cooked. And now it was humanity's turn to make it worse.

17

“Ye shall know the truth and
the truth shall make you mad.”

Aldous Huxley

Yellowstone continued gurgling and belching and suffering the occasional bout of explosive flatulence for another six months, but these were all local phenomenon detected by infrared satellite photography for the first few weeks, and then limited and cautious flyovers by the Air Force, who were the only ones allowed anywhere near the restricted airspace. The ash fall, however, was for the most part done.

That said, it had fallen everywhere: on the ground and in the trees and on pretty much every solid surface. We needed to wear dust masks and some kind of wrap-around eye protection to keep it out of vital areas, and we had to blast the front grill of my truck (and everyone else's in Gunter's Gap) with compressed air and change out the air filter about every other day just to keep it running.

Miss Molly Noodle had to remain indoors, doing her business on a patch of newspapers as if she were a puppy being housebroken. Once the rains washed away the relatively small amount of ash fall we received, she could perform her toilet outside, thus regaining her dignity, but for the most part we kept her in the house.

In terms of a threat to life, these things didn't rate much concern, but it didn't stop people from being worried. Ian, exercising his authority as Mayor, passed the word to those who made it up to The Ridge on Christmas afternoon to watch the ever-expanding shadow to just go home

and sit it out for the time being until the ash settled. This piece of advice lasted until the eruption had been officially declared over. It was not, however, the only thing he said or did.

His first act after coming down from The Ridge that afternoon had been to interrupt the owner of our one and only grocery store, Sammy Dundee's consumption of holiday spirit, which in his case was the better part of a bottle of scotch. I went with him.

"Merry Christmas!" Sammy slurred upon answering our knock. Five-eight and weighing in at maybe a hundred and fifty pounds, his diminutive size masked a wiry ex-Golden Gloves boxer who kept in shape by working in his store twelve hours a day, seven days a week, closing only on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years Day.

He and his wife Delores were alone this holiday, their one son having decided to forgo the annual family reunion for a trip to Aruba with his new wife. The newlyweds would be killed in a day or so by a gang of drunken thugs who broke into their cabana in search of more alcohol, although Sammy would not learn of this for three months.

"And to you, Sammy," Ian said as the man allowed us inside. The place had a warm, cozy feel, belying its two thousand square-foot size. The family room we were ushered into held two comfortable leather couches and three overstuffed chairs arrayed in front of a large stone fireplace, in which a pile of logs cracked and popped. The wood-trimmed walls were checkered with photos of what appeared to be family vacations in a variety of locales. A muted TV, flashing images of destruction, sat on a small folding table in front of the couch, upon which his wife lounged.

"Have a drink, Ian," Delores offered. She was a small woman with happy, slightly inebriated eyes on her cherubic face, wearing a red sweater, trimmed with gold and featuring

Santa presenting gifts to a snowman.

“No, thank you, my dear. But by all means, don’t think you need to refrain from imbibing on our account.”

I thought he should be speaking for himself on that score. After seeing the towering column of black doom to the east, I needed a drink. Or two. Or fifty. I’d have even taken scotch, although I prefer tequila. In moments of national crisis, one must learn to adapt.

“What can we do for you?” Sammy asked.

“I see you’re aware of the volcano,” my uncle said, indicating the television.

Sammy gave a solemn nod. “Terrible thing to happen on Christmas.”

“Or any other day,” I agreed, tossing in my few cents.

“Indeed,” Ian said. “And it is because of this and what it means that we are here. I want you to do something for me – for all of us, the whole town.”

“Anything.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Sammy.”

Suspicion danced across the man’s face. “Why? What do you want?”

“I want you to keep your store closed until further notice.”

Ian had degrees coming out his wazoo: a Bachelor’s in Liberal Arts, Masters Degrees in History, Philosophy, and Sociology, and PhD’s in History and Political Science. He did nothing

with them.

That's not exactly true. He tried teaching for a while. The stint at the high school in Medford after I was born was only the first time, although; he couldn't bring himself to lecture any more students who didn't care about a watered down curriculum giving them just enough information to pass a standardized test without actually teaching them anything. That was the real outcome of *No Child Left Standing* (okay...*Behind*): a nation filled with young people who knew a lot about passing tests, but not much else. Instead, he went the college professor route, instructing students who still couldn't care less but needed the General Ed credit anyway. At least the curriculum was more about the actual history and gave him the freedom to give them a bit of knowledge – whether they wanted it or not.

This lasted a few years and resulted in him achieving tenure at the University of Oregon, in Eugene after publishing three fairly respected books – two on history and one on the social philosophy of Democracy called, *If Thomas Paine Were Alive Today, His Head Would Explode*, which became a best seller for all of about two seconds, made him a good bit of money, and from which I've stolen a number of concepts for whatever this thing is I'm writing (they had a copy here at the library). But he finally became fed up with academic politics and what he called the “educated idiocy of academia,” and so he came back to Gunter's Gap and ran for Mayor.

The election, three years previous, had its moments of conflict and incivility, primarily because he'd run against Ronny Gibbons, the man who'd held the office for twelve years and hadn't wanted to give it up. The voters thought otherwise, however, and all but handed Ian the job. And then the greatest catastrophe in human history got dumped in his lap.

What else could he do but call a town meeting?

Gunter's Gap was your basic summer town. It still is, I suppose, although the big ass wall, pockmarked with bullet holes you see on your way in, kind of diminishes its vacation appeal, but everything I've seen west of the Wasteland, to one degree or another carries the scars of what happened.

The town had all the usual accoutrements. The streets were wide, with pretty houses in a happy mixed and matched variety of shapes and sizes. There were two churches: one Presbyterian, run by Reverend Paul Warren, and the other, non-denominational, with Pastor Judith McGee, and the people attended one, the other, or neither as their own belief system dictated. There was no good side of town. There was no bad side. There was just the town, although the year-round residents tended to cluster on the east side and leave the west to the summer tourists.

To the west, a gas station served as the first indication of civilization amidst the deep green forest surrounding the town. To the east ran the road leading into the National Forest, which, as I said before, led nowhere. Logging and Park Service trails sooner or later would get you to the highway, but few bothered to run such a circuitous route, except for the three pot farmers and one Survivalist we had living out that way. Mark Hamilton's machine and auto repair shop served as the eastern introduction to town.

The center of Gunter's Gap held an actual town square, with a small park in the middle of everything, complete with the obligatory War Memorial, in this case commemorating Colonel Thomas Dickerson of the 223rd Field Artillery.

The good Colonel had gotten himself swept up in the mass-retreat during the early stages

of the Battle of the Bulge, but he'd managed to salvage a three-howitzer battery before getting the hell out of Dodge (or in this case Malmedy), something a lot of his colleagues in the artillery had not managed to do. He died in the process. As a thank you from a grateful nation, the U. S. Army presented the town with three cannons.

These were fired exactly once a year, on the Fourth of July. They'd tried it on Veteran's Day once, but the concussion caused a bit of an avalanche on the hillside south of town, so they never did it again.

Three sides of the square held the typical small town shops: a hardware named after its owner, Frank Angelucci; Sammy's Grocery; a drug store; the First Bank of the Northwest; Obrien's, a family restaurant; the Gap House, a three-floor, twenty-two room hotel; a small but respectful bar with the too-cute name of Come On Inn; a bakery called (again with too-cuteness) Hot Buns; and four tourist-type curio/antique/miscellaneous crap stores. The fourth side was devoted to municipal buildings, including the Sheriff's substation, the firehouse, the small elementary school (with its whopping eighty-three students and six teachers) and the town hall/courthouse, where everyone in town gathered on the evening the eruption ended.

"I demand to know what the government's going to do about it!" Ronny Gibbons, ever the gas bag and always ready to pounce upon the person who'd beaten him like a rug barked, trying to make it sound as if Yellowstone had somehow been Ian's fault. He was whining – pretty much all he had done since losing the election.

There is a subsidiary to *those who do and those who don't*, namely: those who whine. We all do it from time to time – the blasts of self-pity and the damnable injustice of it all that every now and then we need to vent. But once most of us have, we're done and feel much better. Unfortunately, there are those (like Ronny) who seem to do nothing else – just *bitch, bitch, bitch*, on and on and on. Those are the *true* tales told by an idiot because they really do signify nothing.

Nobody likes a whiner, so the saying goes, but somebody must because there sure are a lot of them. My basic attitude is: beyond simple venting, if you don't like a certain thing, then do something about it. If you're not going to do anything about it then shut the Hell up, because – seriously – nobody likes a whiner. And if you can't do anything about it, then it is what it is; deal with it and move on.

And so now I'll take my own advice. Sorry for the intrusion.

“Shut up Ronny, and let the man talk,” someone shouted from the back of the room. A round of applause served as sufficient evidence that: *a)* my above statement is correct, and *b)* nobody was buying his crap.

“I doubt the government's going to be able to do much of anything,” Ian said. “Not here in the Gap. Not for some time. I'm afraid we don't rate very high on their list.”

“What about FEMA?” Joey Witherspoon, owner of the Gap House, asked.

“Given that they were already overwhelmed by the earthquakes pretty much everywhere west of I-5, FEMA might get to us six months from now – maybe. I wouldn't hold my breath.”

Ian looked over the familiar faces in the hall. I could tell he didn't like what he saw. "Ladies and gentlemen, I think we need to face some hard realities. The government does not have the capacity to help us. We are on our own."

"For how long?" someone asked.

"I wish I could tell you. Best case scenario, I'd plan for a minimum of one month." This drew a wide variety of responses from the crowd – none of them good, but I was glad to note that with the exception of Mister Gibbons, none of it directed against my uncle.

"As I said folks, we are on our own, but please understand we are not alone. We have each other. Together we can survive this. There's enough food, water and fuel here in town to get us through, as long as we work together."

"And who's going to pay for all of it?" Sammy asked, repeating the discussion we'd already had in his home Christmas Day. He'd been none too happy about it then but had seemed to agree to the sense of my uncle's argument. Apparently, he'd been having second thoughts.

Ian leaned one elbow on the podium he stood beside and breathed a deep sigh. "What do you think is happening out there? I'd be willing to bet that if the President hasn't already suspended trading, then Wall Street has crashed. And I'm not talking about the little blip we had back in 2008. I'm talking about something on the scale of the Great Depression, or worse. For the time being, and maybe for some time to come, money is meaningless. I could give you every penny I have, Sammy, and it wouldn't be worth the paper it's printed on."

This drew still more protests, the volume of which built in intensity until Ian slammed his hand down onto the podium. "Snap out of it, people! Do you believe anything we thought of as

normal exists anymore? Yellowstone has changed everything. Life as we knew it is over, folks; done, finished, kaput. The sooner we understand this, the sooner we can start taking care of business.

“And please notice I’m using the word ‘we.’ If we pull together, if we pool our resources and our talents and our abilities, we can make it through this. But if we go into it with an every man for himself mentality, then we don’t stand a chance.”

“Socialism!” Ronnie again.

Ian laughed and shook his head. “Call it whatever you like. You want to call it Socialism? Fine, be my guest. Call it Communism. Call it Zen Buddhism, it makes you happy. What we’re talking about is survival. Bottom line folks: if we don’t band together, we die.”

18

“A civilized society is one
which tolerates eccentricity to
the point of doubtful sanity.”

Robert Frost

Ian’s request for everyone to hunker down and ride it out for a month had been sound advice, but of course my mother didn’t take it. And I suppose I should have known she wouldn’t. Being my mother, being who she was, there’s no way she could sit still in the midst of a disaster while people were injured.

Everyone in town was fine, for all intents and purposes. There were plenty of rattled nerves and some mild respiratory distress brought on by the minor amount of ash fall we received, but nothing significant. They still took full advantage of her presence, however, because the so-called doctor we had in town, Nathaniel Periwinkle, was seventy-two years old, hard of hearing, and blind enough that the State of Oregon no longer allowed him to drive. This kept her amused for all of a week.

During that week, I kept myself amused by helping Ian assess just how well we’d be able to do what he said we could do. Having blown necessary sunshine up the butts of our fair town’s citizens, my uncle now needed to find out whether or not he could actually pull it off.

Job one was food. Sammy’s Grocery had been well-stocked with all the obligatory Christmas goodies, counting on holiday gluttony, and since the eruption began with another week remaining in the holiday season, plenty remained; although, had it been allowed to open, it was at best questionable if that would have remained the case.

Sammy did no small bit of whining when Ian came to collect on his Town Hall statement, but in the end it amounted to little more than venting. Perhaps it was Ian's threat to tell everyone in town Sammy had turned his back on them. My uncle was a fair and honest man, but this did not stop him from being a manipulative bastard when the need arose. Even so, and even though there were only about six-hundred- fifty of us in town, the food would not last long. Sooner or later we were going to have to find other sources.

The second task was gathering all the backup generators and identifying all sources of fuel for them. The power grid had been reliable up until this point, with only three brown-outs in the twelve days we'd been there, but no one was quite sure how long it would last. The outside temperature fluctuated between high twenties and low forties, so basic refrigeration wasn't a problem, but it wasn't consistently cold enough to keep frozen food frozen, so the generators would be important.

It seemed to me we were screwed as far as fresh vegetables – and not only because it was winter. The estimates from the news reports for how long it'd be before we had another growing season were gloomy at best. Nobody came right out and said it, but reading between the lines it looked as if it was going to be years. The age-old parental saw about eating all your vegetables because there were starving people in the world appeared to be about to come true with a vengeance. But then Ian introduced me to Dennis Brown.

Dennis was The Gap's local, uh, horticulturist. He had been known to grow several crops of a certain weed per year. Everybody knew he was doing it, but left him alone for two reasons. First, Dennis was another one of those people like the Crow – nicest guy you'd ever want to meet, probably give you the shirt off his back. The second was, he wasn't harming anybody and

he sold the stuff in Medford, not in town. The full time residents of Gunter's Gap had a very "live and let live" attitude about life: you leave me alone; I leave you alone, everybody's happy. Plus, Dennis spent his money (ill gotten or not) in The Gap, including a healthy contribution when the roof on the school gymnasium needed to be fixed.

Be that as it may, the Rogue River has a number of tributaries – mainly creeks and runoff beds from the higher elevations. One such creek skirted along the north side of The Ridge, then cut southward on the eastern edge, cascading down a series of steps, and providing us with a few minor waterfalls. These make for wonderful photographic opportunities. And if they are sufficiently high enough (over six feet) and the amount of water is large enough (over a thousand gallons per minute) they also make for excellent small-scale hydroelectric power sources.

Dennis had made good use of this fact, as would we, by and by. He had a half-acre plot on the northeast edge of town with one such waterfall in the far corner of his property, on which sat a fifteen hundred square-foot "guest house" given over entirely to growing his crop indoors, utilizing grow lamps in lieu of sunlight. He lived there with his wife, Caroline. She and I had already been introduced.

I'd never met Dennis, however, and so of course I'd never been to their house. As Ian and I approached their front door I was surprised to hear jazz playing from somewhere inside. My own clichéd brain had been certain it would be the Grateful Dead or maybe Bob Marley, rather than Miles Davis.

I suppose it's easy to categorize and pigeon-hole people; slapping this, that, or the other label onto them and abrogating our responsibility for thinking. Dennis grew marijuana, and so of

course he must be slack-jawed, long-haired and wearing dirty and tie-dyed tee-shirts over ripped jeans, with Jerusalem-cruisers on his feet and not a single coherent thought in his brain as he listened to typical stoner music. And then having squeezed him into the appropriate box, I no longer had any need to consider him as a singular, unique, individual human being. I could just shine him on, safe and secure in my own moral superiority.

It is somewhat ironic that Nietzsche, who held most of humanity in contempt and viewed the mass of the great unwashed herd as beneath him, would have been the one to point out the obvious flaw in that kind of thinking. By saying “*When you label me, you negate me,*” he made the same argument as leaders of the Civil Rights movement would a century later when they attacked the absurdity of *Separate but Equal*.

Separating people into groups is to a certain degree unavoidable, if for no other reason than the logistical problem of putting the chaotic jumble of information with which we are constantly bombarded into some kind of cohesive form. But just like Biology’s method of splitting the millions of species on this planet into class and phylum and so forth, the separation is supposed to be the beginning, not the end.

If all you go by is the group, then anyone or anything that does not belong to your group is of necessity different. It is the natural inclination of human beings to treat different things differently, and when we do so, we rarely treat them as equal.

This is all fine and good, and I would submit as morally axiomatic that you should in fact treat each individual as a unique and, therefore, different human being – some better, some worse, some equal – and then judge him or her on their merits (or lack thereof) alone. If you adhere to the Golden Rule, and if you want people to judge you on your merits and not on

whatever group they arbitrarily decide to dump you – if you do not want to be viewed and treated as a sweeping generalization – then you must give them the same courtesy.

If you stop at the label (the sweeping generalization) you've only done part of the job, and the easy part at that. An individual human being is not all one thing or all another. A person is a little of this, a little of that and a dash of the other; all mixed into a greater whole. So if you stop at the group, all you have is part of the picture. You need to think it through.

I had automatically stopped at the *stoner* group and so had the requisite idiotic preconceived notions about Dennis, but I was about to get an education.

Caroline answered the door wearing a sleeveless tee-shirt, a pair of thong panties, a pair of flip-flops, and not a single thing else. “Hey Ian, how’s it going?” She asked then looked me up and down like a cougar might gaze at a tasty rabbit. “And you, Jake, look positively delicious.”

“Caroline,” my uncle said. “Bold fashion statement,” he added as she let us in. Strangely enough, she gave Ian plenty of room to enter but then took a step closer, and I damn-near had to meld with her to get by. All-in-all, I found it rather entertaining.

“You like?” She asked, looking right at me.

“Delightful,” I replied.

Dennis and Caroline were also swingers – or at least Caroline was. Dennis, from what I understand, was rarely seen at local functions, whereas she was a social butterfly you couldn't help but notice. The general consensus held that the “swinger” bit was so she could cat around

more or less in the open with more or less anyone (including other women) of legal age and it wouldn't be cheating.

This was another proclivity they restricted to outside of town; although, she had the habit of climbing all over me for some reason – perhaps because I tended to develop an erection whenever she was around. Given her fashion-sense, which usually consisted of (slightly) more clothing than she had on at the moment, this should be understandable, if only because it meant my eyes were open.

“I'm so glad you like it,” she said, “accidentally” brushing her hand about six inches below my belt buckle.

Ian could see my obvious discomfort, and under normal circumstances would have played it for all the amusement it was worth, but we were there for a reason. “Caroline, darling,” he said, taking her by the arm and gently pulling her away from me. “Could you fetch Dennis for us?”

She gave a pouting sigh then said: “If I must.”

Her husband came into view a few moments later, wiping his hands on a rag before stuffing it into the back pocket of his faded jeans. “Gentlemen!” he exclaimed. “How ya' doing?”

As I said earlier, the cliché of a pot grower is someone with long, probably dirty hair and clothing, red eyes, and a stoned/stupid expression on his face. Dennis, on the other hand, looked like a gentleman farmer. He wore a clean golf shirt over faded jeans and what looked like a brand new pair of penny loafers over white socks. His brown hair was cut military-short, and his

eyes were bright and intelligent.

Ian got right to the point. “We need you to perform a bit of crop rotation.”

Dennis nodded. “I was wondering when you’d show up,” he said, shaking both our hands with a firm grip. “I’ve already started to harvest and clear, and I should be ready to plant whatever you like in about two days.”

So much for him being a slack-jawed stoner.

The last of the Big Three logistical jobs Ian and I had to perform to ensure he wouldn’t be proved incorrect in his Town Hall assertions, was to find out how much gasoline remained in the reserve tank behind the police station. We had a gas station just this side of the bridge over the Rogue River on the west end of town, but it was owned by our token right-wing nut job (another sweeping generalization, but this time not far off the mark). His name was Richard Coolidge. Predictably, everyone called him Dick.

Dick hadn’t bothered going to the Town Hall meeting because he positively loathed my uncle, thinking him a bleeding heart liberal (which he wasn’t), and feeling certain he would Socialize the town (which, of necessity, he essentially did). Dick had been pretty much Ronny Gibbons’ only vocal supporter.

He was also the one and only person in town who allowed himself to be caught up in the “Tea Party” silliness that became popular a couple of years before the Big Boom. It had been a so-called “grass roots” organization intended to protest the many and varied abuses of the Obama Administration.

“Grass Roots” indicates a popular and non-partisan uprising of people dissatisfied with their government. As the name implies, it is supposed to grow in organic fashion, free from the influence of party politics. While it is true that certain people within the movement came to their dissatisfaction independently, it is also true the vast majority had been influenced and goaded by right wing talk radio.

As each day progressed beyond the start of the Big Boom, television became less and less a viable news alternative, because of all the particulates in the air. Those higher up in the atmosphere interfered with the satellite reception upon which cable TV relied and so we soon had to use broadcast. This posed a problem in that during 2009, all the televised broadcast media switched to digital, requiring a special antenna. Since most everybody had cable or satellite, very few had the necessary equipment and so we reverted back in time about fifty years and went to good old radio.

Most radio stations had been geared toward music of one variety or another and so were not so well equipped to become sources of the information everyone wanted: namely, just what in the Hell was happening. Those already geared toward a talk format leaned primarily right. Progressive radio, like the short-lived *Air America*, didn't have the rabid following of its conservative counterpart and so the ratings and, therefore, advertising revenue wasn't enough to keep it going, except in ultra-liberal markets such as San Francisco, Seattle and Portland. Medford (the nearest radio market) was quite a bit more conservative, and so the Tea Party was relatively more popular there than in Gunter's Gap.

Because of the habit of many members to wear wide-brimmed hats festooned with

hanging tea bags, some creative ignoramus started calling them “Tea-Baggers,” a name which many of the self-identified people within the movement took to calling themselves, unaware of the term’s homosexual connotations having to do with the position of a man’s testicles during a particular oral activity.

Gay humor notwithstanding, the Tea Party, like many of the protests during the Health Care debate and many of the audiences at Republican rallies during the Presidential races in 2008 and 2012, had been a color-blind movement. There was, for all intents and purposes, only one color: white. This is not by any means to say these were racist events, but the fact remained: damned few people of color attended.

For example, the Tea Party held an event in Vegas back in 2010 featuring their poster-girl, Sarah Palin (and her stump catch phrase: “It’s not a time to retreat. It’s a time to reload!”). The attendance estimates varied, but the general consensus put it at somewhere around eight thousand people. Maybe a handful of them were *not* white. I’m sure this was another one of those coincidental moments.

Whatever the color, these events also featured a number of signs with (sometimes misspelled) incendiary slogans such as: *We’re not armed – this time* and *Obama/Osama – Coincidence?* And they were attended by a number of fringe groups with shockingly large followings such as *The Birthers*, who insisted the 2008 Presidential election was invalid because Barak Obama hadn’t been born in this country as mandated by the U. S. Constitution. Ignoring the very obvious fact that in case after case (including one before the Hawaii Supreme Court in the President’s home state) his birth status had been confirmed, this assertion still flew in the face of logic, if for no other reason than the human nature of politics. Had there been any

validity to the charge whatsoever, his opponents in the Democratic Primary election – namely former First Lady and future Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – would have been all over it like white on rice. But apparently facts and intelligent social discourse did not matter because people believed it.

I used to listen to talk radio (both conservative and progressive) once upon a time, and used to enjoy it, if only for the pleasure of being able to yell at the radio while driving down the road. My enjoyment ended upon realizing just how scary and dangerous it could be. The precipitating incident of my disillusion came one day while listening to a local guy in San Diego.

He and his listeners had been discussing the war protests surrounding a woman named Cindy Sheehan, who had lost her soldier son during the Iraq War and used it as inspiration to go after the Bush Administration. This particular talking head made the assertion that it was perfectly within a person's Constitutional rights to protest the war, *provided* there were no soldiers in harm's way. Since war by definition involves soldiers being in harm's way, and without the soldiers being there, there would be no war, what this idiot had said was that it was perfectly okay to protest the war, as long as there was no war to protest.

The most shocking thing about such absurd and intellectually bereft statements was the large number of people who agreed with them. I did not know for certain but I suspected Dicky would have been one of those people.

And so Ian wanted to make sure we had reserves of our own before asking him to yield his for the greater good. The reserve tank behind the Sheriff's substation was only about a third full.

Sooner or later we'd have no choice but to venture out of town for supplies. Plus, Ian

knew he'd eventually have to head to Medford to find out what kind of governmental coordination was taking place. So we were left with no alternative but to try and negotiate with the Dickster.

As we entered the station itself, sure enough, Dick was listening to talk radio. And wouldn't you know it but the Reverend Thomas Jericho blared from the speakers. *"For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of God"* sayeth Matthew 24:7. Can you doubt the truth of it? It was prophesied of old. *As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of God; Matthew 24:37. Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before Him and around Him a tempest rages.* That's the Psalms. This moment has been foretold over and over again in the Bible. Thank you Jesus!"

Dick stood transfixed, weaving back and forth. I couldn't hear him over the noise of the radio, but I swore I saw his lips mouth "Amen."

"I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord. Revelations, dear friends; the End Times as foretold are upon us as a great Day of Reckoning."

Now I know I heard him. "Amen!" he shouted.

"Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done," sayeth Isaiah 3:11."

All of a sudden I felt glad Mom wasn't with us.

Ian cleared his throat, trying to draw Dick's attention. The man twitched and blinked, looking around as if unsure where he was. And then his eyes lit on my uncle.

“Behold, he comes as a thief,” he said.

“Well no, Richard,” Ian replied. “I come as the Mayor.”

“As a wolf in sheep’s clothing, then.”

“Old Navy, if you really must know.”

He glared at us – mostly at my uncle – with not-quite seething hatred. “I hear you finally went Socialist on us.”

“Just doing what I needed to do in order for us to ride out this disaster,” Ian replied.

“Which brings me to why we’re here.”

“Peddle your Liberal Commie filth somewhere else.”

“Actually no, Richard. I came here as a Capitalist,” and so saying, my uncle reached into his pants pocket and withdrew a wad of cash.

We’d stopped by the bank on our way over, having no faith in Dick seeing sense and pitching in to help out. James Dugan, the bank manager, had thought we were crazy when we knocked on the door of his house and told him what we wanted, but when Ian explained why, he damned near fell to the ground laughing.

“Here’s five thousand dollars – taxpayer money – to get you to do what anyone else in town would do for no other reason than because it’s right,” Ian said, shoving the wad into Dicky’s grasping hand.

“Everyone else in town’s a fool and a Commie,” Dick-Face replied, counting each bill.

“Even Ronny’s going along with it.”

The man glared at him for a moment, then snorted. “Ron Gibbons is the biggest fool of all. If he wasn’t, he’d have cleaned your clock in the election.”

“That was three years ago, Richard.”

“That’s right,” he said, nodding. “And that means we only have to put up with your liberal ways for one more year.”

I laughed. “Who do you think’s going to run against him?” I asked. “You?”

“Maybe so,” he replied, casting a few visual daggers my way. “My dead dog could run this town better than your uncle.”

“It’s okay, *Dick*,” Ian snapped. “Don’t mind my feelings. I’m just standing right here.”

The human penis snorted again. All-in-all, those snorts were about the most intelligent sounds coming out of his mouth.

Ian pressed on so we could end this silliness and get back outside into air with a higher IQ. “By taking that money, you agree to give gasoline to anyone we say.”

“Certainly,” he smiled, and that was scary. “At the rate of ten dollars a gallon.”

My uncle was an affable man, with bright, smiling, friendly eyes, like my mother. But just like Dear Old Mom, those same eyes could flash into an icy cold stare so quick it’d send chills up and down my spine. Such was the case now as he backed Dick up against the counter simply by walking toward him with those eyes.

“Richard,” Ian began in a steady, measured voice as he stopped about three inches from the man’s face. “Try it. Try it once. And I’ll have you arrested for price gauging. I will see to it we throw you in jail and melt the damned key.” The six-foot-tall phallic symbol stared at him with wide, shocked eyes. He blinked. He gulped. But he did not reply.

“Do we understand each other?”

Dick nodded.

“Fine,” my uncle said, then turned on his heel and left the building. I followed.

As we put enough distance away from the station to avoid being overheard I said: “You know that money’s worthless, right?”

“Yes I do,” Ian replied. “But Richard obviously doesn’t.”

“Want to place any bets on how long it’ll take him to figure it out?”

“No,” Ian said. “But I don’t think I want to be around when he does.”

19

"When we remember we are all mad,
the mysteries disappear and life
stands explained."

Mark Twain

The economy, at best still flat after the crash in 2008, was now wrecked. A solid third of our country had been rendered uninhabitable. Airplanes could not fly, railroad tracks and highways were buried under ash and anything driving on them ceased to work, so the transportation network was immobilized. The power grid no longer existed on a national level because more than half of the switching stations – the half going right across the middle of America – would not function because the transformers were choked with volcanic fallout. The same held true for the cellular and communications networks.

We couldn't export anything if we couldn't move anything. We couldn't build or manufacture anything if nothing functioned. We couldn't grow anything – even if it hadn't been winter – if the topsoil was buried under and/or mixed with a couple *trillion* tons of sterile ash.

The dollar was worthless because everything it had been based on – the intrinsic value of our nation – was gone. In the course of nine days – eleven, if you include the earthquakes – the United States of America had gone from an economic superpower to a Third World country.

In those places where the governmental powers failed to shut down commerce, people mobbed the stores and bought everything in sight until nothing remained. And so store owners of every stripe, from grocery to gasoline and camping to clothing, suddenly found themselves with wads of cold hard cash and not a single thing to use it for, except perhaps toilet paper.

To use yet another example from the first Civil War, by the end of 1864 and into 1865, the Southern economy was non-existent. They had no manufacturing to speak of, other than the weapons their army needed. Their two main cash crops, cotton and tobacco, were unavailable because the cotton had either been blockaded or seized outright by the Union, and the tobacco growing country – Virginia down to Georgia – was either in the middle of a war zone, thanks to Grant in Virginia, or being burnt to the ground everywhere else, thanks to William Tecumseh Sherman.

Confederate money, which the CSA had printed by the bushel, was worth exactly the paper it was printed on. To buy bread in the capitol at Richmond, Virginia, people would take a five dollar bill and hand it to the baker, who would then place it on a loaf of bread and cut a piece the exact size of the bill – if he could get the flour to bake the bread with.

And so if money has no value, then the only real currency you possess is how *useful* you are. Mom understood this right off – after all, who is more useful in a traumatic disaster than a trauma nurse? It took me a little longer. I'm kinda slow.

When everything is great and life is hunky-dory, we have the luxury of accessories – those extra-added bonuses of a society rolling in the proverbial clover. But when the shit is headed downhill faster than you can shovel, there is no time or need or use for professional dog walkers or advertising executives or media consultants or sensitivity trainers or pet psychologists. They serve no useful purpose. They are *useless*. It doesn't make them bad people; it's just that we no longer need their services. They are no longer necessary. Whether or not they were in the first place is neither here nor there.

Before Yellowstone, we placed a premium on celebrity. We valued sports heroes over

real heroes, rock stars over teachers, famous faces over the day-to-day normal, hardworking people who gave of themselves – who served a useful purpose. We gobbled even the most mundane of details about the lives of these cherished few, hanging on their every word and movement, mesmerized by their greatness, hoping and dreaming that somehow the most infinitesimal fraction of it might rub off on us, make our lives better, give our lives meaning. And when they inevitably did something wrong – proved themselves to be human after all – we ate them alive in a cannibalistic orgy of tabloid magazines and television programs, plucking at their carcass as we waited for the next one to fall. And we never had long to wait.

Life's a bitch and then you die. Its seemingly endless drudgery wears us down, leaving us wasted at the end of the day. So we seek distractions, shiny objects to occupy our attention, to keep us – even for a moment – from the dread certainty that tomorrow will just be more of the same; and so it goes, on and on, day after day, as we scurry about in search of the almighty dollar, trying to find some meaning, some purpose to justify it all, until finally, at the distant end of (hopefully) decades, we die.

But when the dollar becomes worthless, when celebrity is revealed to be all flash and no substance, when nothing can distract us from the reality of a disaster of Biblical proportions, our one saving grace – the life ring to which we can cling to keep us from drowning in the mudslide of shit – is our ability to be useful; to serve a purpose.

And most Americans have intrinsically understood this. Consider their behavior in the Midwest whenever heavy rains have threatened to send the Mississippi over its banks. It never mattered what a person did in normal times. When the levy was fixing to break they'd grab sand bags and pitch in. Or if some child was missing, they'd drop whatever they were doing and help

with the search; neighbor helping neighbor during times of need. But these were temporary inconveniences – a few days or a week of hard labor and then a return to the status quo.

Life as we knew it had changed out of all recognition and for all time – at least as far as our limited experience of time. Normal was Hell and gone and would not be back for years to come. There was nothing temporary about it. It was time to grab a shovel or get out of the way.

As the general nature of patients changed from the moderately in need of care to: “Oh come on; now you’re just whining,” Mom developed itchy feet. And knowing Mom, I knew if I tried to stop her or in any way impede her attempt, I’d have her size six shoe prints going up and down my torso. As that was not something on my agenda, I agreed to accompany her to Medford. Ian and Francine went with us. Miss Molly Noodle stayed home.

In better times, Medford had been a sleepy little town with delusions of grandeur; big enough and nice enough to have some of the amenities of a city, with few of the problems. But even a few problems when multiplied by a gazillion will turn into a big damn mess. Yellowstone was the multiplier from Hell.

Those who made it out of the worst of the ash fall zones headed to every point of the compass based upon where they started. People in Northern Montana and Idaho and North Dakota went to Canada, where they were welcomed with more or less open arms. Those in Utah and Colorado drifted south into Arizona and New Mexico or southwest towards Southern California, as did many in Nevada. Word had spread quickly that the prevailing winds were keeping the volcanic crap away from the region, so in a bit of environmental irony, millions had set out for the clean air of Los Angeles. Who knew *that* would happen?

Those trapped to the east and downwind were pretty well screwed. Everyone from eastern Montana and Wyoming through Nebraska and Kansas and all the way into western Minnesota and Iowa had to tramp through over a foot of choking ash. Driving was out of the question. Millions of them never made it.

And the people to the west, like the good Reverend Thomas Jericho in Boise, headed into Washington or Oregon. Seattle and Portland had been wrecked by the earthquakes, and so offered little in the way of refuge. Spokane, WA, in the eastern part of the state fell well within the ash zone and so added refugees to the mix. The Oregon State Capitol in Salem fared little better than its neighbor to the north. Eugene was in relatively better shape, but relative is a relative word. The damage, while somewhat diminished, had been extensive. And so the first more or less undamaged city of any size south of the Canadian border and west of the Cascades was Medford.

We ran into the first checkpoint about three miles north, outside the town of White City, Oregon. A line of yellow school busses blocked US 5 South and a wide variety of what I took to be stalled vehicles filled the median, allowing for little opportunity to try and speed past on the northbound side.

Three armed Oregon State Police officers wearing dust masks stood on our side of the busses. Through small gaps in the barrier I could see quite a few more waiting beyond. We eased up to the roadblock.

One of them, a big brute of a man easily over six-and-a-half feet tall and wide as a good-sized rhinoceros, walked up to my window. "Good morning," he said in a neutral voice.

“Hi there,” I replied.

“License and registration, please.”

I looked at him as if he were from another planet for a moment, and then reached for my wallet. I gave him my ID and asked Mom to hand over the documents in my glove compartment.

“Nevada,” he said, looking at them. “Sorry, but we’re not allowing any more refugees. No more room.”

“We’re not refugees,” I countered. “We’re coming from Gunter’s Gap.” I hooked my thumb toward the back seat where Ian sat behind me. “He’s the Mayor.”

The officer looked past my shoulder at my uncle. Through the rear-view mirror I could see Ian wave. “And the rest of you?” He asked.

“We’re not the Mayor,” Francine answered.

He scowled at her. “Sarcasm is not appreciated.”

“I’m a trauma nurse,” Mom said, understanding what was happening better than any of us.

His eyes moved to her, paused for a moment, and then returned to me. “And you?”

My immediate inclination was to match my cousin’s sarcastic reply by saying I wasn’t a trauma nurse, but good sense and a strong desire not to be pummeled by this uniformed giant made me check my tongue. And then the light bulb went on inside my dim cerebellum and I got what he was driving at. “I’m in construction.”

He looked briefly at Frank as he considered the situation, then nodded once, returned my documents, and said: “Proceed to the next checkpoint. You will be instructed where to go from there.”

20

“The trouble with the world is that
the stupid are cocksure and the
intelligent are full of doubt.”

Bertrand Russell

I dropped Mom off at the hospital and left Ian and Francine at the Jackson County Court House. I told Ian I’d be back in four or five hours. To my cousin I said: “And you, Frank, my four-eyed Sarcasm Queen... Keep your mouth shut.” She scratched under her eye using the middle finger of her right hand. I suddenly developed an itch on the end of my nose, which I relieved – by coincidence – using the same finger.

At the second checkpoint, I’d been informed that voluntary work assignments were being distributed at the City Hall, a couple blocks down the street from the Courthouse. There, I’d been told to head over to the new housing area on the east side of town and talk to a man named Edgar Reed.

I ran into him as he progressed from one crisis to another. He stood about my height and maybe sixty pounds heavier, but from the way he carried himself I doubted any of it was fat. His light caramel head at the moment was covered with a ball cap advertizing *Moose Drool® Brown Ale*, so all I could see of his hair was the salt and pepper of the sides, but I suspected he was bald underneath.

“Are you Edgar?” I asked – mainly to be polite, having already had him pointed out to me by one of the laborers. He said he was.

“How’s it going?”

“Like herding cats,” he replied. “What can I do for you?”

“Thought I could help out.”

“Can you swing a hammer?” He asked.

I told him I could but thought I might be able to help in other ways. I showed him the four cards in my wallet representing the four inspection certificates I possessed: Reinforced Concrete, Post-Tension Concrete, Reinforced Masonry, and Sprayed Fire-Resistive Materials (an official and litigation-neutral way of saying fireproofing).

“Come with me,” he said.

He led me to a series of what appeared to be housing pads, at one of which sat a concrete pump set up to pour. A concrete truck was just backing up. The pads themselves were laid out in roughly seventy by two hundred-foot rectangles, delineated by boards laid on their edge. They were otherwise empty.

“What the Hell are they doing?” I asked.

“That’s a good question,” he replied. He gestured toward a large bald-headed Hispanic man who was yelling at seemingly everybody.

“Why don’t you go find out?” Edgar suggested.

Socrates is my favorite philosopher. That this says something about how much of a geek I am hardly matters.

It has occurred to me there are a number of similarities between this ancient Greek and Jesus of Nazareth. What we know of both comes from the writings of others: Luke, Mark, Matthew, John and a host of so-called experts for Jesus; and primarily Plato, as well as Alcibiades and a few others for Socrates. Both were concerned with the truth. Both took it upon themselves to teach others. And both got into trouble because they pissed off the people in charge.

It is safe to say most of us know what Jesus did, as well as its end result. Whether or not the internal reason for his death was to absolve us of our sins, the external reason was that he made the Pharisees and the ruling Romans very nervous. And so they sentenced him to death.

What Socrates did to incur the wrath of the people in charge is encapsulated in his axiom that wisdom is: *knowing that you know nothing*. This is not to say wisdom is being ignorant. It means nobody (including you and I) knows everything about anything. There are no pure experts. This does not, of course, stop people from claiming to be experts.

There is a great (and often misinterpreted) bumper-sticker-quality quote: *Question*

Authority. That's Socrates. Contrary to popular opinion, it does not mean question those who are in authority; it means question those who *claim to be* authorities.

We've all met them: the cocksure blithering idiots who wrap themselves in the certainty of their own superiority. They know everything about everything, have all the answers and therefore couldn't learn a damned thing if their lives depended on it. There have been those in the past who have accused me of this. And I have been known to throw a quote from H. L. Mencken back at them in response: "*All men are frauds. The only difference between them is that some admit it. I myself deny it.*" All of which is self-absorbed and aggrandizing balderdash. The truth is, I have absolute faith in my ability to be wrong, and so as a general rule I check myself twice – sometimes thrice. I could say something witty about my usually being right, but I need to keep my enormous ego-monster in check, so that would not be prudent.

Sometimes even I am astonished by how full of shit I can be. But – as usual – I digress.

The problem with know-it-alls is that they actually *seem* as if they know what they're doing, and so quite often end up being put in positions of authority. And proving that the people in charge don't know what they're talking about can be risky business. This was as true in Socrates' time as it is today. It's what got him killed.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Problem child number forty seven," Edgar answered.

"All-righty then," I said, and wandered over to the pad. I stepped inside the rectangle and toed the dirt with my boot, which sunk in about three inches with minimal effort.

Seeing someone new to yell at, the so-called superintendent stomped over to me. “What do you think you’re doing?” He barked in accent-free English.

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “But I think I’m looking at a disaster waiting to happen.”

He suggested I go have sex with myself. Mind you, I’m not adverse to masturbation – Lord knows I’ve done it enough over the years – but it didn’t seem an appropriate time, so I declined his suggestion and carried on in my attempt to discover what this knucklehead was doing.

I nodded toward the truck. “Is that sand slurry?”

“No you moron, it’s concrete.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Pouring housing pads. Now get out of my way.”

I stared at him for a moment as a dog might look at a human doing something unusual, and then turned my attention to Edgar. “Are you really going to let him do this?”

“Problems?” Edgar asked as he came into earshot.

“No,” I answered. “Not if you don’t mind completely wasting time and resources.”

The bald ignoramus snorted like a wildebeest about to charge, but refrained from doing so when his boss said: “Do tell.”

“In the first place, there’s no way this is being built per plan.”

Edgar looked to Captain Brain-Dead for an answer. “You said you wanted it built fast,”

he said.

“How fast do you think it’s gonna be if the damn thing collapses around your ears?” I asked.

“I’ve built dozens of these,” he replied. “I don’t need a plan. I could do it with my eyes closed.”

“That may be,” I conceded. “But I doubt you can do it with your head up your ass, which is what it looks like you’re trying to do.” The hairless – and empty – head glared at me with what I guess was supposed to be intimidation, but came off more like drooling idiocy. I checked things off on my fingers. “The soil is way too loose. There’s no vapor barrier. There’s no rebar. There’s no plumbing or electrical. There are no anchor bolts to tie in the walls. Other than that, everything’s perfect.”

Edgar looked at the mental giant. “Well?”

Gorrest Fump scowled at me for questioning his expertise then proved his lack of it by answering the man in charge. “It’s temporary housing so the slab doesn’t matter. The plumbing and electrical we can tie in directly through the walls. And the walls we can tie in with shot pins.”

Edgar looked at me, as if visually passing a tennis volley. “Shot pins?” I asked. “Structural walls with shot pins, really? The ones for non-load-bearing members?” I continued, trying to wrap my head around this monumental stupidity. “Did you not hear about the earthquakes we just had?” I looked at the boss. “Where’d you get this guy?”

“You’re writing checks your body can’t cash,” Genius Boy growled.

“And you’re building something that’s going to hurt people,” I countered. The two men looked at me: one with interest, the other as if he were about to start frothing at the mouth. I’ll let the reader decide which was which. I pressed onward.

“Look, it’s real simple. First off, just how temporary do you think this is going to be? You think everything’s going to be back to normal in a couple months? Try a couple years – at least. Secondly, if you don’t put rebar in the concrete, it will crack. If you place it on loose soil, the foundation will settle, making the cracks wider. If you don’t put down a vapor barrier then the next time it rains, water will get under the foundation, and since water follows the path of least resistance, it will seep through the cracks in the slab, where it will turn to black mold and mildew, which cause diseases, making whoever lives here sick and unable to work. And then the already swamped medical people will have to work that much harder because there will be more sick people to take care of. And that’s if the walls you put in with freaking shot pins don’t collapse and kill them outright.”

“What do you know about it?” Came the intelligent reply.

“Apparently more than you.”

“I’ve poured more concrete than you’ve walked on!”

“Really?” I asked with no small amount of sarcasm. “Then why are you still doing it wrong?”

And that’s when he swung at me. I might’ve gotten hurt had it not been so telegraphed I could have broken for lunch and still gotten out of its way. What else could I do in reply but knock him on his ass?

When the applause from the gathered crowd of construction workers died down, Edgar assisted Numb Nuts off the ground and told him to go away. And then he turned to me. I braced for the rebuke I was sure would be coming. Instead, he smiled and extended his hand.

“Edgar Reed.”

“Jake Campbell.”

Socrates got into trouble because he went after the people in charge. And he did it - I’m sure - by being far more diplomatic than I had been. In any case, I got out of trouble by doing it in front of the guy in charge of the guy I did it to. The most valuable lesson I learned in the military: always delegate authority up.

“Nice jab,” he said as we shook hands. “You want a job?”

“Sure,” I replied. And that’s how I came to be put in charge of building temporary housing in Medford, Oregon.

Societal Interlude #1

Special interests have always whined to elected officials about the necessity or injustice or sometimes both of this, that, or the other issue, whispering sweet (and often lucrative) nothings into their ears at such a constant rate that those officials gave in just to stop the noise (or deposit the check). It has been this way since our Grand Experiment began. As George Washington said, “Few men have the virtue to withstand the highest bidder.”

This of course is not to say it’s always been monetary – but it has almost always been *quid pro quo*. During the health care debate in 2009 and 2010, the negotiations even between various members of the ruling Democratic Party became so blatantly avaricious in the U. S. Senate that the Majority Leader was giving out unashamed bribes to recalcitrant Senators for their vote. They didn’t even try to hide it.

And the rhetoric coming out of the opposition party, the Republicans, was no less *gimme, gimme*. Virtually everything they said and every negative vote they cast was designed to chop at the knees of the Democrats for one simple reason: if the Democrats lost in the next election cycle, the Republicans in our two-party system would necessarily win.

What our elected representatives were doing – and have done for decades – had nothing to do with what was best for the country, unless what was best for the country was also best for this, that, or the other political interest. And why should they?

In spite of all the sound and fury over the abuses of power committed by the Nixon Administration, what changed afterward? What did it signify? Shakespeare had the correct

answer: nothing. They made a huge deal about campaign finance reform, had committees all over the place vying for who could get the most media coverage, and when the dust settled, so little had changed, we had to revisit it again in the Eighties... and the Nineties... and the Twenty-First Century.

The best interest of the country – which, after all, was what we elected them to ensure – would have been to seriously reform the system. The best interest of the politicians was to leave it the Hell alone. History has demonstrated again and again which one they prefer.

Consider the mantra of “it’s to protect the children,” so often spewed by our politicians when any issue came within a country mile of our families. Or try the barefaced lie of “support our troops” from the people who were cutting veteran’s benefits and sending them into combat without adequate body armor. Anyone calling them on their obvious bullshit was instantly and with vociferous righteous indignation shouted down and branded a traitor or anti-family; none of which had anything to do with the best interests of the country.

Consider, then, the question of illegal immigration. The first ethnicity that comes to mind is Hispanic, but they were by no means the only group breaking the law. At the time of the Big Boom, however, there were several million Hispanic people – most of them from Mexico – who were in The United States illegally. To my knowledge, this fact was never disputed.

One would think with so many breaking the law (and that’s what it amounted to – it was called *illegal* for a reason), our lawmakers would have done something about it, but from all indications, one would be wrong. They made a lot of speeches, extolling either the pro- or anti-immigration viewpoint, depending upon which special interest they were pandering to at any given moment, but when it came time to either enforce the laws we already had on the books or

to create new ones, the specter of millions and millions of Hispanic registered voters would scare them away from actually doing anything.

Control (law) without freedom is tyranny; freedom without control is anarchy, and so the best interest of the nation was to fix the problem. The best interest of the politician was to be re-elected. Again and again, decade after decade they proved where their priorities lay.

And we Americans had become so used to it after decades of non-stop hypocrisy and having so much rhetorical smoke and sunshine blown up our butts that we just passed it all off as a matter of course. In short, what they were doing worked, and because it worked, they kept right on doing it. After a while, because we as a people have always gravitated towards whatever works, we adopted the same self-interested and self-absorbed attitude demonstrated so successfully by our politicians. And why shouldn't we?

The problem is: if every individual within a group is concentrating on self-absorbed self-interest, then the group cannot function. And if the group happens to be a nation – like, say, America – what then happens to that nation?

21

“The ultimate result of shielding men
from the effects of folly
is to fill the world with fools.”

Herbert Spencer

I spent the rest of the day straightening out what my mentally-challenged predecessor started. One of the first things I did was demote the guy Nimrod had had as Head Foreman. The reason was simple. The first words out of his mouth when I met him were “Habla Espanol?”

I don’t care what race or color or ancestry or gender or orientation or whatever you are. I’m going to treat you as a human being, just as I would with anyone else – unless and until you prove to be a jerk or a moron, and then I’ll treat you like a jerk or a moron – or in the case of my predecessor, both. I take people one at a time. The reason is as basic as it gets: The Golden Rule.

I want people treating me based on who I am, not what I am; no more, no less. And because of this simple precept and because I try to remain true to myself, I cannot justify treating anyone else any differently. Think about it: why should I give a damn about your ancestry? Why should you give a damn about mine?

I don’t know this for certain because I haven’t done the research myself, but I am told my family history has been traced all the way back through William Wallace and Robert the Bruce (made famous by the movie *Braveheart*) to the year 1066 and the Battle of Hastings, where

supposedly one of my ancestors fought alongside William the Conqueror. Another ancestor – on my maternal Grandmother’s side – was said to have signed the Declaration of Independence. My great-grandmother was said to have been the third cousin of Sir Winston Churchill (which I guess would make me pretty much nothing to him).

All of these facts – if they are facts – make me justifiably proud of my ancestry. This is good for me and makes for interesting conversation at family gatherings. But I have no right to expect – let alone *demand* – that anyone else give a rat’s ass, which is the opposite of what the whole Diversity Training/Awareness balderdash seemed to try and jam down my throat when it forced me to acknowledge whatever comes before the hyphen in Hispanic-hyphen-American or African-hyphen-American, or This-hyphen-That-hyphen-or the Other-hyphen-American.

After all, who your parents are is an accident of birth. It should have, and in my opinion does have no bearing on who you become, because in a free country, who you become is a matter of choice. Our choices are what define us, not the genetic soup over which we have no control. So I don’t care *what* you are, as long as who you are, is a good – and in the case of the post-Yellowstone world, *useful* – person. The rest of it is little more than extra-added detail.

There’s a brilliant soliloquy in the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about the Battle of Gettysburg called *The Killer Angels*, by Michael Shaara, that to me sums up this issue with perfection. The point of it is: the difference between America in the Nineteenth Century and everywhere else in the world was that here in this country you were supposed to be judged by who *you* were, not by who your father was.

In theory, you start with a clean slate from Day One. Because of ignorance and prejudice (not to mention a little thing in our history called slavery), however, the practice doesn’t live up

to the idea, but we don't exactly live up to The Golden Rule, either. Does that mean we shouldn't try?

The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution says everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. I take it this means exactly what it says: you have the same legal rights as everyone else. You will be judged by who you are and what you do, *period*. Nowhere does it say, I need to care one bit about your family history, or that you need to care one bit about mine.

I don't have any problem with Mexicans – or any other nationality – as a group. There's another thing in *The Killer Angels*, a line that has always stuck with me: “*Anyone who judges by the group is a pea-wit.*” I like that.

And I understand why so many people crossed the border in search of a better life. The Mexican government, from the top all the way down, was one of the most corrupt on the planet. They had plenty of natural resources, not the least of which was oil. Before Yellowstone, the richest man in the world was a Mexican oil magnate, but none of that wealth found its way to the Mexican people. If you went to Acapulco or Cabo or any of the other resort towns before the Big Boom, you'd have found conspicuous opulence for about a mile in from the coast, surrounded by abject poverty. If I'd have been born in Mexico, I'd have left, too. I'd like to think, however, I would have done it legally.

Before the United States joined Mexico as a Third World nation, we didn't ask much from the people emigrating here: obey the law, pay your taxes, and learn the language. And okay, going through the legal immigration process was a bureaucratic pain in the ass that more often than not took a very long time. But to come here illegally – to break the law – and then get offended when the legal citizens complained about it, was at best disingenuous and at worst a

slap in our face. Furthermore, if they wanted to become a US citizen, by extension it meant becoming part of us, and you don't become part of a group by ignoring its rules.

Being in construction, I've worked with a lot of Hispanics over the years and about as many of them are good workers as any other nationality, and in many cases, better than a lot of white boys I've known. The main problem I had (and still have) was when people from another country came here and didn't bother to learn English.

It boils down to a simple matter of courtesy. Not doing so was rude. Enabling, in fact encouraging this rudeness to continue, which is what our taxpayer-supported multi-lingual system had done, was flat-out stupid. By not learning the language, they kept themselves separate from the rest of the American people who had. And they did this while demanding to be treated as equal – *Separate but Equal*.

I worked in San Diego for about a year after I left the service, and there it made a kind of sense for certain workers in this country to not understand our language, because it was conceivable they were commuting back and forth across the border every day. And then I moved back to Vegas – a good *five hundred miles* from the border – where there was no way in Hell they were commuting, and I still found about the same proportion of people who couldn't speak English.

If, before Yellowstone, I went to work five hundred miles south of the Mexican border, I would have had no choice but to learn Spanish, just to get by, but here, they could live and work for years without ever learning to speak English, or to speak it so poorly as to be unintelligible. That's just insane.

In any case, Medford, Oregon was almost twelve hundred miles from our southern

border. To me, the fact this foreman couldn't speak the language was unacceptable. If I was in charge, he was of no use to me as a foreman if he couldn't understand me. Naturally, however, because whining was an accepted form of discourse, a certain faction disagreed.

Edgar approached me about three hours after the confrontation with my intellectually bereft predecessor. He did not look happy. "Are you trying to give me an ulcer?" he asked by way of a greeting.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Then why did you fire Pedro Herrera?"

"Uh...", I began, exhibiting my outstanding communication skills. "I haven't fired anybody," I replied, then added: "And who's Pedro Herrera?"

"The old foreman."

"Oh, that guy," I said, understanding. "I didn't fire him. I demoted him. There aren't enough volunteer workers to give me the luxury of firing anybody."

"Why demote him, then?"

"The guy couldn't understand a word I said."

"You don't speak Spanish?" he replied.

"Do I need to?" It finally dawned on me where this was going. "You put me in charge, right?" He nodded. "Then it's not important whether or not I understand him. If he's my

foreman, it's *essential* he understands me." I let this sink in for a moment, and then: "He didn't, so I demoted him and got somebody else who could."

Edgar thought about it in silence for a bit then nodded. "Works for me," he said finally. "Now all I gotta do is make it work for the whiners who complained about it."

"Sucks to be you," I said with no small amount of sympathy.

"You don't know the half of it." And with that, he wandered off, grumbling to himself and no doubt lamenting his lot in life.

We were building three hundred self-contained two-storey glorified barracks buildings, each capable of housing one hundred and fifty refugees in little or no comfort, with seventy-five people and two bathrooms per floor. The building materials were all but commandeered from the local concrete plant, rebar supplier, home improvement warehouse, and lumber mill after Edgar conned them into accepting an IOU from the City of Medford worth about as much as the dollar on which it was based.

The food and water had been seized outright by mayoral edict, as had the tents, blankets and sleeping bags from the three local sporting goods stores and the four Wal Marts within twenty miles of town. I can just imagine the whining it caused.

The proprietors were given the ever-popular *eminent domain* and (as Ian had done with Sammy and his grocery store) told that if they didn't go along with it, when this was over everybody everywhere would know they'd been asked to help during the greatest catastrophe in recorded history and they'd said no. Bad publicity is often more powerful than good, and so the

managers had fallen in line.

The people were going to have to share communal bathrooms – four per building. At least this was the theory. They'd raided both the local home improvement warehouse and a plumbing supplier, and cleaned them out of sinks, showers and commodes, but still only managed to come up with about two hundred of each. This left them several hundred short, a problem that would need to be rectified unless they wanted it to get really smelly.

The refugees these were being built for didn't know any of these details, of course. It wouldn't have been pretty when they found out, so I guess it's just as well events intervened before they did.

They had the land cleared for the first hundred pads and I'd been told Edgar was arranging the removal of the rest of the trees. In any event, we had enough to get us started. While even a hundred may sound like a lot, it's fairly simple to build provided you're organized, have enough people, and have everything pre-staged. Of course, the intellectual equivalent of a Chia Pet® I took over from had done nothing of the sort. I untangled the mess enough so we could start fresh in the morning, and then I went to collect my family.

22

“I don’t make jokes—
I just watch the government
and report the facts.”

Will Rogers

My dear mother – ever a pain in the ass – decided she was going to stay. Intellectually, I suppose I understood it and should have expected as much. After all, she was doing what she did: helping people under the worst of circumstances.

There is another sub-group within *the people who do*, and that is the people who go above and beyond. Firefighters are a good example, as are the police stationed in the worst neighborhoods (although they’re all bad these days), teachers, and inner-city social workers, as well as all emergency medical personnel and every person who has ever worn a military uniform.

It’s why I have always been proud of having served in the US Coast Guard, in spite of the numerous “puddle pirate” jokes and derogatory lines, such as the one from the movie *Navy Seals*: “If I was careful, I’d be in the Coast Guard.” The nine guys I knew who died in the line, did so saving other people’s lives. Everyone who puts on the uniform risks their life for other people, and that’s going above and beyond.

These folks do the impossible for the ungrateful and they are and have been paid far too little for their efforts. We owe them our thanks and a damn-sight more money.

I got why she wanted to stick around, but this was, after all, my mother. The last thing I wanted to do was leave her in the middle of a refugee nightmare. That said; I wanted to risk having her kick the crap out of me when I tried to pull her out of there even less, and so I left her at the hospital, praying to all the gods I could think of she would be okay.

I headed back to the County Courthouse, weaving my truck in and out of the chaos created by far too many people. Talk about ten pounds of crap in a two pound bag! The population of Medford had already doubled since the eruption and looked about ready to triple. At first they housed the people in schools and churches and in public sections of the Medford Center Mall (which proved to be a security nightmare because the shops kept getting broken into), but within a week of the start of the eruption these were overflowing. Some residents opened their homes to refugees, but many, unwilling to allow perfect strangers into their private lives, did not.

With no room left indoors, the remainder moved outside into the cold and rain. A tent city had been set up in the high school outdoor sports stadium several blocks from the courthouse, destroying the field, which turned into a sea of mud within about twelve hours. By the time we got into Medford, days later, it had been mostly abandoned in favor of the asphalt parking lot.

During the first few days after people were forced to camp outside, some well-meaning pencil-pusher had been sorting them according to race, placing whites with whites and Hispanics with Hispanics and so forth, presumably to avoid tensions, but of course it had the opposite effect. In large areas, as for example certain sections of the Medford Center parking lot, it

created a situation where there were conclaves based solely on difference. This in turn begat an Us vs. Them mentality, such that, for example, when one group got fed before another group – in plain sight of that other group – the unfed group (whichever one it happened to be) would whine about the unfairness of the distribution, creating a no-win situation.

Later, as the number of refugees neared the six-figure mark, they abandoned the sorting process altogether, but the damage had been done. Ironically, after they stopped sorting on purpose, the people started doing it all on their own, with like attracting like, which I suppose is just human nature, but in the end, the result was the same: the tensions rose and the pressure began to build.

Hundreds – *thousands* – of people stumbled aimlessly around the city; some visibly frightened, and most stunned, quite a bit like so many ducks hit over the head, with no idea what to do and no one to tell them. Whether or not they worked was strictly voluntary. Apparently, the Mayor and others in charge deemed it far more trouble than it was worth to try and require people to get off their asses, so they just sat there, waiting and trying to wrap their heads around the incomprehensible.

And the garbage! It was everywhere, piled in the streets and parking lots and sidewalks; the lighter stuff blowing in the breeze, the heavier things stacked up like so many junk sculptures created by some demented artist.

I parked on the sidewalk across from the courthouse because its parking lot was filled with a shouting, sign-carrying mob, clamoring for the government to *do something*, as if they could wave their top secret magic wand and make it all go away. The signs seemed to decry anything and everything in the political spectrum from *Food Rationing is Fascism*, to *Housing is*

Racist and *Work Parties are Racist* (although every now and then you'd see a sign claiming this was also *Communist*), to the dangerous idiocy of *Anarchy Now!*, and the abject bullshit whining of *Blame Obama*, as if the outgoing President's "liberal" policies had somehow caused the series of massive earthquakes and the super-eruption.

And there were no small number of religious posters declaring *Repent Now*, and *The End Times Are Here*, and the ubiquitous *John 3:16*. On one side stood a large rectangular white tent made of a thick and apparently water-resistant fabric with a banner for my old pal, the Reverend Thomas Jericho.

His followers (most of whom, I'm sure, hadn't accompanied him on his private jet as he escaped the ash in Boise – those people were all dead) surrounded the tent but did not enter, as though they were oblivious to the inclement weather. They swayed side to side like a human crop of sodden wheat, some raising their arms to Heaven as if praying for God to harvest them and take them to the great silo in the sky. A few looked as though they were speaking in tongues.

Of course, their remaining outside could have had something to do with the line of gentlemen in uniform red jackets who stood in front of the tent's entrance. I didn't see them turn anyone away, exactly, but neither did they appear exactly inviting.

Emblazoned on the back of their red coats was a round white insignia featuring the letter W, topped by a crown and halo. I'd be seeing this more and more in the days to come.

I shook my head in wonder and no small amount of psychological fear, and got in out of the rain. As I was entering the building, I noticed something else I'd be seeing more of by and by; a black, spray-painted graffiti containing just three letters: ZOG. I had no idea what it meant.

I'd be finding out in a little over a week.

If I thought the wet jumbled mess outside was bad, the barely controlled chaos inside the courthouse was worse. And of course Ian was right in the middle of it. So was Thomas Jericho. He was nice and dry.

They sat at a long table atop a dais with fifteen other people, presumably dignitaries of one form or another. Ian sat on one end and the Good Reverend perched just to the left of center next to a woman, who turned out to be Brenda Morgan, a representative of the Governor (who was otherwise occupied with chaos, destruction and civil unrest in Portland).

I saw Frank standing off one corner of the dais near Ian. She waved and I returned it. And then she made stroking motions with her hand, indicating the mental masturbatory nature of this meeting.

The rest of the chamber was filled to standing room only by a mass of none-too happy people; most if not all of which were waiting to be heard. A forty-something woman with untamed hair and wearing some form of cloth dress festooned with all manner of beads and bangles was speaking as I entered.

“...the Northern Spotted Owl is already on the Endangered Species List, and the Oregon Spotted Frog is a candidate. Both reside within the area of old growth forest you intend to clear.”

“Old growth my ass,” I heard a voice say from behind me. I looked over my shoulder and was surprised to see Edgar. “That stand of trees was planted back in the Seventies to replace

the old growth loggers had clear cut.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He nodded toward the woman. “That’s the area we’re planning to build on.”

“Ah, Jesus,” I exclaimed.

Edgar nodded toward Jericho. “He’s here, too.”

“Lovely.”

Before Yellowstone, if you boiled down the various ingredients, I suspect what would have remained was the notion that political discourse in the Post-Watergate Era was little more than professional whining. And I suppose it made a sick kind of sense. You know what they say about the squeaky wheel.

In the fifteen or so years before the Big Boom, it had seemed to me as if a vicious circle had developed between the politicians, the media, and the scandal-happy American public. A politician would make some off-hand remark that may or may not have been the wisest choice of words. Some media outlet or another (be it print, Internet, radio or television) would pounce on whatever was said, getting the jump on the other media outlets, who then pounced harder than the first to make up for lost time, blowing whatever it was out of all proportion and feeding the ravenous beast that was the twenty-four hour news cycle. And the American public would eat it up like so much salacious candy, thus ensuring the practice would continue.

And then because their every word was being dissected by literally thousands of media

entities, the politicians seemed to stop making any attempt whatsoever at giving a straight answer, lest that answer be picked apart – and it would be. Their political opponents would make sure of it. And this went on and on and on, *ad infinitum*, creating a never ending whine-fest.

I recall a carefully prepared statement made by then President Clinton. I believe it had something to do with the Monica Lewinski silliness. He made his statement, said “Thank you,” and then got the Hell out of there before the press could ask any questions. The talking heads made a big deal about just how carefully chosen his words had been, and then in virtually the same breath, proceeded to dissect every single one of them, thus proving the wisdom of the President’s linguistic caution.

I remember another example from a couple years before the Boom. Then President Obama was commenting about financial responsibility in the midst of a recession, and said it wasn’t smart to spend your college money on a wild weekend in Vegas, or words to that effect. Hyper-sensitive individuals (who by coincidence happened to be conservative Republicans) decried the comment as a slight against the great city of Las Vegas, crying their crocodile tears about the damnable injustice of it all. That the Senate Majority Leader happened to be a Democrat from Nevada who was up for re-election that year (2010) I’m sure was also the purest of coincidences.

Naturally, the media picked up on all this, yammered about it for two or three days on however many news channels there were at the time, opined about it in the op/ed pages of hundreds of newspapers and ten times that many Internet Blogs, and whined incessantly about it on every conservative talk radio show in the United States. None of which, of course, had

anything to do with the essential truth of the President's comment: it really *wasn't* a good idea to spend your college money on a wild weekend in Vegas.

I used to enjoy watching Tim Russert, the late great host of *Meet the Press* on Sundays as he kept pushing politicians with question after question, trying his best not to let them off the hook. But he could only go so far before the questions turned into badgering, and so at a certain point he'd move onto the next topic. He tried not to show his frustration. Sometimes he'd succeed; sometimes he wouldn't. I always wanted to ask how he resisted the urge to reach across the table, grab some lying sack of shit politician by the throat and throttle him until he got a straight answer.

The net result of all this professional whining was the creation of a system in which it didn't pay for our politicians to tell the truth. The second anyone had the audacity to try, someone else would pounce on it as a "Gotcha" moment and twist their words; folding and spindling and mutilating them until what remained was a sledge hammer with which to pound the head of the naïve fool who thought honesty might be the best policy. And you could be sure these moments would be dredged back up, amplified, taken utterly out of context and jammed right back down the throats of those same fools when time came for them to be reelected.

So the people we elected to represent us were faced with a choice between blowing smoke up our asses (which was in their best interest), or telling us the truth (which wasn't). Therefore; since honesty clearly was not the best policy in terms of their self-interest and the continuation of their political careers, by simple deductive reasoning, the words coming out of their mouths, day after day through the twenty-four hour news cycle, *must* have been lies. You can call it rhetoric or spin or anything else you may like, but (to horribly misquote the Bard)

dishonesty by any other name still smells like bullshit.

The point is: the whining worked, over and over again – literally thousands of times. Regardless of the means, anything that works thousands of times can be considered viable. Whether it should be deemed as such, well, like most things I suppose it's up to the individual. In any event, because Americans tend to gravitate toward what works, we as a people had adopted whining as a viable means of getting whatever it was we wanted.

Consider the woman who sued one of the fast food giants because she'd spilled coffee in her lap and – oh my God what a shock – that coffee had been hot. She made millions on the deal. People saw this and the, *you-must-protect-me-from-my-own-blithering-idioty* lawsuits started flying fast and furious, generating an equally extreme response from the business community, such that we were inundated by absurdities. And so things like disposal butane lighters needed to come with stickers shouting out the warning: *Do Not Ignite Near Face*. These stickers cost money, which was then added to the price of the lighter and passed onto the consumer, and all because some intellectual amoeba might burn his face off and then sue the lighter company because they hadn't told him not to.

The whining worked. People saw it worked. And so the level of whining grew exponentially.

Sometimes, however, you just have to tell people to shut the Hell up.

“...The animals have rights,” the festooned woman concluded, and it seemed to be the last straw for my uncle.

“I have just one question,” he began. All eyes gravitated toward his end of the table.

“Yes, sir?” the woman replied.

“Are you kidding?”

A furor arose from the crowd – many protesting, but many more laughing and applauding Ian’s question. The woman sputtered. “What?”

“The Spotted Owl? The Spotted Frog? Are you kidding?” He repeated to more applause.

“That kind of cavalier attitude is what has made them endangered,” the woman barked with righteous indignation.

Ian shook his head in wonder and sighed. “Look, ma’am,” he struggled to retain a modicum of diplomacy. “I don’t know if you’re up on current events or not, but if we don’t take drastic steps soon, *we’re* going to be on the endangered species list.”

Bellows of “Alarmist” tangled with equal shouts of “Tree Hugger” and other more profane declarative epithets to form a cacophony of sound.

“I don’t know who that guy is,” Edgar said, “but he’s great.”

I smiled. “That’s my uncle.”

He smiled back. “If you’re anything like him, you and me will get along just fine.”

I was about to reply, but Ian wasn’t done. “Take a walk outside, ma’am. We have thousands of people living on the street. It’s winter. The ash is going to make this winter last a very... long... time,” he continued, drawing out the last three words. “Forgive my bluntness, but

the Spotted Owl be damned.”

The place erupted to thunderous applause and cries to “Call the vote!”

Edgar clapped me on the back and all but yelled into my ear to make himself heard above the uproar. “Looks like you get to keep your job.”

American Interlude #1

The human kind of power is predicated upon two things: the individual's willingness to relinquish their personal authority to another person or group for the greater good, and the implied "or else" behind those in whom the mandate is retained. The latter might be couched in the pleasant verbiage of *quid pro quo*, but like wolves clad in Armani, what lies behind it is, "if you don't do what we ask, we'll do something nasty."

So in the best of circumstances, we walk a thin line between public benefit and private desire. We hope those in whom we delegate this ability will refrain from screwing us, and we vote in the event they do. That's how a representative republic is supposed to work. Without the power of that vote, the only restraint on what those in authority can and will do is their personal sense of right and wrong – assuming they have one.

As an example, during the 2004 Presidential race, I had a number of discussions with friends about the two candidates: the incumbent George W. Bush, and the challenger John Carey. Nobody really liked John Carey, including myself, primarily because he inspired little more than the occasional yawn. But I told my friends that I was going to vote for him anyway, because the alternative was far too dreadful to contemplate.

When asked to explain, I answered by suggesting they look at what Bush and his cronies had already done during the first four years, knowing full well they had to stand for re-election: a war in Iraq we shouldn't have fought, based upon faulty and cherry-picked information about weapons of mass-destruction that turned out not to exist; a peeling back of our civil liberties,

including arguably unconstitutional and probably illegal wire tapping; no-bid contracts to former business associates of high-ranking officials; industries brought in to write legislation supposedly meant to control those who were writing it; the unashamed use of torture. The list went on and on and on. And I told my friends that if re-elected, those people – knowing they wouldn't need to run again due to Presidential term limits – would run amok. The four years between 2004 and 2008 proved me right.

And the elections in 2006 and 2008, which ousted the Republicans who'd been in power, showed that our system worked; it might have taken a few years and it wasn't pretty, but it worked. And then I suppose the argument could be made that it worked again four years later.

On the first Tuesday in November, 2012, the American people did what they have always done: they voted with their wallets. The economy, so thoroughly broken by the previous inept administration, was at best flat, and so the tenure of the nation's first African-American president ended with the election of the first woman president; two firsts from opposite political parties. Whether I agreed with the outcome or not, the system once again worked as it was supposed to. That I believe the result of it working was idiocy of the highest order hardly matters.

Too many ill-informed, tea bag-wearing people listening to too much conservative Talk Radio and swallowing too much misinformation, innuendo, half-truths, and bald-faced lies. Fifty-one percent of the voting public bought it hook, line, and sinker, and so America got what it democratically wanted.

But in the end, it hardly mattered. She didn't live long enough to cause any trouble.

23

“The more the superstitious concentrates upon absurd beliefs and practices, the more indifferent he becomes to the real needs of humanity.”

Voltaire
Homily on Superstition

Over the next week, as Mom continued to stay at the hospital and as I began the process of building shelter for the thousands of homeless refugees, Ian spent his time debating the future of our small slice of American society.

America no longer stretched from sea to shining sea. We were no longer a nation, no longer *out of many, one*. Yellowstone had effectively turned us from one into many American-*ish* islands of humanity. We had been splintered into a thousand pieces, each left to fend and decide for itself what it would become.

Democracy is a wonderful thing, but the Founders knew too much of a good thing could be very, very bad, and so they made us a representative republic, rather than a true one-person-one-vote democracy. The reason was to keep us from becoming swept away by whatever passion of the moment might grip the mob of popular sentiment; the theory being that wise men (and back then, it was all male – and all white) of good standing who would volunteer to put their lives on hold briefly by becoming one of our representatives, would consider the issues on their merits and not be swayed. Since power corrupts, and since the “brief” voluntary service became a lifelong career for many whose ambition and greed outweighed any sense of the public good, however, the practice became pretty much the exact opposite of what they’d had in mind.

And so by the time of Yellowstone, our representative republic had become a twisted, ass-backwards parody of itself where the popular sentiment of the mob ruled.

To suggest our elected officials pandered to this, that, or the other special interest was to invite a response of “no shit, Sherlock. What was your first clue?” One only had to consider the wide-spread use of polling data and focus groups.

What other function have they except to discover where the popular sentiment lies? And what other purpose can this discovery have, but to exploit the information to tailor a political response based upon what is most likely to make the politician popular and, therefore, more likely to be re-elected?

Self-interest is the natural state of the human condition. People like getting what they want, precisely because they want it. Whether it is wise or prudent or in the interest of the many hardly matters. And when a large enough group of people want the same thing, even though said group may be a minority, giving them what they want makes them happy.

The wise career politician knew this, and knew to use this in order to manipulate the masses, and so they gave this group this, and that group that, and the other group some other thing, none of which was in the best interests of the nation as a whole – the many – but all of which made the politician a really popular guy.

But society is made up of the many, not the one, and as the immortal Mister Spock was fond of saying, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.

“... We need to remain sensitive to the needs of minorities and to the diversity and

uniqueness of individual points of view, and their interests. I thank you.” Roberto Gutierrez, a member of the Oregon State Governor’s Council on Diversity whined, concluding a fifteen minute long verbal love fest in which he managed to blow smoke and sunshine up the butts of pretty much every racial, ethnic and/or special interest group with the exception of white people, who apparently were the ones who needed to enhance their sensitivity.

This fact was not lost on the Good Reverend Thomas Jericho. “And what of the rest of us?” he asked.

It was late, well after sunset, and I was tired and needed to get back to The Gap and collapse into a coma, at least for a little while, before returning at oh-my-God-it’s-freaking-early the next morning. But my uncle was occupied with this nonsense and needed me to drive him home, so I stayed. Frank sat beside me in the peanut gallery, offering sarcastic comments at every opportunity.

“Us meaning racist religious wackos, of course,” she said.

“Naturally,” I replied.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean, Reverend,” Mr. Gutierrez said from his position at the center of the table upon the dais where all the dignitaries – including the Reverend and my uncle – sat.

“The rest of us,” Jericho repeated. “The God-fearing citizens of our expanded community who make up the majority.”

What I know of the Good Reverend, I didn’t learn until well after the fact. And I suppose

I may as well admit this was the ostensible reason I came to Boise. I wanted to try and understand how this nut job had attained such a level of legitimacy; how it happened that he slipped through the American Bullshit Detector without revealing just how much of a psychotic racist son of a bitch he really was.

I doubt this comes as a shock, but Thomas Jericho was not the name on his birth certificate. Born August 13th, 1952, Gerald Maurice Smoot, the son of an Eastern Indiana factory worker, grew up in rather mundane circumstances, except for the fact that his father, two uncles, and two grandfathers were members of the Ku Klux Klan. One of those uncles and one of those grandfathers were also ordained Baptist ministers.

You don't normally associate the Klan with a Northern state like Indiana. Perhaps this is why their national headquarters had been located there.

In any event, as Gerald grew to manhood amidst the toxic cocktail of racism and religion, while the KKK gradually slipped into decline during the Seventies and Eighties, a parting of the ways seemed inevitable. Apparently the occasional lynching and/or cross-burning didn't satisfy the burgeoning lunacy of his World Vision. He drifted westward, finally landing at a seminary college in Los Angeles, where he found a home in the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, which later became known as the Aryan Nation. There, he found the writings of Wesley Swift, whom the FBI believed to be the single most significant player in the early formation of the Christian Identity movement.

Christian Identity was based upon the notion that the early European tribes (otherwise known as White People) were the actual descendents of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. They became lost when, in 745 BCE, the King of Assyria deported them out of Israel for having failed

to honor the First Covenant, as given to Moses by God. Apparently, these tribes became the Celtic-Germanic hordes who ravaged the Roman Empire, and then populated England, Germany, France, etc.; in other words, the ancestors of White America. And so they – and not the Jews (who it seems were Edomites, or Khazars, or Babylonians, or some damn thing) – were the actual Chosen people of God. This is what they believed, anyway.

Gerald became fully ordained in 1976, the Bicentennial year. This is significant, apparently, because God warned these lost tribes they would be punished for 2520 years, a number which when added to the date of 745 BCE (because the Common Era started at the Year One and not Zero) gives us a date of 1776.

Don't look at me, folks. I'm not the one who came up with this stuff.

The movement gained national attention when, in 1984, an offshoot known as The Order (named and partially modeled after a fictional group in the racist novel, *The Turner Diaries*, by William Luther Pierce) went on a nice little crime spree, including bank robberies and the murder of talk radio shock jock (and Jew) Alan Berg, before being taken down by the FBI. It resurfaced into the mainstream in the Nineties, when a tenuous connection to former Green Beret and Christian fundamentalist Randy Weaver was unearthed by the news media in the wake of FBI debacle at Ruby Ridge. What wasn't widely circulated was the reasoning behind The Order's crime spree.

One of the central Christian Identity beliefs had to do with the End Times – but not The Rapture, which they didn't believe in. The upshot of the whole Lost Tribes thing was the idea that the Final Battle would be waged between the forces of the Anti-Christ (the Jews and their allies – like, say anyone not white and/or anyone who disagreed with Christian Identity), and the

Pure White soldiers of the True God. The crime spree was an effort to fund the acquisition of enough weapons and the training of enough soldiers so they would be ready when this Final Battle began.

The main problem with their method (aside from the fact of their apparent lunacy) was that once you start committing crimes in full view of the public, sooner or later even the slow-moving bureaucracy of the Federal Government is going to take notice. Once they do your revenue streams' days are numbered.

In 1985, the Identity-based White Separatist organization, *Posse Comitatus* (Latin for "force of the County), who believed there was no legitimate government above the county level, and no higher legal authority than the County Sheriff, was formed in Oregon. A year later, Gerald Smoot joined them.

White Separatists differ from White Supremacists, supposedly, because they believe all races have the right to develop their own culture. They just didn't think these cultures should be allowed to mix, and so they wanted to remove themselves from the racially integrated American society (which they called a Zionist Occupation Government, or ZOG – like the graffiti on the Medford Courthouse) and form a White Only homeland, specifically somewhere in the Northwestern United States.

I mean, come on; just because they wanted to be soldiers in the final battle to wipe America clean of all its non-Jewish and non-white influences didn't make them White Supremacists, did it? Of course not!

Purely by convenient coincidence, looming large among their many arguments with the US Government was the supposed invalidity of the IRS, which sparked a number of Tax

protests. Enter Thomas Jericho and the tax-exempt Jericho Ministries in Boise, Idaho.

Had Jericho (*nee* Smoot) retained his original name, or publicly spouted his racist horseshit, it would have been entirely too easy for the “Zionist” government to tie him to the KKK and Christian Identity, etcetera, and therefore a simple matter for the IRS to close the tax-exempt loophole. And so, courtesy of the necessary falsified and forged documents, and a new public persona, he became the Reverend Thomas Jericho, and the tax-free money poured in by the truckload.

“He means white people,” Ian explained upon seeing the confused expression on Mr. Gutierrez’s face.

This sparked no small amount of grumbling from the crowd and a mixture of disgust and moral superiority on the face of the man he was explaining it to. What the guy didn’t get was the sarcasm with which my uncle had said it.

“That, sir, is highly racist.”

“Yes,” Ian replied. “It is.”

“I am offended.”

“You should be.”

Mr. Gutierrez’s face turned purple. “How dare you?”

“But you should not be directing it at me,” the good Mayor of Gunter’s Gap suggested.

“These distinctions of white and black and brown and so forth are pointless and do not do a

single thing to solve the problems at hand, which, by the way, are rather monumental and require our undivided attention,” he was working up a good head of steam on this one and it made my fatigue fade into a dull throb just behind my eyes.

“We are not diverse, Mr. Gutierrez, Reverend Jericho,” he continued, looking from one man to the other. “We are equal, in that we have all been equally affected by this disaster. And as Benjamin Franklin once said, if we don’t hang together, we shall all hang separately.”

“Go Dad, go,” Frank said with justifiable pride.

Ian’s logic was impeccable; its truth, undeniable. And so naturally, it had no effect whatsoever.

“Like the sheep in wolf’s clothing, you’ve provided us with a perfect recipe for Godless Socialism,” Jericho declared.

“What does God have to do with it?” my uncle replied in what was not exactly his wisest verbal maneuver.

“Ooh, bad move, Dad,” Frank said, stating the obvious.

“That was dumb,” I agreed.

“For that matter, what does Socialism have to do with it?” he added, recovering a bit of his intellect. A bit late, I’m afraid.

“If you do not see the Hand of God in recent events, then you sir are a blind fool,” the Reverend countered. This drew a rousing response from the crowd – a disturbing number of which were clad in the red jackets of Jericho’s private army.

“Ah, but which God?” Ian asked.

“There is but one,” Jericho replied.

“Then why are there so many versions?”

“That is blasphemy!” The exhaltation was accompanied by many shouts of “Heathen!” and “Blasphemer!”

“No, it’s the truth,” my uncle countered, ignoring the epithets.

“And it has nothing to do with the diversity issue,” Gutierrez offered. This drew such a shout of protest from the gallery, I almost felt sorry for the guy – almost.

“Okay, this is getting silly,” I said to my cousin, who replied with the appropriately sarcastic “No, really?”

“I’m sorry, Reverend, but religion is not going to solve our problems. Neither is getting mired in petty arguments about one minority or another getting its needs met. We have to be one, unified in our struggle, or it will be in vain.”

“Yes,” Jericho agreed, which did not fill me with a warm and fuzzy. “We do need to be unified – one nation, under God.”

“Keep God out of it.”

“I shall not!” Jericho stormed. “And if you persist in your atheist sympathies you shall be shouted down!”

As if on cue, Jericho’s red-jacket army took up the chant: “Shout him down! Shout him

down! Shout him down!”

The Mayor of Medford, the Honorable Justin Carter, who'd long since lost control of this meeting, banged his gavel with minimal effect. His cries of “Order!” would have fallen on deaf ears had anyone been able to hear anything above the shouted chant.

Ian tried in vain to reply, but after a few moments of wasted effort gave it up as a lost cause. With one last shout of “You're all fools,” he stood and stormed off the dais, exiting the room through a nearby door.

“That's our cue to bail,” I said, grabbing my cousin by the arm and heading for the exit out the back of the hall.

The odd thing about this exchange was that Ian was by no means an atheist. And while he was also not a “religious” man, this fact did not preclude him from either being spiritual or believing in God. He did not – as I do not – however, believe in religion, particularly when it came to things (such as a government of free people) best left to secular methods.

Human history is painted red with the blood of millions who've been killed because of religious disagreements. But a simple belief in God has had nothing to do with it.

If I say I believe in God and you say you believe in God, then what's the conflict? And as for those who don't believe in God at all, if you believe we were created in God's image, by God's hand, with the choice of free will as part of that creation, then how can you have a problem if someone freely chooses to believe in something or nothing?

And as for religion and government, I think Thomas Jefferson said it best: "*The*

legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." It doesn't get much simpler than that, and yet we continue to have these religious/political arguments as an integral part of our governmental discourse, when it is obvious they have no place within our government.

It isn't, and hasn't been, the belief itself which has caused the problem, but this, that, or the other *version* of belief. Christians have been more persecuted by other Christians than by any other single group in history. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all share the same God – the God of Abraham – and yet we have been killing each other over our various versions of this God for centuries. And to what end? What good has any of it done for any of us?

And this penchant for quibbling (and killing) over religious details is in part why the Framers of the Constitution separated Church and State. There are too many versions. This is a free country and you have no more right to tell me which version to believe in than I have to tell you.

Thank God. Or not. The choice is yours.

24

“Truth resides in every human heart,
and one has to search for it there,
and to be guided by truth as one sees it.
But no one has a right to coerce
others to act according
to his own view of truth.”

Mohandas K. Gandhi

And that’s how it went. Mom stayed in Medford, working more hours than I cared to consider. I was worried enough for her safety and didn’t need the extra-added distress over her sanity if she suffered a psychotic break brought on by overwork and sleep deprivation. I stopped in whenever I could and tried to ignore the steadily darkening circles under her eyes. But I couldn’t ignore the cough.

Called the *Yellowstone Hack*, you could hear it everywhere the refugees gathered, a soft undertone to the noise of the camps. Pretty much everybody wore something over their noses and mouths to keep the ash away, but how do you keep microscopic particles out of your lungs without restricting the ability to breathe?

The airborne volcanic cinders were all but non-existent in Medford and Gunter’s Gap after the first couple of heavy rains, but these people had come through so much of it to get there, it permeated everything they owned. Water was the problem.

We were downriver of everything but the coast, so all of the debris from hundreds of miles to the east washed down to us, contaminating the water supply and clogging the sewers already overworked because of the sudden population explosion. You could take the water out

of the river or pull it from a well, wait for the ash to float to the top, skim it off then boil it, and it was drinkable, but that didn't help the thousands of washing machines needed to keep everybody's clothes clean.

They were able to wash themselves in the rivers and streams downriver from the town (if they could stand the near-freezing temperature, which most could not), and as long as they dried off well enough they were fine. But when they tried to do the same with their clothing, it was like washing in wet concrete. When the ash mixed with water (or the fluid in someone's lungs) it turned into a paste that when dried, hardened like cement.

Their clothes – already permeated by the ash – would pick up more of it from the river, dry, and be stiff as a board – even after it thawed – when they took it off the clothesline, as if they'd used a gallon of spray starch. People did the only sensible thing: they stopped washing their clothes. The result was both predictable and stinky.

And so the ash stayed with them. It was worse for those who found shelter inside the refugee centers (or the hospital), jammed in like sardines. An abrasive grey film covered everything like a deadly blanket. Sooner or later it worked its way into their lungs and the coughing began. My mother was exposed to too much of it.

Gunter's Gap was lucky because we sat atop an aquifer fed by underground springs, so the vast majority of detritus got filtered out by the intervening rock. Our washing machines ran fine (when we had power), save the occasional plugged drain, so I was able to keep myself and my mother in clean clothes, and the Medford hospital had showers for the staff, so she was able to keep herself clean. Nevertheless, we skimmed and boiled everything we drank. Better to be safe than dead.

After Yellowstone

Every morning, I drove into Medford. Fuel was being rationed and travel had been restricted to essential traffic only, but being in charge of a necessary construction project had its advantages, namely: they gave me all the fuel I needed, and so I was allowed the freedom of movement and spared the hassle of dealing with Mr. Richard Coolidge. Sometimes Ian went with me and sometimes Frank went with Ian.

Of course, morning is a relative term. With each successive day, the skies grew darker. Oregon has never been considered a runner-up for the title of “Sunshine State,” but once the ash cloud made its way to us and mixed with the already overcast winter skies, gloom became the average shade of the day. The brightest it seemed to get was roughly the equivalent of twilight, a sort of Dawn’s Early Light on a permanent basis. At sunrise and set the heavy slate gray would turn angry shades of red and purple; frightening and ominous, rather than beautiful and inspiring; a nightmarish sky worthy of Edvard Munch.

Nothing flew. Nothing could for fear the engines would clog with ash and the planes come crashing down like so many dead birds. Where once the air had been filled with contrails now there was nothing but overcast, gloomy sky.

You could still run without headlights – barely – but most didn’t, including me. And then there was the seemingly never-ending cold acid rain.

It had started as rain, anyway. As one day turned into the next, the precipitation went from constant drizzle, to sleet, to snow, to ice as the temperature fell. And in the camps, people began freezing to death. At first, two or three would succumb during the night, with another forty to fifty cases of hypothermia thrown in just for fun. With each successive day these numbers grew exponentially, making the bad situation worse. Pressure continued to build.

Every now and then, others from town headed into the city with us, mainly just looking for something to do. They'd work for a day, maybe two, get tired of the ever-increasing chaos and decide boredom was the preferable alternative. And chaos it was. But it built slowly, and I suppose that's why it got so out of hand when it should have been predictable and therefore easy to head off at the pass.

There's an old biology axiom about a frog and boiling water. If you stick a frog in a pan of boiling water, the thing will jump right out of it, but if you stick it in a pan of cold water and slowly bring it to a boil, the oblivious amphibian will just sit there and cook to death. We should have seen it coming, but we didn't.

The initial problem was food – or, more to the point, the lack of it. But as the violence and looting in the wake of the Port-au-Prince earthquake in 2010 proved, food was a sufficient enough spark.

In the aftermath of the above catastrophe in which an estimated one-hundred and forty thousand people died, armed gangs carrying machetes and other less civilized weapons took to looting out of desperation – so goes the official theory anyway. People don't hack each other to death because they're hungry unless they're resorting to cannibalism, which those people were not. A more cynical individual might suggest hunger was only the symptom. The disease went much deeper.

In Los Angeles, the stated cause of the riots in 1992 was the unjust verdict in the trial of

several police officers who beat Rodney King senseless after he refused to stay down during an arrest. A “concerned citizen” caught the incident on video tape. Why this individual chose to be passive and stand by watching the event rather than shouting and/or making a general ruckus that could possibly have given the officers pause, thereby stopping the beating, is unknown. The person did, however, make gobs and gobs of money off the video tape. And in a manner of speaking so did Rodney King.

The officers were found not guilty by a mostly white jury. It sparked five days of rioting. Fifty three people died, two thousand were injured and the ensuing madness caused between eight hundred million and one billion dollars in damage.

Afterward, politicians fell all over themselves trying to explain the violence. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton, of course, blamed the George H. W. Bush Administration for cutting too much funding to inner-city programs, citing the “breakdown of economic opportunities and social institutions.” Naturally, he couldn’t just leave it at that and proceeded to flap his politically correct gums about culture and values and home and family and church, and on and on, *ad infinitum*, using all the best buzz words, and again demonstrating what Shakespeare said about the tale told by an idiot. He wasn’t the only one.

Then Vice President Dan Quayle started talking about a “poverty of values,” and stating: *“I believe the lawless social anarchy which we saw is directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society.”* He may not have been far wrong.

Do you have any idea how disturbing it is to find myself agreeing with Dan Freaking

Quayle? But of all the quotes I found on the subject here in the Library, his was the closest to what I believe was the truth of the matter. I hate when that happens.

The problem with all of it is, if the verdict was what started the riots, then it stands to reason the violence should have been black – or excuse me, African-American – against White-American. But one of the primary targets turned out to be Korean-Americans, and half of those arrested and more than one-third of those killed were Hispanic-Americans. And just what any of it had to do with stealing TV sets remains a mystery. In my opinion, the root cause of both the riot and a great many of our social ills before and after Yellowstone was a combination of selfishness and the hyphen.

Rene Descartes, the Seventeenth Century French Philosopher who gave us the immortal *I think, therefore I am*, also said: “*Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord.*” From a construction perspective, the truth of this is irrefutable. As they discovered in the Santa Clara Valley near San Francisco, where the recent earthquakes turned the ground to goo through the process of liquefaction, a building is only as good as the ground it’s built on.

As I see it, the fundamental flaw of Democracy and Capitalism (which I did and still do think were the best systems human beings have ever come up with) as we practiced them before the Big Boom, was that greed (selfishness) and dishonesty (bullshit) worked. All you need to do is look at what happened when the economy imploded in 2008 to see the truth of this.

Wall Street had made a killing, trading securities they knew were worthless based on debt they knew was bad. Average consumers were gleefully agreeing to mortgages that anyone who

understood basic math could see they couldn't possibly afford on houses whose value was absurdly overrated. And banks were delighted to provide them the money; even though there was no way in Hell a person making sixty grand a year could afford a five-hundred thousand dollar house. To my knowledge, these facts are undisputed.

Why would they do it? What possible fundamental reason – other than greed – could there be?

Wall Street and the banks did what they did in spite of what they knew for one simple reason: they were making shocking amounts of money. And average consumers took on insane mortgages because the housing prices were soaring into the stratosphere and they were hoping to cash in. Looking at it with the benefit of hindsight, what happened was inevitable. Enter the US Government.

What did they do when the economy dropped into the abyss? They borrowed ridiculous sums of money the taxpayers will be paying back for more than a generation (or would have had Yellowstone not gone *Ker-Floey*, so I guess we've got that going for us) and gave it to two of the three culprits of our economic collapse (who by coincidence happened to be the rich bastards who pay for political campaigns) with damned few conditions, screwing the vast majority of average Americans, who lost their jobs and their homes and had their credit ruined in the process.

I found a copy of the April 15th, 2010 *Rolling Stone* magazine, and an article by Matt Taibbi, where he described how Wall Street giants like Lehman Brothers and Goldman-Sachs – you know, the rich bastards to whom we paid tons of federal taxpayer bailout money – stuck it right up the asses of the city and county taxpayers of Birmingham, Alabama, and broke it off in a

sewer construction scam that was supposed to cost 250 million dollars, and ended up costing 1.3 *billion* just in interest and fees. With financial help like that, was it any wonder the American economy imploded? Apparently, they managed to pull off this monumental thievery by bribing local government officials.

And then, when the economy went to Hell, average American taxpayers had to foot the bill for hundreds of billions of dollars in what amounted to protection money so these same thieving rich bastards wouldn't fail and wreck it any further than they already had. That, my friends, was bullshit on a gargantuan scale, which brings us to the hyphen.

During the Civil Rights movement of the Fifties and Sixties, people were absolutely justified in protesting the absurdity of *Separate but Equal*, the notion that the races, while equal in the eyes of the law, should nevertheless be separated. The concept was stupid on the face of it. How can one be equal if they are treated differently? Through trials, tribulations, beatings and a number of assassinations, this series of laws was struck down. Thank God.

But then some of the very same people who worked so hard to rid this nation of that idiotic injustice turned around and pushed equally hard to force the political correctness of hyphenated Americanism down our collective throats. African-American, Hispanic-American, Native-American, Asian-American, This-That-Or-The-Other-American; all once again separate but equal under the different-sounding but equally idiotic bullshit name of Political Correctness, ignoring the commonality of what comes after the hyphen.

Mega-celebrity and pro golfer Tiger Woods, who had an African-American father and an Asian-American mother, appeared on *Oprah* shortly after winning the Master's. The TV icon asked him – based on his parentage – what he considered himself to be. His answer: “I'm an

American.” This to me was the right answer, but from all indications seemed to be the minority opinion.

We share the fact that we are all Americans, and in times of trouble it is what has always made us strong. Look at what happened after Pearl Harbor. We did what no nation in history has ever done: we fought a war on two fronts – literally two separate wars – and won them both. Look at the extraordinary unity we experienced after 9/11. But if we are too busy being self-centered and greedy and/or “celebrating our diversity” to pay much attention to what we all have in common, then our foundation – what makes us strong – becomes undermined, and by the laws of social physics will necessarily collapse.

America is said to be “the melting pot,” and so it is. *E Pluribus Unum*, Out of Many, One; one nation out of a conglomerate of various and sundry nationalities, creating a greater whole.

If, for example, you take a couple carrots, an onion, some celery, a tasty variety of herbs and spices, throw them together into a pot with chicken stock, chicken, and maybe some rice for extra measure and body, what do you have? You do not have carrots and onions and celery and herbs and spices and chicken stock and chicken and rice. You have soup. Each ingredient may be delicious on its own, but it takes the combination to make a good, strong chicken soup.

If any one of those ingredients – say, the onion – struggles to dominate the others, what you’re left with is a pot full of something that tastes like crap. By extension then, if every one of those ingredients struggles for domination, what you get is a caustic mess and really bad indigestion.

25

"But what was this world created for?" said Candide.

"To drive us mad," replied Martin.

Voltaire
Candide

In this case, the spark was – by coincidence – chicken soup.

In normal times, Medford – like America – did not want for food. This was, after all, the land of plenty. Five dairy farms, three chicken farms and two pig farms dotted the landscape and tickled the olfactory senses. Green beans were a significant cash crop (and yet another source of methane), but as it was January, everything had already been picked.

The grocery stores started out bursting at the seams with food, since the world went *Ker-Floey* right before Christmas – all of which was confiscated by the city, stored at the Medford Center and secured by the small contingent of soldiers from the local National Guard armory. And when the livestock began dying from a wide variety of maladies, good, smart people did the sensible thing and started butchering them and storing them in as many large freezers as could be located.

In addition, a group of on-the-ball County Sheriff's Deputies seized a number of trucks heading either up or down the I-5, including two refrigerated semis carrying frozen chicken, three with frozen vegetables and a third unrefrigerated one packed with rice. Necessity might be the mother of invention, but when the ingredients are staring you right in the face, what else can you do but make chicken soup?

After Yellowstone

Two forty-foot semi-trailers will carry about sixty thousand pounds of frozen boneless chicken. This can be cut into one hundred-twenty thousand half-pound meals, or two hundred-forty thousand quarter-pound sandwiches or – chopped up into one-eighth pound portions – five hundred-eighty thousand bowls of chicken soup. This sounds like a lot until you do the math.

The pre-Yellowstone population of Medford was seventy-seven thousand, with a total of around two-hundred thousand in the surrounding Jackson County. By that fateful Sunday, however, the number had jumped to an estimated one-hundred and eighty thousand in the city alone. I say estimated because nobody knew the actual number. In spite of all their best efforts at containing and stopping the flow of refugees, hundreds slipped in every day.

If you assume (and you know what happens then) the original residents could more or less fend for themselves for the first couple weeks, this still meant over one hundred thousand people needed to be fed each day. If you cut the portion of actual chicken down to a sixteenth of a pound, this creates one million, one hundred and sixty thousand bowls of soup, or enough for one meal a day for about eleven-and-a-half days. Try making a batch of anything for a hundred thousand people just once and tell me how good you do.

The Medford Center held something like twenty restaurants and so it seemed the logical place from which to cook up the hundred thousand-plus portions of food each meal. Emily Fabersham, a sixty-six year-old force of nature from Klamath Falls ran it all.

Where she developed the skill is beyond me, but it brings to mind yet another Civil War anecdote. There was a woman named Mary Anne Bickerdyke, a Quaker widow called Mother Bickerdyke by the Union soldiers for whom she made thousands of gallons of coffee, gathered food such as eggs and chickens, and even assisted in amputations during four years and nineteen

battles.

Bad times bring out both the worst and the best in us. Emily Fabersham, like Mother Bickerdyke before her, fell into the latter category.

Distribution was organized mainly by logistical availability. The Medford Center was the main area, but to try and cram a hundred thousand people in there would have been madness, and so they spread it out as much as possible into a multitude of locations. Some, like the one in Alba Park, were designed to keep the crowd away from essential areas like fire and police stations, the hospital, and the Jackson County Courthouse, while others, such as the ones in Bear Creek Park and Hawthorne Park, were to relieve congestion around the mall so the delivery trucks could get in and out without running people over.

People get testy when they're hungry. The diet they were being given was minimal to begin with: one-half cup of oatmeal and milk in the morning – until the milk ran out and they were stuck with just the oatmeal – and a single bowl of watered down soup with bread at night. Occasionally, they'd get beef stew instead of chicken soup, but most of the beef had been turned into jerky so it would stand a chance of lasting through the winter. They had originally been distributing sandwiches at lunchtime, but those had run out three days before. Variety wasn't on the menu. Boredom breeds discontent, which, when added to a life-altering disaster, breeds trouble.

26

“A little neglect may breed mischief...
for want of a nail, the shoe was lost;
for want of a shoe, the horse was lost;
for want of a horse, the rider was lost;
for want of a rider, the battle was lost.”

Benjamin Franklin

The kindling had been piling up for days. It seemed as if every time I came into town, either first thing in the morning or at some point during the day when I had occasion to leave the jobsite, the protests had grown a bit louder and more insistent. At first, the crowd in front of the County Courthouse was the only one, but it soon spread to Alba Park, a couple blocks away, and then to Hawthorne Park across the street from the Medford Center Mall, and then to the parking lot of the mall itself. There seemed to be no discernable structure, just a mixed bag of pissed off people with a wide variety of complaints, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous.

The only continuity from day to day came in the form of Reverend Thomas Jericho and his followers. And even this seemed a random array from the ever-present *John 3:16*, to placards decrying homosexuals and abortion and racial impurity, and exhortations to *Repent Now!* The one thing I expected to see from them but didn't – news of the coming Rapture – to me spoke volumes in its absence.

If Jericho started going on about the Rapture, then sooner or later it would have to come or he'd lose credibility from all but his most ardent and mindless followers. Or so I thought.

In its place, however, was the notion of *Armageddon* – the Biblical final battle between the forces of God and The Devil. He had plenty to say about that, the gist of which appeared to

be that he thought it was coming real damn soon and that he stood at the head of God's Army. What he didn't advertise, and what didn't become apparent until it was too late, was that if it didn't start on its own, he planned to help it along.

I stayed as far away from the lunatic fringe as possible, right up until that Sunday.

We'd planned to work for the simple reason that it rained and the temperature grew colder almost every day, and the apartments weren't going to build themselves. The sooner we got them built; the sooner people could start getting in out of the cold and wet. The Good Reverend didn't agree.

"Sunday is the Lord's Day," he said through a bullhorn as he and his flock gathered across the road into the site, blocking access. "Keep the Sabbath, sayeth the Good Book, and in this time of tribulation and signs and portents of the Lord's Mighty Wrath, is it wise to defy His Holy Commands?"

The assemblage shouted a unified "NO!"

"In Ezekiel 7:3, the Lord says '*The end is now upon you and I will unleash my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and I will repay you for all your detestable practices.*' My friends, failing to keep the Sabbath is a detestable practice in the eyes of the Lord. Shall we allow it and tempt God's mighty Wrath?"

"NO!" the crowd roared.

I stood watching this next to Edgar. "We're screwed," I told him.

We stood around for about another half-hour as part of a crowd including the other guys who'd come into work, as well as numerous looky-loos who came to see what all the fuss was about. Jericho continued to spew his fire and brimstone message and showed no signs of stopping, so we finally just said to Hell with it and gave in.

Looking back, perhaps we'd have been better off kicking his ass out of town, or better still, locking him inside a windowless cell and throwing away the key, but hindsight has the advantage here. I suppose one could say the same about the German people and Hitler: they should have seen him coming, but most humans aren't equipped to recognize insanity on so gargantuan a scale. And so we let it pass. We'd be paying for that mistake, by and by.

I got this second hand of course, because I was snug as the proverbial bug in Gunter's Gap at the time, but at the Baker Street Middle School serving line (there were fifty-seven in all and this was number thirty-six), the truck carrying the evening's chicken soup ran late due to engine problems. Apparently someone had forgotten to change out the air filter, which became clogged with ash, and the damn thing kept stalling. You know what they say about *for the want of a nail*.

The truck was forty minutes late and the crowd grew more and more agitated as they waited for the servers to set up. Somebody started grouching, then somebody else joined him, and then another, and another. From somewhere in the crowd of an estimated eight hundred cold, wet, hungry and miserable people, someone shouted, "This is bullshit!" Others took up the cry.

I can just imagine the growing terror of the five poor bastards who'd come to serve food to this ungrateful mob as the chants of *Bullshit* steadily increased in volume and the crowd

pressed in around them. They did what anyone would have done: ran like Hell.

Unfortunately, one of them – Mark Hollingswood, aged 35 – made the mistake of trying to drive away in the truck. Rumor had it there was more food in there. The rumor proved incorrect, but this didn't change the late Mister Hollingswood's fate. By the time he made it to my mother's Trauma Center, he was so badly beaten there wasn't anything anyone could have done to save him.

After setting fire to the school for no apparent reason, the mob moved eastward, down the mostly residential Baker Street, wrecking everything in sight as they went. A newspaper rack crashed through the plate glass window of a convenience store that had already been picked clean and closed. The rabble burned it to the ground anyway.

This set fire to three houses and a liquor store in the immediate vicinity. Fourteen suffered smoke inhalation and three others received second degree burns as they attempted to clear out the alcohol before the building exploded, showering the crowd with broken glass and falling debris, killing four and injuring twenty-three more. But at least some of them got to be drunken idiots. The results were predictable.

Frantic calls to 911 went unanswered for twelve crucial minutes as gunfire from some of the frightened residents rang out into the cloudy night. Seventeen people died – twelve of them trampled to death as the crowd scattered to avoid the flying lead.

When the police arrived in full riot gear, it only made matters worse. The officers, showered with rocks and pieces of brick and broken bottles from the exploded liquor store, retaliated by wading into the crowd with night sticks. Tear gas dispersed the throng but the only place for the rioters to go was right into more heavily armed residents bound and determined to

protect their property. Thirty-two more died and one hundred and twelve were injured, including four police officers.

Another officer was killed when some dingbat with a hunting rifle put a bullet through his face shield as he was trying to pull a little girl out of the path of the panicked crowd. They say the shooter was later found to have no less than twenty-three gunshot wounds.

Word spread through the ranks and the officers did what anyone so armed with nightsticks and tear gas and handguns and shotguns would do upon hearing their colleagues and friends had gotten the living crap beaten out of them. They responded in kind.

The total casualty figures for the evening were sixty-four dead, three hundred and forty two injured. One hundred eighty-six of them – mostly Medford locals – were white, but Mark Hollingswood was the only one of those who died.

There were also three reported rapes during the night, including that of a fourteen year-old white girl. The alleged assailant happened to be black. Word traveled fast.

It was not, however, the only thing that went horribly wrong. The date was January 20th, 2013.

American Interlude #2

By now, I would imagine, most if not all of you know what happened on Inauguration Day, 2013. Like the assassination of Lincoln or JFK, when the President of the United States is murdered, people take notice. When two are killed, along with most of the movers and shakers in the Federal Government, word gets around.

Whether the people responsible were Al Qaida, or the North Koreans, or members of the Moose Lodge, hardly matters. In the same manner, the Port of Entry – New York Harbor, Galveston, Texas, or Long Beach, California – doesn't change the fact. Neither does the yield of the three suitcase nukes detonated that day: two in Washington, DC, and one thirty minutes later on Wall Street in New York City. What matters is the result.

Somebody kicked us while we were down. In one fell swoop (two if you want to count the thirty-minute gap) the United States government and the financial center in New York City were effectively eliminated.

That night, the Medford Riots started.

Societal Interlude #2

Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion states: *for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction*. This works just as well at a societal level as it does in describing the movement of celestial bodies.

Take the 1950's, for example. America experienced unprecedented economic prosperity. That this was due in large part to the fact that every other industrialized nation on the planet had been wrecked by the Second World War hardly matters. The fact remains.

Eisenhower sat in the White House. His former soldiers did what good soldiers always do: they followed orders, conforming to the point of near-automation. They did what they were told when they were told to do it, without question, without argument.

Women, who had done just as much as any man in winning the war (short of getting shot at), stayed where they belonged: in the kitchen, barefoot, pregnant, and rattling those pots and pans. And if they happened to get smacked around a time or two, well, that was to be expected. After all, this is where the "rule of thumb" comes from: wife and/or child beating was deemed acceptable, provided it was done with a stick no bigger around than the man's thumb.

African-Americans, who had also sacrificed and contributed just as much to the war effort as their fellow white soldiers, were right back where they started: sitting at the back of the bus, drinking at *Black Only* water fountains, eating at *Black Only* diners, tipping their hats to their southern white "superiors" as they passed on the street. And if the occasional lynching occurred, well, best not to talk about it.

Anyone who did not conform became marginalized, pushed aside or blacklisted. Joseph McCarthy may have been the poster child, but he had not been alone – not by a long shot.

Action: conformity, repression, discrimination. Reaction: the 1960's. Anti-war Protesters, the Civil Rights Movement, Hippies, Be-ins, Owsley Acid, the Summer of Love, Woodstock; these could not have been more diametric opposites from life in the Fifties if it had been planned that way.

There is a biological condition called *homeostasis*. It is Nature's continuous attempt to maintain a balance, to find the middle ground. Everything in the physical world is this way – action, reaction, homeostasis, trying to find and maintain the center. If the predator population in a given area drops below a certain level, the non-predatory animal populations increase to the point where their numbers exceed the available food, and so they starve and die until their numbers go back down and regain balance. This is how nature works.

Everything has its price. I'm sure the deer in the above scenario were delighted at the idea of fewer predators, right up until they began starving to death.

In the same way, the Flower Children of the Sixties were delighted to find they were changing the world. But their reaction to the repressive action of the Fifties was to race headlong toward an impossible Utopian society where everyone and everything was equal and the drugs and sex were free and the Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead held never-ending concerts in the park. The price was drug addiction, AIDS, wacko environmental groups who put Spotted Owls above homeless people, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Disco.

And then there was LBJ's Great Society and Welfare. People were living on the street and starving in the most prosperous nation on the planet. Children in the inner-city couldn't get

the basic nutrition needed to enable them to benefit from the schools they were being bused to in the suburbs. Something had to be done.

Unfortunately, the solution they came up with was to give people free money in a society and a world where *nothing* was free. And so rather than the individual footing the bill, society paid the price, and the price was to have thousands and thousands of people in a nation built upon the principles of hard work with no incentive whatsoever to work. And why should they? They were getting something for nothing.

The system as it was set up – regardless of the good intentions involved – was self-defeating. And the reaction to it – the Conservative drive to eliminate Welfare altogether – was opposite and equally self-defeating because the fact remained that sometimes people needed help.

When Reagan was in office, for example, in an effort to save money, he cut Federal funding for public psychiatric institutions, and required anyone who was not a danger either to themselves or to others be released. And so thousands of people who, although not meeting the danger criteria, just couldn't make it work in the real world (including no small number of shell-shocked Vietnam War veterans), were thrown out into the street. The price was an explosion of the homeless problem. And so the cities and states were left with a serious mess they then had to pay for with money they didn't have, and so they either raised taxes and/or begged and borrowed money from the Federal Government, costing the taxpayers even more than it would have if Reagan and just left well enough alone.

In nature, the point of all – the end result – is homeostasis, and for the most part it works itself out naturally, without any external interference. In society, however, with the squeaky,

whining wheels at either extreme getting all the grease, the silent differential on the axle in between – containing the vast majority of people in America – is neglected and ignored. Sooner or later it's going to break down.

If everything is handed to you, free of charge, then nothing has value, and if nothing has value, then what difference does it make if you act like an asshole?

The vast majority of those eight hundred or so people on the first night of the Medford Riots had done nothing but wait around to be fed and taken care of, choosing to pass the buck of responsibility for their own well-being onto an overtaxed, undermanned governmental entity, barely managing to hang on by its fingernails.

Those people had not worked, they had not contributed; all they had done was complain about their lot in life and the damnable unfairness and injustice of it all, while waiting to be fed. To my knowledge, not one of them was on any of the work crews building what was supposed to become their new and free homes. Not one of them slaved away in the many kitchens needed to make a hundred thousand bowls of soup per day.

They had gotten something for nothing and they had bitched about it. And when they'd been mildly inconvenienced by less than adequate maintenance on a truck by an overworked and underfed individual who had been voluntarily working for their benefit, they set fire to an entire neighborhood. And one of them raped a fourteen year-old white girl. Enter Murphy's Law.

The asshole in question, by sheer genetic chance, happened to have dark skin. That he was an individual screwed up person committing a thoroughly screwed up act on his own and

without influence from anyone with a similar skin pigment hardly mattered to the crowd of justifiably pissed off people who happened to be white. All they needed was the Reverend Thomas Jericho to tell them who to blame.

Even in the best of times, life is a bit like a pressure cooker. What you want and desire and dream chafes against your responsibilities, creating friction. Friction creates heat. Heat causes the molecules of your life to collide, creating pressure. Sometimes the pressure gets to be too much. And if you relieve it too quickly, it's going to explode, just like a volcano.

Before Yellowstone, life in these United States had become a fast-paced chaotic mess that rarely made sense. Our political figures – those we were supposed to trust with our safety and security and well-being – had become objects of scorn, seemingly unable to give us a straight answer about anything, lest their words be taken out of context and used against them. They bribed each other, gave their friends sweetheart deals, abused their authority, clog-danced on the Constitution, and blew so much smoke and sunshine up our collective butts that average Americans had the equivalent of colon cancer.

And it occurred so often over so many years that we became convinced there was nothing we could do to change it. They had rigged the system. And in spite of the best (and most widely-publicized) efforts to fix it, in the end, nothing happened. So with slowly simmering anger and frustration and a resigned expectation of being screwed by the people we elected to represent us, we put our heads down and carried on with life. But we were not happy about it. Pressure built.

The public expression of religion – the squeaky wheel, if you will – had been taken over

by intolerant, manipulative, political, money-grubbing, morally superior and corrupt, hypocritical gasbags, who seemed more concerned with foisting their agenda on the American people than they were in promoting the teachings of a man who was if nothing else *tolerant* of everyone but hypocrites. They used divinity as a wedge to hammer into and separate from themselves anyone and everyone who didn't agree with (or look like) them.

This is not to say *every* Christian or *every* religious person. Just as not every Conservative was a right-wing fascist and not every Liberal was a left-wing pussy, not every Christian was a fundamentalist wacko. Unfortunately, the ones we heard most about were the extremists, because they made the most noise – they were the squeaky wheel.

The media who were supposed to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable;” and to be our eyes into the machinations of the people elected to represent us or trusted with our spirituality, had become instead a combination popularity contest/whine-fest/propaganda machine for whoever paid them the most money or whatever gave them the best ratings. Surely Edward R. Morrow must have been turning triple summersaults in his grave.

And then there was what makes the world go round: money. This is an oversimplification, but the way it broke down was this: the Conservatives believed the way to drive the economy was to put money into the hands of rich people; the Liberal idea was to give free money to poor people. Neither method was worth a damn.

If you put money in the hands of rich people, rather than having it “trickle down” to the great unwashed, all you did was put money in the hands of rich people. Bill Gates was not a K-Mart shopper. You would not see Warren Buffet wandering the aisles of Home Depot searching for a good deal on light fixtures. It was the K-Marts and the Home Depots and the grocery stores

and the Old Navy stores and the Sears stores and the Wal Marts that created the jobs and drove the economy.

New stores needed to be built. People needed to work in them. Other people needed to deliver the goods (made in foreign countries where workers had no choice but to accept \$1.50 a day in wages). All of them needed places to live and eat and recreate – all of which once again had to be built and staffed. And the people who did all this building and working and delivering spent their money in the K-Marts and Wal Marts and grocery stores and Home Depots in which rich people wouldn't be caught dead shopping.

On paper this may have looked like “trickle down” economics, but the rich were not opening these businesses because of tax breaks and governmental incentives. They were opening these businesses because they made money supplied by the average Middle Class Americans they would screw if given half the chance (and a decent profit motive).

Take, for example, the bailout of the airlines following 9/11. The first thing the airlines did after receiving taxpayer money was to lay off thousands of American taxpayers. This was by no means a new phenomenon. It had become Standard Operating Procedure whenever they needed a bump in their stock price. The rich got richer, the poor got poorer and the Middle Class got screwed again and again and again, without so much as a kiss on the cheek.

If instead we gave free money to poor people, or to people who were in this country illegally, all we did was provide them with no incentive to work in a nation built upon the principle of work. And if they didn't work, all they were was a burden taking taxpayer money from other places it might have better served, and costing average Middle Class people more money they weren't getting because the rich bastards were hanging onto it.

And when the economy imploded because of idiotic economic policies on both ends of the political spectrum, what was the solution? They threw gobs and gobs of money at rich people who used it to get richer while downsizing so average people couldn't find a job to save their lives and so they lost their homes and they no longer went to K-Mart and Home Depot and Wal Mart, which eliminated still more jobs and increased the pressure exponentially.

The pressure built, bit by bit, pound per square inch by pound per square inch. By the time of the Yellowstone eruption and the riots in Los Angeles and Seattle and Portland and Pittsburg and Detroit and Medford, people were feeling (as Vonnegut said) like something the cat dragged in, and they were looking for someone to blame.

Because that's what all the whining and posturing and sensationalist media had fostered in us; forget fixing the problem, let's find who's to blame. Toss in the Us versus Them separating hyphen of this-that-or the other goddamned-American and the idiocy of Separate but Equal under a new name, sprinkle it with Religious versus Secular, add a dose of Right versus Left, Conservative versus Liberal, and a pinch of Rich versus Poor, and the one who gets that blame is *The Other Guy*. It's never you or your group. It's never *your* fault. You're a victim. It's the other guys – the other groups. They did it. Because if it's not your fault, then logic dictates it *must be* someone else's. And if someone else is to blame, justice demands they pay for what they did.

Add Tea Parties and right wing radio and people who think it's okay to talk about carrying weapons to a political rally, spice it up a bit with a world-changing cataclysm, eliminate our national political leaders and wreck our financial institutions, and then sauté it all over the fire created by a religious nut-job televangelist who believed he should be at the head of God's

After Yellowstone

own army sent to scour the Earth of all that's unholy enough to disagree with or look different than him, and then give him a pulpit from which to point out all those who are to blame. Set him loose upon a city with far too many shit-scared, pissed off, heavily-armed people and far too few resources, and see what happens.

Part Three

Stand Tall

“For all we have and are,
For all our children’s fate,
Stand up and take the war.
The Hun is at the gate.”

Rudyard Kipling

Getting Down To It

Okay... Now we're getting down to it; the part I've been building toward and avoiding as much as possible; the disturbing part; the part that plagues my dreams and my every waking moment; and the question: did I do the right thing?

As for the last – the question – I suppose any number of pencil-necked academic dweebs, years or decades or centuries down the road will decide. They can all kiss my ass.

Perhaps this is a monument to the people I've lost; people like Ian; people like my mother. Perhaps this can be their epitaph – a three hundred some-odd page tombstone saying: *They Were Here.*

But then again, maybe I'm doing this for me as a last-ditch effort to preserve my sense of self-absorption. Maybe I'm jerking myself off in a final act of mental masturbation. Maybe I'm just whining. Or maybe I'm doing this as an act of contrition, prostrating myself before God or the Higher Power or Mother Nature, begging forgiveness, trying to save my immortal soul.

Horseshit.

I'm doing this because I can; no more, no less. And now it's time to sack up and get on with it.

27

“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”

W. B. Yeats
The Second Coming

The Second Amendment to the Constitution states: “A *well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.*” This seems straightforward and simple, but apparently it’s not. The argument of the pro-gun lobby has concentrated on the second half of the sentence and all but ignored the first. But it is the first, “A well-regulated militia, etc.,” which is the basis for the amendment.

Once the Revolution had run its course, the Framers didn’t want to leave a standing army. The wisdom of this was proven when, a number of years later, the French had their revolution and left one in place. All it got them was Napoleon Bonaparte.

George Washington could have easily become King or Emperor of the United States, had he wanted it. He did not. We should thank him for that.

Still and all, the US Government needed to “provide for the common defense,” and so they chose to go with the militia system to be ready in the event some other nation invaded. This left them with two choices: they could either stockpile the arms to be issued when the need arose, or they could allow the people to do it for them. If they did it themselves, then distributing the arms would take time, which they may not have if an attack came suddenly. In addition, it’s

probably not a good idea to hand out weapons to people who don't know how to use them. Allowing the American people to keep and bear arms solved both problems.

This is all fine and good except for one not insignificant detail: we have a standing army now and, therefore, no longer need a well-regulated militia. And even if we did still need one, the drunken idiot next door is not what I call "well-regulated."

Just as the actual meaning of Socrates' *Question Authority* is something other than what popular opinion would suggest, *well-regulated* does not mean we're supposed to heap all sorts of regulation on gun ownership. It means a well-trained and well-equipped militia. As should seem obvious by the way I dispatched my mother's ex-husband and by what I later led our ad hoc army to do at the Battle of Rogue River, I have no problem with people owning guns. I just don't want the aforementioned drunken idiot to own a bazooka, and so the line needs to be drawn somewhere.

In yet another example of Newton's Third Law, representatives of the gun lobby suggested their eighty year-old grandmother in Weeping Willow, New Hampshire needed an Uzi for home defense, and so the anti-gun people countered with the idea that we should ban guns altogether. Both notions were absurd. But in all this back-and-forth bickering with one side trying to top the other by their level of absurdity, we lost common ground.

Enter right-wing media. With Chicken Little-like cries of "they're going to take away our guns," the Far Right created so much fear Before Yellowstone that people were snatching up weapons and ammo to such a degree that when our world went *Ker-Floey*, we had a population armed to the teeth. And when the riots started, all hope of keeping them well-regulated went right out the window.

We discovered there was trouble at the first roadblock on the north end of town. Ian sat beside me in the front seat, with Bobby Drummond and George Collins sitting in back. As had become a matter of habit after the eruption, I still had Mom's .357 tucked alongside the driver's seat and a box of shells in the glove compartment. Both Bobby and George wore their sidearms in shoulder holsters under their coats, and Bobby carried a twelve-gauge double-barreled scattergun for good measure.

Bobby was fifty-three, bald with a long white beard hanging from his chin like moss; an ex-motorcycle cop and former Navy Seal who'd spent a lot of time down around the border dealing with Mexican biker gangs. George had retired from the Federal Marshals ten years before. He carried an unassuming air like a second skin, but one look into his intense grey eyes put any notion of messing with him right out of your head. Age had not taken one bit of piss or vinegar from either one of them. They'd decided out of boredom to volunteer for the auxiliary police force that had been authorized during the last Medford City Council meeting on the previous Friday. They wouldn't be bored much longer.

We'd been rocking out to a burned CD I had of Luther Allison's *Live in Chicago*. I suppose we could have been listening to the radio, and had we been we'd have certainly heard the news of what happened in DC and New York, but by this point we were so far removed from what was going on three thousand miles away on the East Coast – both figuratively (by the necessity of dealing with our own not insignificant problems) and geographically (by the huge chunk of the United States between Medford and Washington, DC buried under ash) – that the information, while shocking and tragic, wouldn't have meant a whole lot.

In any case, the blues man's blistering guitar licks seemed to require maximum volume. I think our ears continued to ring for a couple minutes after I turned the stereo off as we approached the school bus barricade, and so we did not at first hear the sporadic gunfire.

Every morning for the previous nine days my opening brush with civilization beyond the Gap had been the uniformed giant we met at the checkpoint that first day. His last name, as pinned to his massive chest in the form of a name tag, was Carson, although given his size and the very real possibility he could crush me like a beer can, I'd always called him *Sir*. But on this morning, he was absent. In his place was an officer named Gadson who looked like a kid playing cops and robbers. He couldn't have been more than twenty-two. I wasn't entirely sure he'd started shaving yet. What did seem certain, however, was the fear in his eyes.

"Nobody's allowed in," he said. I couldn't help but notice his right hand on the butt of his holstered sidearm. The other two officers who usually occupied this side of the busses were not in sight. I scanned the area and found them pointing rifles at us, each through a different window of a separate yellow bus, holding us in crossfire.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He blinked and looked over his shoulder but didn't answer. Bobby was the first to notice the smoke. "Looks like we got a fire," he said, reaching his hand into the front seat and pointing off to the southwest.

"A lot of them," the scared kid confirmed.

"What's going on?" I asked again.

"Riots," he answered, and then repeated: "Nobody's allowed in."

“Young man,” Ian began. “I’m Mayor of Gunter’s Gap and I’m expected at the Courthouse.” He pointed at me. “He’s in charge of housing construction.” He hooked his thumb toward the back seat. “They’re volunteers for the police force. Every one of us is needed in there.”

He blinked at us again. Apparently we were overloading his stress-saturated cerebellum. I gestured toward the radio clipped to his belt on the opposite hip from his weapon. “Why don’t you use your radio? Call ahead. Get permission for us to enter. Like the man said, we’re needed.” He blinked again, hesitated, and then did as I suggested. Moments later, he waved us through. I couldn’t help but notice the two riflemen never took their sights off us.

At the second checkpoint, just on the edge of the city, three officers in full riot gear greeted us with the happy news. “It’s a madhouse in there,” one of them said over the background noise of gunfire. “We’ve cordoned off the Courthouse, the Medford Center and the hospital, but everywhere else is pretty much up for grabs.”

“What kind of numbers are we talking about?” Bobby asked.

“No idea, but it’s in the thousands” the officer replied and seemed about to elaborate when his radio crackled to life.

“...All units. We’re losing Medford Center. Repeat... We’re losing Medford Center...”

The officer waved us onward as he turned to confer with his two compatriots. I eased my foot off the brake and continued into town.

The US 5 bisects Medford, with the Courthouse and Alba Park on the west side, Bear

Creek Park to the south, and Hawthorne Park, the Medford Center, and the hospital on the east. The side streets are laid out in a grid which, at the highway, is oriented southwest to northeast.

We got off a couple exits earlier than usual on McAndrews Road and eased down North Riverside Avenue, keeping the I-5 between us and the Medford Center. The black night sky was losing its edge as twilight approached. I hadn't seen the sun since December 25th, and it was now January 21st. It had only been thirty days since the earthquakes started and twenty-eight since the eruption. A month – less than a month – and our world had gone to Hell.

The sky had lightened a bit more, a prelude to the Munchian nightmare. We could see a black column of smoke rising about two miles away, a little south of east at what turned out to be the sports stadium. I guess some resentment over having to sleep in a sea of mud had needed to be worked out by setting fire to the place.

We came upon some more anger and resentment as we turned toward the Courthouse onto the commercial-zoned West Main Street, lined with shops, restaurants and various and sundry office buildings. A gas station sat on the corner of North Central. We were half a block away when it exploded into a gigantic ball of fire.

I slammed the truck into reverse, fishtailing backward on the icy road up to Riverside then turned down it until we came to another cross street going west. 7th was purely residential. Whatever had happened there was over, but the wreckage remained. Three cars still burned, two had been reduced to smoking rubble, and several others had busted out windows. People – presumably residents – lined the sidewalks, many of them armed with a wide variety of weapons, ranging from baseball bats to shotguns and hunting rifles and pistols. They pointed and/or waved them in our direction as we weaved our way through the debris. Some of that debris was

human – or had been before whatever it was happened. They were corpses now.

“Good Dear God,” Ian gasped, taking it all in.

“Don’t think God’s got much to do with it, Mister Campbell,” George replied. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

As we crossed Central, the whole south side of the neighborhood was backlit by the burning gas station. The ignited fuel had flown to all points of the compass, setting fire to a number of other structures, including a couple houses near the intersection. A light icy drizzle fell as it had done for a great many days. I didn’t think it would do much if anything to save this section of town from going up in flames.

We had to cut south to 10th in order to bypass the railroad, and there continued west. Holly marked the eastern border of Alba Park. I eased up toward the intersection with 8th Street to see what kind of mayhem might be occurring.

The park itself was moderately wooded, mostly Ponderosa Pine. Through a gap in the trees we could see a crowd of people carrying honest-to-God burning torches gathered around what looked like a vintage cannon, circa the Second World War, but it did not appear American, like ours in Gunter’s Gap, although its country of origin mattered not one bit.

To the west down 8th we could see another, larger crowd, facing off against a phalanx of police officers decked out in full riot gear. Even from three blocks away we could hear the cacophony of shouts and the two-word chant that seemed to be suggesting the officers perform a sex act upon themselves.

I pulled a u-turn and headed back to 10th, hoping to skirt the crowd and come up on the

other side of the Courthouse. We turned up Laurel Street, but at the corner of 8th saw the hopelessness of our situation. The building sat in a rectangle bounded by Oakdale and Laurel to the east and west, and by West Main and West 8th to the north and south, with its parking lot on the opposite side of Laurel. There must have been ten thousand people at least, gathered in front of some kind of jury-rigged stage and spilling out of the parking lot and onto 8th and Laurel. I didn't see any way in Hell we were going to be able to drive up to the Courthouse.

I looked over at Ian, who stared out through the windshield. "Well Uncle," I began. He slowly turned his head in my direction. "Either we go in on foot, or we go away."

"I vote we go away," Bobby tossed his two cents worth from the back seat.

"I second the motion," George added.

Ian pondered it for a moment, and then: "Motion denied," he said. We all gaped at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Have you lost your mind?" I asked, checking to be sure.

"No," he replied. "We can't keep stumbling around without knowing what's going on. And the best place to find what's going on is in there."

"Shit," I said.

"Well put," Bobby complimented.

"Yes. Well... It doesn't change the fact." Ian looked determined to follow the course, but none too happy. I wanted to do what he suggested about as much as I wanted to be pulled apart by the assembled crowd, but I couldn't escape his reasoning.

“All right,” I acquiesced. “But first we’re gonna stash this truck. We’re probably going to need it to get the Hell out of here in a hurry.”

28

"Religion, which should most distinguish us from beasts, and ought most peculiarly to elevate us, as rational creatures above brutes, is that wherein men often appear most irrational and more senseless than beasts themselves."

John Locke

The 1921 Race Riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma, started because a black man, Dick Rowland, accidentally stepped on the foot of elevator operator and white woman Sarah Page. When he had the incredible temerity to reach out in an attempt to help her regain her balance, she screamed. Being a black man in 1920's Oklahoma, he did the logical thing and ran like Hell. He was arrested the next day, charged with sexual assault, and held at the local Courthouse. The white community shouted for lynch mob justice.

Seventy-five members of the black community, most veterans of the First World War, and all of them armed, took up positions around the courthouse to defend him. When a white man attempted to disarm one of them, a gun went off, sparking the riot. Outnumbered ten-to-one, the black men dug trenches and formed battle lines as the riot raged through the night. Fires

sprang up and spread throughout sections of the city as firefighters were turned away from the affected areas by the rioters on both sides.

Finally, the National Guard was called in. Either by accident or design, they sided with the white people. In any case, they set up two mounted machine guns and fired into the black lines, causing their surrender on June 1st, one day after the riot began. By then, thirty-five city blocks had burned to the ground.

Tallies of the final death toll range from ten whites and twenty-six blacks, to a possible total of three hundred, presumably at about the same ratio – a bit shy of three-to-one, black to white. It took ten years to rebuild Tulsa.

Medford, in 2013, had only a small contingent of National Guardsmen, all of whom had been at the Medford Center, guarding the food, and none of whom had mounted machine guns. The Medford Center – at least from what we heard over the officer's radio at the second checkpoint – had been lost. All that stood between the mob of thousands of pissed off white people and the Courthouse which, in theory, held the answers Ian was looking for, was a phalanx of a hundred and fifty policemen in riot gear, slightly less than half of which were recent volunteers, which Bobby and George would have been had we arrived earlier.

Going in the front through thousands of angry, yelling and probably armed people would have been madness. We did the sensible (if somewhat cowardly) thing by skirting the crowd and approaching the Courthouse from the back.

Discretion is absolutely the better part of valor when faced with hundred-to-one odds.

Following passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, there were seven race riots in the US that year alone. Philadelphia, Rochester and Harlem, NY, Newark, NJ, Cleveland and Cincinnati, OH, and Chicago all burst into racial flames. It was only the beginning.

On August 11th, 1965, Marquette Frye, who happened to be drunk, obnoxious, and black, was pulled over in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles by Lee W. Minikus, a police officer who happened to be white. When Mister Frye failed the field sobriety test, his mother got out of the car and started scolding the officer, as roughly three hundred people in the all black section of town gathered to watch. A rumor circulated that the officer had assaulted Frye, his mother, and his pregnant girlfriend. It grew like wildfire in the stifling summer heat. Violence erupted, lasting six days. Thirty-four people were killed and more than a thousand were injured.

On July 23rd, 1967, police raided an unlicensed drinking establishment in Detroit. When they brought the patrons (who happened to be black) outside in handcuffs, the officers (who happened to be white) were confronted by a crowd of local residents of this coincidentally black neighborhood. Fearing for their safety and being sensible, the officers ran like Hell, took shelter, and called for backup.

At first, the looting was restricted to white-owned businesses, but by the second day, in what I suppose you could call a demonstration of equality, the color barrier had been breached and black-owned businesses became fair game. By the time it was all over on the 25th, forty-three black people were dead, almost twelve hundred were injured, and over seven thousand had been arrested. To my knowledge, no tally exists for the number of televisions looted.

“This is wrong. This is so wrong,” Bobby said as we reached the top floor of the Courthouse.

“Cooler heads will prevail,” Ian said, but it may have been so much whistling through the graveyard.

“I like you, Ian,” Bobby replied. “I even voted for you. Probably do it again. But like so many liberals I’ve met over the years, you are shockingly naïve.”

“Why,” my uncle asked, “because I believe in the essential good nature of human beings?”

The other floors had been empty, at least as far as we could tell. But as the top floor contained the holding cells, it seemed the likely place to find somebody who could fill us in. As we walked through the dark and empty corridor toward the lockup, Bobby attempted to explain reality to Ian.

“From my experience, that ‘good nature’ is a fairy tale we tell ourselves so we can sleep at night,” he said, looking at George for confirmation. The laconic former Marshall nodded, but said nothing. “Me and about a hundred officers from San Diego joined a contingent from other cities and headed down to New Orleans after Katrina. I’m here to tell you, those people were animals, pure and simple. They did not give a shit about anyone or anything. The looting, the murder, the rapes,” he continued, shaking his head in disgust. “Worse than anything I saw when I was with the SEAL Teams. That ‘essential good nature’ as you call it was nowhere near Louisiana. You won’t find it here, either. Expecting to find it will probably get you killed.”

He had me convinced, but Ian dismissed it – or seemed about to before we damned-near

got shot entering the bullpen outside the lockup. Naturally, I was in front.

Three twelve-gauge pumps and two M-16's swung in my direction when I foolishly opened the door without knocking. It's probably a good thing I hadn't eaten that morning (it would have been messy) and an even better thing we'd run low of coffee and so had to ration, cutting my usual morning consumption from four cups to one (my heart might have exploded).

"Easy! Easy!" I shouted, throwing my hands into the air. "We ain't part of the mob."

"Identify yourselves!" Five barrels, five pairs of determined and understandably nervous eyes belonging to five uniformed officers all looked ready to turn my body into a bloody mess.

For once in my life I found myself at a loss for words. What could I say; "Hi, I'm a construction worker?" George, who, with Bobby and Ian, had wisely not been the first through the door and so remained out in the hall where they couldn't be seen (or shot), solved my dilemma.

"Former US Marshall and San Diego PD out here, along with a local Mayor."

The officers relaxed a bit but still didn't lower their weapons as they looked at me.

"Hi, I'm a construction worker," I said with a supercilious wave of my two raised hands.

From somewhere behind the officers I heard a familiar voice. "It's all right, boys. I know this guy." Edgar peaked out from around the corner of the hallway leading to the lockup.

"Hi Jake!"

"What the Hell are you doing here?" I asked, voicing the first thing that came to mind.

Then I added: "Glad to see you."

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” he retorted, pushing his way past the officers who still hadn’t lowered their weapons. “I could ask you the same question,” he added as he held out his hand, which I gratefully shook. I could have kissed him – except, you know, I’m not gay.

Ian, Bobby and George cautiously entered; Bobby and George showing their weapons and making it clear they weren’t in any hurry to use them. I turned around and flipped up my coat to show Mom’s .357 tucked into the back of my pants. “Pull ‘em out slowly,” one of the deputies (whose name we later learned was John Krickenheim) ordered in a voice that didn’t invite discussion. We complied, although Bobby and George seemed none too happy about it.

They turned their attention to Ian who opened his coat and spun around, proving he was unarmed. The five barrels gradually lowered, although the men carrying them didn’t put them aside.

I queried Edgar. “What the Hell’s going on out there?”

“We had a food riot last night. It got pretty ugly.”

“So what’s with the angry mob?”

“Some asshole raped a white girl,” Krickenheim answered.

“Oh, you’re shitting me.”

“Wish I was,” the Deputy voiced his honest regret.

That still didn’t explain what was happening outside. “And?” I inquired.

He hooked his thumb back towards the lockup. “We’ve got him in there.”

“Oh my God!” Bobby exclaimed, knowing in an instant what it meant. I was a little slower.

“Yeah, so?”

“Lynch mob,” George explained in an even but deadly serious voice.

“Jesus Christ,” I swore.

“That pretty much says it all,” Edgar agreed, and then added, “The Good Reverend has been stirring them up for the last hour or so,” when my brain-dead expression seemed to require elaboration.

I re-asked my original question. “So what are you doing here?”

He sighed. “The asshole’s my brother-in-law.”

“Great... Wonderful...,” Bobby broke in as he strode toward the nearest window. Pulling back the heavy curtains, he looked out at the chaotic scene below. “What’s the plan?”

Deputy Krickenheim, who obviously led this unenviable detail, said: “We hold him here until the National Guard arrives.”

“How long ago did you send for them?” I asked.

He glanced at his four other team-members, none of whom appeared happy about anything at the moment. “We put the call out...” he checked his watch. “Eighteen minutes ago.” He conspicuously avoided looking me in the eye.

“Did they give you an ETA?” I inquired, although I suspected the answer wasn’t going to

give me a warm and fuzzy. He didn't answer.

"Well?" Bobby said after a moment, pulling his attention away from the madness going on outside. He still didn't answer.

Another of the officers, Gilbert Gordon, finally pleaded: "Tell them, Krick."

He took a deep breath, glanced at his compatriots, and then admitted: "We didn't get a response."

"What about the Mayor? The City Council? What are they doing?" Ian asked.

"Wish I knew," Krickenheim answered.

"Wish we knew where they were," Edgar added.

"And the Sheriff?" George asked.

Krickenheim shook his head and shrugged. "He was at Medford Center. Last I heard he was headed this way, but..." He let the answer trail off.

Bobby threw open the window, letting in the noise of the crowd. It didn't sound like they were cheering on their favorite team. We heard Thomas Jericho.

"...*I will not look upon you with pity,*" the Good Reverend quoted through what sounded like a bullhorn. "*I will surely repay you for your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know I am the Lord!*" He shouted the last word, performing his best Samuel L. Jackson impersonation. "My friends, the Zionist Occupation Government, with their liberal ways and their Jews and their Heathen Races have been polluting our hearts and our minds and our country for too long. No more!"

“NO MORE!” the crowd echoed, although the roar of ten thousand people sounds a lot more impressive – and frightening – than any echo I’ve ever heard.

“I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries; so sayeth the Lord in Leviticus. In Isaiah, the Bible tells us ‘According to what they have done, so will He repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes.’ We are that wrath, friends, and the hour of Retribution is upon the foes of the Lord.”

“Has it all been like this?” Bobby asked, closing the window and shutting out the Reverend’s amplified bile.

“Pretty much,” Edgar replied. “Blah, blah, blah, retribution. Blah, blah, blah, Lord’s wrath.”

I felt a sinking feeling starting in my chest and ending somewhere in the vicinity of my left testicle. “So... what?” I asked. “The plan is to wait here until something magic happens?”

“I don’t think sarcasm’s the answer,” Ian – ever the diplomat – cautioned.

“Yeah, well, neither is waiting for that mob to come up here and take the prisoner,” Bobby stated the obvious.

“We need to get him out of here,” George agreed.

I’m ashamed to admit it – even this long after the fact – but my own self-interest had gotten the better of me. “Fuck him,” I said, and then apologized to Edgar. “I know he’s your brother-in-law, dude, but if the son of bitch is a rapist, he ain’t worth my life.”

He nodded, but couldn’t look at me, couldn’t, it seemed, bring his eyes up off the floor.

Finally, he shrugged. “He always was an asshole.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Ian declared. “We cannot do it. We cannot even think it.”

“Oh, we’re thinking it,” Krick corrected.

Silence in a room filled with ten people is a palpable thing. It weighs on you like a lead overcoat, or maybe more to the point like some gargantuan behemoth of a moral dilemma. It has been said character is what you do when nobody’s looking. But there were ten of us, and we were all looking at each other, so I guess in this case the measure of a person would be what they decide to do when given a choice between self-interest and the right thing.

The inclination to self-preservation and self-interest is a natural response; the first part of what Soren Kierkegaard, the Nineteenth Century Existential philosopher, called the Either/Or. You either choose what’s best for you, which of course is always the first option that comes to mind, or what’s best for the Greater Good. To him, life in society was a never-ending internal series of either/or questions. To be a good human being and a useful and productive member of society, he thought, was to put the first choice aside and instead choose the second in almost every instance.

Socrates pointed out what should be obvious, but apparently isn’t: it’s not always easy to know what’s right, but it is easy to *do* what’s right, simply by not doing what you know is wrong. If you know it’s wrong to lie or cheat or steal or murder or rape somebody, then don’t do it; simple stuff, just like the Golden Rule.

After pissing off the people in power by questioning those who claimed to be authorities,

and embarrassing them – often in public – by proving they really didn't know what they were talking about (something Jesus had also been very good at), Socrates was brought before the governing body to face charges of corrupting the youth and preaching false gods; charges that had no basis in fact. He was tried by the council, found guilty and sentenced to death.

As he was awaiting execution, friends came to visit and told him the fix was in and they could get him out of there. It would mean he'd have to spend the rest of his life in exile, but at least he'd still have a life to spend. Socrates said no.

His reasoning went something like this: even though the verdict was unjust, and even though he believed and taught that unjust laws should be fought, the law against escaping from prison, regardless of the reason for being there, *was* just, and, therefore, it would be the wrong thing to do. And so he walked out into the middle of the amphitheater, said his last few words, drank the hemlock, lay down and died.

Okay, that was pretty hard core, and if faced with the same situation, I'd have run like Carl Lewis. And so, probably, would most people. Most people aren't Socrates or Jesus (who stopped his Disciples when they offered to fight the Romans that came to arrest him, presumably because he thought it would be wrong to have them die in his place). Most of us never have to face such moral dilemmas, such questions of right and wrong, such either/or decisions. But it is people like Socrates and Jesus who we should look to when faced with situations where the right thing is not the selfish thing.

Just then, my natural inclination was toward saving my ass, and left to my own devices, I honestly don't know if I would have gotten beyond it, but doing so would have been wrong.

I believe in social order. I think it doesn't work very well most of the time, but I still

believe in it. And even though sometimes it infringes upon my personal freedom – something else I believe in – when it’s all said and done, we’re better off with it than without it. This is not to say we shouldn’t keep the order in check, if for no other reason than the fact that it’s administered by infallible, self-interested, and quite often power-hungry people (George W. Bush and Dick Cheney come to mind), but mob justice, while satisfying to the lizard brain within us all, is antithetical to social order. It ultimately leads to only one thing: anarchy.

The people who go above and beyond, particularly members of law enforcement – those brave few who quite often are all there is between us and anarchy – understand the point of the either/or question, whether they realize it or not. Somebody has to choose to do what’s best for the Greater Good because most of us will choose what’s best for ourselves, and what’s best for ourselves isn’t always right.

“Oh, we’re thinking it,” Krick said.

“But you won’t,” George said in his quiet, self-assured way.

He looked at each one of us before responding. “No. We won’t.”

From my experience, there is one major character trait separating those who go above and beyond from everyone else. It lies in the answer to the either/or question. And like the sense of urgency that distinguishes those who do from those who don’t, those who go above and beyond answer the way they do because something needs to be done, and it needs to be done now. Either by accident or design or a simple twist of fate, they are the ones whose job it is to do it. And so they do.

Whether I am one of those people or not I suppose is for others to decide. I like to think I am. I've been in that either/or situation before and I have chosen the latter, time and time again. Sometimes I forget and need to be reminded. But it doesn't mean I have to like it. "Boy does *this* suck," I swore.

"Whatever we're going to do, we better do it soon," Bobby said.

"All right, fine," I agreed, swallowing my self-interested fear and accepting the responsibility and my fate. "In that case, the back way is still open – or it was when we came in here."

"And if it's not?" Deputy Gordon asked.

"Only one way to find out," I said, and having decided to do something, I set about getting it done. "Bobby, you're with me," I continued, taking charge. To Bobby's credit, even though he had field experience, age, and probably a damn-sight more intestinal fortitude, he didn't question my doing so.

Some people lead, some people follow. It's human nature. Some are put in a position of leadership by design; some have it fall into their laps. How one responds is often dictated by natural ability. And I suppose it's like anything else: anyone can be taught a thing, and with enough training can become technically proficient, but just because you've been taught how to play guitar does not mean you are going to turn into Stevie Ray Vaughan.

I think it was Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander of Naval Operations in the Pacific Theater during the Second World War who said: "*If you're in a position of leadership, lead.*" Granted, the person who'd put me in that position in this case was me, and I suppose it could

have just been an example of my ego-driven megalomania, but the fact was, I'd been in the position before.

Krickenheim and his fellow officers had apparently been unable to decide what they were going to do. Their idea of waiting for the National Guard (who they had not heard from in twenty minutes) was at best not a viable solution, and the scene in the parking lot below fairly well shouted (through a bullhorn) that the clock was ticking. Something needed to be done. They just hadn't decided what, so I did it for them.

"We'll get the prisoner prepped," Krickenheim said.

"Good," I replied then turned to George. "Do me a favor," I began, pointing at my uncle. "Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

The linguistically economic ex-Marshall nodded, but said nothing. Ian gave me a nasty look, which I happily ignored as I reached for Mom's .357. "I'm gonna take my gun back, if you don't mind."

Gordon reached onto a table behind him and grabbed two sets of body armor, tossing one to me and one to Bobby. "These might come in handy," he said.

"They might at that," Bobby replied, holstering his sidearm and picking up the scattergun after donning the armor. Even though nothing about it had changed since we entered the room, he still cracked the double barrel to make sure it was loaded. Seeing it was, he snapped it shut then gave me a nod. I stared at him stupidly for a moment, then popped open the cylinder of Mom's .357. Sure enough, it still held bullets.

I spared one last look at my uncle then glanced over at Edgar, who mouthed "Thank

you.” I nodded, turned to Bobby, took a deep breath, and headed out.

29

"I know of no book which has been a source of brutality and sadistic conduct, both public and private, that can compare with the Bible."

Lord Paget

The cold, wet air cut straight to the bone as we eased our way out the back. The sky looked like plate steel with the first tinges of sunrise coloring the horizon, and smelled of burning wood and gasoline, although the column of black smoke from the gas station could no longer be seen. We could hear the noise of the crowd around front but saw no evidence of them as we stood listening for a moment to Jericho's seemingly endless bullhorn diatribe.

“In Matthew, 13:40-42, the Bible says: *As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of God will send out his angels and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* One of those who do evil is there, inside that building, where the heathen unbelievers of ZOG are keeping him from the just retribution of the Lord.

“They are the same Godless people who have wrecked this country with multi-culturalism and Affirmative Action and racial mixing. They are the ACLU and the Jewish-run WTO and World Bank. They have taken away the strong foundation of White American Values and have replaced it with abortion clinics and homosexual neighborhoods.

“And God tried to warn us. He caused 9/11 to get our attention, but we were too busy with our televisions and our Internet and our pornography and our Hollywood movies. And he gave us George Bush to lead the way, but still we did not heed the warning.

“So he sent his wrath in the form of Katrina to lay low one of the most sinful cities in the world – New Orleans, that den of iniquity with its sinful celebration of Mardi Gras; but still we did not heed. And the abortions continued, as did the rampant spread of homosexuality and liberalism and Affirmative Action.

“So He sent us Terri Schiavo and gave us the example of our President coming as a knight on his white steed to save the Lord’s poor child, but he was ridiculed and the Lord’s child was allowed to die; and still we did not heed. We were too distracted by the evildoers of ZOG and the sinfulness of their Devil’s Spawn, the Jew-run Hollywood who gave us as amusements shows celebrating homosexuality like the *L-Word*, and celebrating liberalism with false prophets like Keith Olbermann and that lesbian Rachel Maddow, who ridiculed the true prophets of Rush Limbaugh and Glen Beck and Anne Coulter and Sean Hannity, all sent to us by the Lord to spread the Truth; and still we did not heed.

“And so He collapsed our economy, to rid us of the distractions of the material world so that we could pay attention to what was happening to our country and so we, in fear of his wrath, might rightly turn to the righteousness of John McCain and our Sister Sarah Palin to lead us in

our time of trials and tribulations, but the treasonous liberals instead gave us the Commanding Negro in Chief, Barak Obama. And the Lord said NO MORE!”

“NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE!” the crowd chanted on and on and on, whipping themselves into a frenzy of righteous indignation.

“They are the reason God has brought down his mighty wrath upon us all. And why? Why has God punished us all for their sins? Because, my friends, we allowed it to happen. We let them destroy this country by standing idly by as they brought us all to ruin. I say no more!”

I felt the answer in my toes, even from the other side of the building. “NO MORE!” A sound deep and large and frightening in its unity, echoed again and again: “NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE!”

“They have changed Free Speech to Political Correctness. They have twisted the words ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag,’ into ‘I pledge allegiance to fags.’ No more!”

“NO MORE!”

“They have brought our nation and our people low and denied the Righteousness of our way of life. No more!”

“NO MORE!”

“Isaiah 5:15-16 tells us: *So man will be brought low and mankind humbled, the eyes of the arrogant humbled. But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.*”

“Doesn’t he ever shut up?” Bobby asked.

“Apparently not,” I replied as I scanned the area between ourselves and where I stashed the truck. It appeared empty but there was no telling how long this would last. “Lot of open ground,” I observed.

“Too much,” Bobby agreed. He scanned the side of the building and saw the entrance to what had to be the parking garage. “They gotta have a van down there,” he said, jerking his head toward the driveway. “For transporting prisoners to court,” he added in answer to the stupid look on my face. I mentally smacked myself upside the head for being a low-grade moron and forgetting all the thousands of hours of cop shows I’d watched, and then suggested he go get the others while I got my truck. He nodded and turned, tossing a quick “good luck” over his shoulder as he headed back inside. I hoped I wouldn’t need it.

Jericho’s babbling over the bullhorn faded as I crossed West Eighth and headed for the truck, the echoes reverberating off the buildings and giving them an eerie quality as they chased me away from the Courthouse and toward my truck: *God-od-od-od-od; No-o-o-o-o more-or-or-or-or-or*. But then I heard another, deeper sound off to the east in the direction of Alba Park; a dark rumble of angry voices. I looked toward it and what I saw sent my balls running for cover.

The mob in front of the Courthouse was pure white. The one coming towards me down the street was as multi-colored as you could get, with but a single exception. Had I joined this second group, the Caucasian contingent would have consisted of... let me see... carry the one... add all the numbers... yes! It would have consisted of exactly one: yours’ truly. We were quickly approaching a clash between a bunch of pissed off white people looking for revenge and pretty much everybody else looking to stop them. It wasn’t going to be pretty and I had no desire to stick around and watch it happen. There were an entire atlas-full of elsewheres I

wanted to be. Fate, or at least my uncle, threw what I wanted right out the window.

I made a mad dash for the truck, fumbled the keys, managed to get the thing started, slammed it in gear and hauled ass to the parking garage, running without lights and avoiding the brakes as I careened down the ramp. I found what had to be the security area at the bottom: a section of the back wall cordoned off with a chain-link fence, inside of which, as Bobby predicted, sat an over-sized white and green County Sheriff's van with a mesh of crisscrossed wires running through the thick glass windows, and a cage separating the front from the back. A door at the top of a concrete ramp led down into the fenced section right at the back of the van.

At the moment, no one was there. I waited, trying desperately not to think about what was about to happen up there on the street. I'm delighted to say I didn't have to wait long.

The heavy door leading into the security area burst open and Gordon came rushing through, followed by George and my uncle, then two of the other Deputies (whose names I later found out were Davis and Simpson) followed by a handcuffed black man wearing body armor and a helmet over his torn and dirty t-shirt. His face was bloody and swollen, evidence of the beating he'd received by whoever arrested his worthless ass. Good for them. The last officer (Johansson) brought up the rear with Bobby, Edgar, and Krickenheim. They slammed the door behind them and headed down the ramp, paying no attention whatsoever to the comfort of their prisoner.

Gordon unlocked the gate with one of about thirty keys on a large ring and shoved it open as Bobby, George and my uncle came breathlessly up to me. "Things just got a whole lot uglier," Bobby said.

"I disagree," Ian countered. "I'd say they just got better."

“I’d say you don’t know what you’re talking about,” George countered.

“Will somebody tell me what the Hell’s going on?” I asked.

“We finally heard from the National Guard,” Bobby answered. “They’re on their way with fifty soldiers, along with the Sheriff and about thirty of the deputies from the Medford Center. It’s going to get ugly.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said, and then told them about the other mob coming from Alba Park.

“All the more reason for us to want reinforcements,” Ian said, which may have seemed to make sense on paper, but the reality was quite the opposite.

“Ian, do the math,” Bobby attempted to explain. “Even with the reinforcements it still makes it a couple hundred against fifteen or twenty thousand. A lot of people are going to die.”

“A lot of cops,” George added.

“And for what?” Gordon asked, coming up to us. “That piece of shit?” He hooked his thumb toward the prisoner who was at the moment being shoved none too politely into the back of the van.

“No. Not that piece of shit,” Krickenheim answered as he joined us as well.

“For what, then: the greater good?” I asked, feeling afraid and disgusted and ashamed all at once.

“Who cares?” Bobby said. “It doesn’t change what’s going to happen.”

“And that is?” Ian demanded.

“They’ll arrive in full riot gear with rubber bullets in their shotguns against God knows how many fully loaded weapons and hundred-to-one odds,” Bobby began. “They’ll order the crowd to disperse.”

“Which it won’t,” Gordon added.

Bobby nodded. “Which it won’t.”

“And that’s when they’ll use tear gas,” George said, interjecting his two cents and seven words.

“Won’t that disperse the crowd?” Ian asked, still trying to maintain his position.

“At the front, sure,” Krickenheim took up the prediction. “But the thousands behind them will block their escape, and so there’ll only be one way for them to go.”

“Straight into the cops,” I said, catching on and bringing the point to its conclusion. “It’s like that movie *War Games*.”

“What the Hell are you talking about?” Krickenheim asked.

“And why are we talking at all?” Gordon added. “We need to get out of here.”

“The only way to win is not to play the game,” I said as Davis slammed the back of the van then turned to Krickenheim for orders.

“What do you want to do, Krick?” he asked.

And I suppose that’s how it happened. We all looked at Davis. All of us, that is, except

apparently for my uncle. Had I been looking at Ian, I'll bet I'd have seen him steeple his fingers in front of his pursed lips as he stared into some far off point in space that only his genius mind's eye could see as he considered the logic. I'd have seen him breathe in deep and release the air slowly, then nod to himself as he reached an inescapable conclusion. Maybe he spared me one last backward glance as he turned and slipped away. I like to think so. Not that it matters.

Gordon was the one who noticed as the rest of us were concentrating on our next move.

“Where's Ian?”

30

“Any frontal attack on ignorance is bound to fail because the masses are always ready to defend their most precious possession – their ignorance.”

Hendrick Van Loon

I looked but my uncle was gone. “Son of a bitch!” I swore.

“Where the Hell did he go?” Krickenheim asked.

“Do I look like I’m psychic?” Bobby replied, choosing sarcasm over the string of profanity I knew he wanted to shout.

I didn’t need to be a member of the Psychic Friends Network to hazard a guess. “I know where he went,” I said, and then tossed in a bit of profanity myself. “Goddammit! That stupid, noble moron.” Whether what he did was incredibly stupid or incredibly noble hardly mattered; either way, the result was the same. The others looked at me, waiting for an explanation. “That dumb son of a bitch went to go reason with Jericho.”

“Oh my God,” Bobby exclaimed.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said.

George closed his eyes and shook his head, but said nothing. The three of us knew Ian, knew it was exactly the kind of thing his damnable reasoning mind would think made sense. The cold logic was simple: the white mob was being manipulated by Jericho, and so they were following his lead. If Ian could engage the televangelistic dick weed in a debate, it would be a

distraction. At best it would defuse the situation before it got out of hand. At worst (so I'm sure my uncle thought) it would buy us enough time to get the prisoner out of harm's way, leaving the lynch mob with nobody to lynch and, therefore, no reason to be there, and thus again defusing the situation.

This was of course the purest form of liberal bullshit. Ian was a fool. I only hoped I could stop him before his intellectual exercise turned into a suicide mission. Pointing at the van, I addressed Krickenheim. "My uncle's buying us some time. Let's make use of it by getting that worthless piece of shit out of here," I began. "George, go with them. Take 'em to The Gap. One jail cell's as good as another."

I looked at Bobby, dreading the next part, even as I felt certain what his answer would be. "I can't ask you to follow my idiot uncle," I said. "But I have no choice." In spite of how it turned out, I will be eternally grateful for his response.

"Let's go get him."

The van blew by us as we hurried up the ramp on foot. I had one last look at Edgar staring through the back window and then it was gone, its tires squealing as it sped around the corner. Moments later, three blasts of a horn echoed through the garage, ringing in our ears as it slowly faded, leaving nothing but the sound of our own footsteps. As we rounded the last corner before the exit, another deeper and infinitely more ominous one took its place.

The sky through the wide exit showed an angry red as the rising sun tried to force its way through the omnipresent volcanic clouds; the perfect backdrop for the nightmare scene marching

past. The van had apparently driven right through the second mob, scattering and further inciting its members, whose attention was focused on the direction it must have gone.

We slipped out through the shadows and slid alongside the building, using the bushes lining it as cover. I didn't want to think about what would happen if the multi-colored multitude saw two white boys creeping alongside them.

The crowd had split into two columns, each heading around one side of the building, intent upon catching the white mob in a pincers movement. Whoever was leading them knew a thing or two about military tactics. Somehow, this realization didn't give me a warm and fuzzy. As we crept around the final corner, the two columns paused like dual cocked fists ready to let fly with simultaneous roundhouses into the ribs of Jericho's frenzied host. With their pause came a break in the bullhorn babble as ten thousand heads turned to confront this threat. And in the sudden silence, we found my uncle.

He stood atop what appeared to be a SWAT van – one of those large panel trucks that look like a UPS truck on steroids. In his hand, he held a bullhorn of his own. And in the pause, the deep breath before the twin mobs descended into the bloody abyss, he used it. “HOLD!” he shouted, the echoes ricocheting through the plaza like a verbal gunshot. “Stop this madness!”

Jericho, standing upon the makeshift stage along the north side of the parking lot some couple hundred feet from Ian, replied in an amplified whisper. “The liberal philosopher speaks.” It seemed from our vantage point on the far corner of the Courthouse building as if my uncle's arrival had shaken the Good Reverend; caught him in mid-rant and upset his carefully designed diatribe and its planned manipulation of the crowd. The two opposing forces looked from one to the other in coiled anticipation, electrically charged with deadly stored energy like twin

transformers needing only a hair's breadth movement to send them into a massive short-circuit.

"The prisoner is gone," my uncle said into his microphone. "There's no one for you to lynch, Jericho; no need for any of you to be here."

"You lie," came the bullhorn response.

"See for yourself." Ian replied. He turned toward the Sheriff, standing some twenty yards off to one side, near the center of the phalanx. "Let them in, Sheriff," he said. "Let them check it out. Let them see there's nothing here, and so there's nothing to fight over, no reason to continue this insanity." A murmur rippled through the crowd like a pebble dropped into a still pond as the beleaguered Sheriff did as my uncle suggested and motioned for his men to split the riot-line in the middle, uncovering the entrance to the Courthouse.

"Be my guest, Jericho," Ian offered.

I stood on tiptoe to see the Reverend's response. The televangelistic gas bag just stood there for a moment, his white hair plastered against his head by the constant drizzle, staring at Ian as if his glance could do what his heart and his ego demanded. And when he discovered he couldn't make it happen through the power of his God, he decided on a more mundane and certain method. With a simple nod to one of his red-jacketed minions, he sealed the fate of thousands, including my uncle.

I saw the rifle raised with a slow, deliberate, inexorable motion that will haunt me for the rest of my days. In mute horror, I witnessed the man taking aim, frozen in place by what seemed the inevitable course of this lunacy. I suppose close up, the gunshot would have seemed much louder, but from my vantage more than a football field away, the shot sounded as little more than

a pop as my uncle's head exploded in blood and bone, and most of what was left of my world came crashing down.

FUBAR

Fucked Up Beyond All Repair, or FUBAR, is an acronym whose origins date back to the Second World War. It refers to a state of affairs in which things have been so screwed up by the idiots in charge that any hope of rationality or common sense has been drop kicked right out the proverbial window. There is no salvaging the situation. There is no solving the problem. All one can do is put their head down and survive.

I do not remember what happened next, even now, all these months later. There is a gap of almost an hour, as if the memory has been wiped clean. I suppose it's a defense mechanism or some such psycho-babble bullshit. And after all, what difference does it make? Recalling the utter chaos in the wake of my uncle's demise would not for a single second change the fact. Before the rifle shot, there was a chance for us to step away from the abyss; the possibility cooler heads would prevail and the worst of mankind could be averted, but not after.

FUBAR

It's an odd quirk of reality that something so small as a moment in time or a single bullet can cause so much death and destruction. But as all it takes is a single spark to turn thousands of

acres of pristine wilderness into a maelstrom of fire and brimstone, such infinitesimal bits of human stupidity are all that's necessary to send society straight to Hell.

FUBAR

From what Bobby later told me, before Ian's body had finished its fall from atop the truck, the Sheriff, Richard Cousins, ordered the tear gas. The result was exactly as predicted.

FUBAR

The mass arrayed in front of the riot-line fell back from the choking smoke, with nowhere for them to go. They surged forward again, directly into the line of men clad in full body armor.

FUBAR

The multi-cultural mob to the north charged toward the stage and collided into Jericho's red-jacketed and heavily-armed private security force. One side fired, then the other, back and forth as dozens were cut down by bullets whizzing into the packed bodies. The only way to miss was to shoot straight up.

FUBAR

The white crowd to the southern edge of the parking lot broke to that side, straight into the other half of the pack from Alba Park. Shots were fired, clubs and knives and deadly instruments of as many varieties as there were colors and races of people found flesh and bone and blood and pain.

FUBAR

Somehow, Bobby got me out of there.

31

O wonderful son, that can
so astonish a mother!

Shakespeare
Hamlet

I guess I must have said something about wanting my mommy (or words to that effect), because the next thing I remember, we were in the parking lot of the hospital. I got out of my truck on the passenger side feeling numb and disoriented as if just waking from a strange and mildly disturbing dream. After the madness at the Courthouse, I suppose to Bobby the relative calm of our new surroundings probably seemed surreal, but everything felt that way to me – sensory and emotional overload. One thought and one thought only ran through my mind: find Mom and get the Hell out of Medford.

We pushed through the Emergency Room door and entered a scene worthy of Dante. The morning's violence and carnage may have taken place all over the city, but the results all ended there. Battered and bleeding people stood or sat or laid in moaning confusion, scattered through the too-small area, spilling out beyond the doors. And amidst them all wandered the doctors and nurses and paramedics and orderlies whose job it was to make order out of chaos. I could tell at a glance they were losing the battle.

I found my mother leaning against the Nurse's Station counter, dead on her feet. God knows how many hours she'd gone without rest. Her hospital greens had been stained red so long ago they'd turned to brown, her eyes held a soldier's thousand-yard stare, and she did not at first notice me standing right in front of her.

“Mom... Yo, Mom... Earth to Mother...”

She finally raised her eyes up off the floor and peered in my general direction without focus. She blinked once, then again, and then a deep, rasping cough wracked her body, doubling her over with the effort.

“Jesus,” Bobby swore when I looked at him.

I put my arm around her and tried to find some seat to guide her to, but there were none in the Standing Room Only ER, so I just held her until the coughing subsided. I spied a single bottle of water sitting on the desk behind the counter, stole it, and brought it to her lips.

“Hey, kiddo,” she said in a scratchy voice after I forced some of the liquid down her throat.

“We need to go, Mom,” I snapped.

“Where?” She asked, as if we were in the midst of a pleasant conversation.

“Anywhere but here.”

A young and shell-shocked nurse came rushing up to us. “Mary, we need the crash cart over in the south corridor,” and then she headed off on some other mission of mercy, either not noticing or not caring about my mother’s obviously wasted condition. Mom rubbed a hand through her disheveled hair, smacked herself in the cheek, blinked three times in rapid succession, and then tried to push away from me. I didn’t let go.

“You heard the lady. We need a crash cart over in – where was it again?”

“Somewhere you’re not going to be, Mom,” I said. “We’re leaving.”

“In a pig’s eye,” she replied and tried once again to push away from me with surprising strength.

“Babies in the surf, Mom.” This stopped her – briefly – as she gave me a quick “What?” before shaking her head as if to clear it and then resuming her attempt to carry on with her job.

“Ian’s dead.” She stopped in mid-push and stared at me – but only for a moment. I could see her struggling to process this horrible news on top of all the other bits of horrible, tragic, gut-wrenching information she’d had to sift through over however many hours she’d spent dealing with the results of the rioting since last night.

Triage is a cold calculation. You have to decide in an instant who to help, who to put aside, and who to let die. It’s a decision made without emotion, without compassion, without wasting time and energy on guilt or remorse. Those can come later when it’s all over, when you no longer have to choose between saving one or a dozen. Some people have the capacity. Most do not.

“So are a lot of other people,” she said in dead voice lacking any emotion, and with a violent shove, pushed me aside like some annoying obstacle. I grabbed her left arm and got slapped by her right hand. It hurt. Maybe it was reflex, maybe it was reaction bred of anger, or maybe it was just the only viable solution, but I returned the favor by sending a backhand to the side of her neck.

I received a bit of basic law enforcement training during my time in the Coast Guard, where I was technically a Federal cop by benefit of my being above a certain rank. Part of that training was in self-defense. It keyed on putting people down as quickly as possible. Hollywood notwithstanding, the last thing you want to do in an arrest situation is engage in a fistfight. One

of the moves they taught was a thing called the brachial stun.

A nerve runs up the side of the neck, and if you smack it just right, you'll put the person down quick – assuming they have a neck. My mother did, and so she dropped like a nurse puppet with her strings cut.

There are a wide variety of things I regret doing to my mother over the years. Knocking her ass out, there in the ER of the Medford Hospital wasn't one of them. One of the orderlies – a rather large gentleman – apparently thought it should be. Thankfully, Bobby had my back.

The ex-cop dissuaded the middle linebacker-looking individual from pummeling my ass into a pile of battered goo by forcibly placing the double barrels of his scattergun against the oversized cranium of my would-be assailant. Maximum firepower does have its advantages. To say a crowd gathered quickly would be a gross understatement. The crowd was already there in the packed Emergency Room. All they had to do was turn in our general direction, which they did. I took the opportunity to say a few words.

“Listen up, people,” I said, standing over the unconscious body of my mother. “We need to evacuate. Medford Center and the Courthouse have been lost. A mob of several thousand pissed off people are probably heading this way as we speak. You need to grab what you can, help those who can't move, and get the Hell out of here in an orderly fashion.”

Nobody moved. “Bobby, explain it to them,” I said.

He took the shotgun away from the large man's head, pointed it at the ceiling, and pulled the trigger. “Get a move on, people!”

“Well put,” I told him as the crowd scattered like a broken rack of billiard balls. And

okay, it didn't exactly spark an orderly evacuation, but it did them moving. Two uniformed officers wearing flak jackets came up with drawn weapons and strongly suggested Bobby put down the scattergun. He refused, so I did my best to diffuse the situation.

"Easy guys," I began. "Let's not start shooting at each other." They looked at me, unconvinced and without pointing their weapons away from Bobby. "We just came from the Courthouse," I continued. "It's gone. The mall's been gone. The only secure place left, from what I understand, is here at the hospital." They looked from me, to each other, and then back to me again. One of them, wearing a nametag identifying him as Barber, glanced downward at my mother. "It's okay. She's my mom." This seemed to make about as much sense as putting roller skates on a duck, and so they remained unconvinced. "We do not have time to explain. You're just going to have to roll with me on this. There are several thousand people out there doing all sorts of nasty things to each other. God knows how many are dead. God knows how many are going to die." I let that sink in for a moment, and then added: "We need to get these people out of here."

Maybe it was my powers of persuasion, maybe it was the chaotic chatter they must have been hearing over the radios they each had clipped to their belts, maybe it was the fact that Bobby and I were both wearing flak jackets that matched their own; whatever the reason, they slowly lowered their weapons. "Where do we take them?" the officer whose nametag said Richardson asked.

That was a good and valid question. I could have given them almost any destination within the Jackson County area, because one spot was probably as good or bad as any other. I didn't do that, however. "Bring them to Gunter's Gap," I said, and essentially sealed our fate.

32

"We owe respect to the living;
to the dead we owe only truth."

Voltaire

Mom regained consciousness about halfway home. She was not happy. Luckily, I had not expected her to be and so had her wedged into the back seat between the large orderly who had so recently wanted to pummel my ass into goo (and whose name was Chester Monroe) and one of the larger Docs with whom she worked, an ex-college football jock named Peter McAllister. After telling me on no uncertain terms that she would soon be kicking the crap out of me, she fell into sullen and silent (if you could call sounding as if she were about to cough up a lung every few minutes silent) acceptance of her fate.

We drove at the head of a convoy of twenty-three vehicles of various shapes and sizes, from a Honda Civic to four ambulances and three yellow school busses, and including a psychedelically-painted Volkswagen micro-bus carrying two nurses, one ambulatory patient, two people with injured legs propped up in the back, and one of the Sheriff's Department narcotics officers, along with the driver, Skeeter Willits, who looked as if he might have been transported directly from the year 1967. He would soon find himself gainfully employed as an assistant to Dennis Brown.

In total, I brought two hundred and ten people into Gunter's Gap. We'd barely gotten started. By the time of the Battle of Rogue River, the population would grow from a pre-Yellowstone six hundred and fifty to well over two thousand.

The local residents greeted the convoy with mute interest as they watched our arrival from porches and yards and sidewalks lining the road all the way from the bridge to the town square. Over the coming days, I would hear more than a few grumbles (and more than a few of those would come from Ronny Gibbons and Dick-Face Coolidge). For the most part, however, and to their great credit, people accepted this latest development as just another in a series of major changes to life After Yellowstone.

They were not – by any stretch of the imagination – happy about the newest occupant of our meager jail. Can't say as I blame them; I wasn't too thrilled about it, either. But what other choice was there?

Sure, I suppose I could have directed Krickenheim and company to any other town in Jackson County, but what right did I have to do it? For that matter, what right did I have to direct anything or anybody? And yeah, okay, I chose to take charge of the situation there in the lockup. Nobody asked me to do it. And while I suppose I could offer some excuse about having the burden of responsibility thrust upon me by circumstances beyond my control, it would all be so much whining bullshit. For whatever reason, be it ego or a lust for power or the chance for some really good woe-is-me martyrdom, I made the conscious decision to take the bull by the horns. For good or ill, as Harry Truman said, the buck stops here, and so I guess the blame for everything after the Medford Riots – all the hardship and sorrow and tragedy and death – falls squarely into my lap. So be it.

As we entered town, however, the last thing on my mind was any of that happy horseshit. I was entirely too busy thinking about the conversation I needed to have with my cousin.

When we got home – and that’s what I considered Ian’s house by this time, *home* – Mom and I were the only ones left in the truck. She wasn’t speaking to me and stormed into the house upon our arrival.

The large orderly and the almost as large doctor had gotten out at the elementary school, which we were using as a temporary refugee center until we could find accommodations for our new arrivals. I’d dropped Bobby off at the Sheriff’s substation, so he could check in with George before heading to his own place.

I sat there in the driveway staring out the windshield, trying not to think. Thought would have meant dealing with it all.

There are a plethora of platitudes about life being like a box of chocolates, or what you make of it, or any of a hundred blow-sunshine-up-your-butt, glass half-full homilies meant to soften the cold hard reality, because let’s face it: reality’s a bitch. None of them help much.

What used to be my life was gone, and I had not dealt with it. On the way to Gunter’s Gap, I had taken someone else’s life, and while he was a worthless asshole, it still came with a price. I had not dealt with it. The United States of America had changed beyond all recognition. I had not dealt with it. My uncle – the closest thing to a father I’d ever known – had just had his head blown off right in front of me. I didn’t want to deal with it. Fate, or rather the insistent knocking of my cousin on the driver’s side window, didn’t give me a choice.

I hit the power button and let in the cold air.

“Earth to Dumbass, what are you doing?” she said, in her ever-so pleasant way. I looked at her but couldn’t answer. “Hello? Is anybody home?” she asked, lightly knocking on my skull.

“Hey, Frank,” I said, finally, in a half-whisper.

“What are you doing home? And what did you do to your Mom? Must have been something stupid, ‘cause she sure is pissed off.” I didn’t respond, but it hardly fazed her. “And what did you do with my Dad? Is he out playing Mayor, or something?”

I closed my eyes and sighed then answered by opening my door and getting out. She looked at me as if I’d suddenly grown antennae. “What are you doing, Nimrod?” I shut the door with my body and leaned heavily on the truck.

“Where’s my Dad?”

I should have said something. My lips tried to form words, but nothing came out. It was my job to provide her with strength and comfort, to be there, to help her through the worst possible moment. I failed. Finally, I managed to choke “I’m so sorry, Frank.”

In the end, she comforted me.

American Interlude #3

For security purposes, in times when the vast majority of government officials are together in a single spot (as for example when both houses of Congress are gathered for the State of the Union) a Cabinet member is sequestered in some undisclosed location in the event a massive tragedy occurs. This is how the Secretary of Agriculture suddenly became our President.

Madeline White, a one-time colleague of the ill-fated incoming President, knew little about agriculture and even less about governing a nation in a time of absolute tragedy, but by default, she is the one we got. It hardly mattered.

Following the terrible events of January 21st, 2013, she set up shop in Boston, which had the coincidental good fortune to be where she happened to be when Washington and New York City suddenly developed mushroom clouds, and the physical good fortune of being free of both ash and radioactive fallout. She then gave a speech almost no one heard because the communication lines once spreading from sea to shining sea only covered the eastern third of the country, and two of its largest population centers were glowing. Somehow, word got disseminated to the Western US, sometimes via the Internet using dial-up modem routed through those few areas along the southern border where telephone communications still functioned, and sometimes via paper correspondence sent through a long, circuitous route through the unaffected states like a slightly (but only slightly) modernized version of the Pony Express.

In this speech, she reiterated the outgoing (and now dead) President's order for all

essential public utilities to remain operational, the declaration of nationwide Martial Law, with all civil authorities to be obeyed, and the admonition to remain calm. Like any of it mattered. Like any of us way out on the West Coast paid any attention, because there was little or nothing she could have said to any of us that would have in any way, shape, or form helped. We were entirely too busy killing each other.

33

“Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling together
In one society.”

William Wordsworth

We had three essential problems: one of ignorance, one of assumptions, and one of logistics. None of them were going to solve themselves. They did, however, make it damned-near impossible to sleep.

My brain has always required stimulation. Without stimulus of one form or another, it simply shuts itself off, which could explain my general lack of interest in commercial television. It also caused me no small amount of trouble during the monotony of high school, where the homogenized crap passing for knowledge barely prevented me from falling into a coma. Only a constant supply of coffee and the threat of serious consequences kept me from having the same difficulty during the hundreds of endlessly mind-numbing training lectures I had to sit through throughout eight years in the military.

I don't consider this a bad thing. I'll take active brain function over drooling any day, but like everything else, it comes with a price: sometimes the damned thing won't shut the Hell up.

Such was the case that night. I tossed and turned, despite having tried to drink myself into a stupor, but gave it up as a lost cause after a few hours and stumbled downstairs in search of sobering coffee.

In one corner of Ian's kitchen sat an old pot-bellied stove he'd picked up years ago in some antique shop in Portland. He'd used it occasionally during winter, just to cut the chill in the drafty old house. We used it to brew coffee. In an effort to ration our dwindling supply, we'd taken to using the single-cup camping percolator I'd found buried in the back of Ian's pantry. But my troubled mind, coupled with the alarming quantity of alcohol I'd consumed, seemed to require more. I pulled out the big guns and brewed up an entire full-sized pot as I once again started running through worst-case scenarios.

The ignorance problem stemmed from our having no idea what nasty surprises would be in store for us in the aftermath of the Medford riots. Presumably, Jericho had taken charge, although we had no way of knowing for sure, and sitting on our collective butts in the seeming security of Gunter's Gap wasn't going to enlighten us one bit. We had to assume the worst; to do otherwise would have been painfully naïve and probably suicidal. And the worst thing I could think of was that Jericho would gather his army and come in force to take the prisoner.

Edgar's brother-in-law, Harold Jefferson, was a useless piece of shit, as far as I was concerned. He had no value as a human being. I'm sure the ACLU would have disagreed, but it didn't change the fact of what he'd done.

There are a number of crimes I suppose you could justify. Killing Mom's ex-husband was technically a crime, but I felt perfectly justified in doing so. If your family is starving and you steal some food, few (except perhaps the person you stole it from) would argue its moral if not legal justification. Certain reasons make the illegal act understandable, if not acceptable. There is no understandable or acceptable reason for raping any woman – least of all a fourteen year-old girl.

I'd have been happy to pop a cap in his worthless ass myself. To do so, however, I'd have had to stand in a very long line, but as I opined earlier, lynch mob justice and social order go together about as well as matches and gasoline, and at this stage, the one thing we desperately needed was social order.

The third and by far most acute problem was the steady stream of frightened people flowing into Gunter's Gap. I had hoped its isolation and the fact that if you blinked at the wrong moment you'd miss the turn into town would have saved us from a refugee crisis, but it was a stupid hope from the word go. I have no one to blame but myself.

I made the conscious decision to send both the prisoner and the people we evacuated from the hospital to our town. I did it, nobody else. I will have to live with the consequences for the rest of my life.

None of which, of course, solved the logistical nightmare of feeding and housing and caring for the extra five hundred some-odd people who'd showed up on our doorstep already, and the who-knew-how-many others who'd be coming in over the next few days.

We'd already begun running out of basic stuff. Stocks of flour, sugar and (God help us) coffee were dwindling. We were out of milk. We could forget about fresh meat, and fresh vegetables were all but gone. I'd need to talk to Dennis (and Caroline) to see what kind of time frame we'd need for renewable vegetation. It wouldn't be happening tomorrow, however, and so we'd have to take stock of what Sammy had left and try to find out what the good citizens had stashed away in their homes. Basic self-interest dictated this would not be an easy task.

We still had a fair amount of fuel, albeit under the control of our token right wing nut job, but it wouldn't last forever. And then there was Dicky himself; something would have to be

done.

Electrical power had already been an issue, with brown-outs occurring on a more or less regular basis. Add it to my list of things I'd need to talk to Dennis about, and maybe get the Crow involved as well.

Medicine didn't grow on trees, or if it did, required a certain degree of processing, which we couldn't do. I remember Mom telling me one time that the notion of medication stock-piles was a joke, because every bit of it had an expiration date, and without regular resupply even the basic stuff would disappear or go bad. Mom would need to get involved, so she was just going to have to get over being pissed at me.

Thinking of her and how beat-up she'd looked as I dragged her unconscious ass out of the hospital proved to be something I couldn't do while sitting in the house where she'd been born. The fact of her deteriorating condition couldn't be denied or ignored. Neither could what she'd told me about the Yellowstone Hack: past a certain point, it killed you. I already had the certainty of her mortality. I didn't need reminders of her childhood.

And so I set out into the night with no real destination in mind, wandering and smoking one of my three remaining cigarettes. I guess the end of the world had its advantages, although it seemed a bit extreme as a stop smoking remedy.

The cold volcanic winter air cleared my head and pushed back the effects of the hangover I had coming to me in a way coffee could not. The darkness helped as well, but neither eliminated the dull throbbing in my temples – the price of last night's failed attempt at drinking myself into a coma. No pain, no gain, my ass. The inevitable cerebral hemorrhage would in no way be worth the non-existent gain.

But what the hell? Misery loves company, so why not wake up George and send him on a dangerous mission?

I had to flick my lighter just to see the unlit dial on my watch when I arrived at George's house. It said the time was four-fifteen. As I reached out to knock on his door, I hoped George hadn't taken to sleeping with a gun. As it happened, I needn't have worried. He opened the door fully dressed, with bright, wide awake eyes and a baseball bat.

"Hi, Jake."

"Morning, George."

"If you say so." He leaned the bat against the inside door jam and gazed at me with mild curiosity. "What can I do for you?" After I told him what brought me to his home at such an ungodly hour, he nodded, intoned a quick "Will do," and then closed his door with me on the outside. I expected no less. It was, after all, four in the morning.

I'd asked him to solve the first of our problems: ignorance. We needed to know what Jericho had in store for our little town. We knew it'd be something, but we didn't know when, how, and with how many he'd be coming. George, with the help of a couple "volunteers" (white guys, of course) he could trust, was to find out.

The year-round residents of Gunter's Gap were a good, self-reliant and understanding bunch. At the risk of sounding like I'm about to break into a chorus of *Cumbaya*, they stood together and looked out for each other in times of need, and left each other alone for the rest. But even so, these were extraordinary times, on top of other extraordinary events and increased

exponentially by the influx of refugees we were receiving. Thank God for winter and the mass-exodus of our summer residents. Three times as many lived there during the summer than did in winter. We'd need the empty houses. And everybody needed to know what was going on. They would want a town meeting. Problem was: I had no clue. This would have to change.

I returned to the house just as Mom came stumbling down the stairs. She saw me and started to say good morning, but then apparently remembered she didn't like me too much at the moment, and so shut her mouth with a snap as she brushed by me on the way to the now cold and empty coffee pot.

"Mother..." I began.

She ignored me.

"Mother..." I repeated, keeping my tone neutral.

She coughed and kept ignoring me.

"For Christ's sake, Mom, lighten up!"

Her back to me as she went about making herself coffee with the single-cup pot, she continued to give me the proverbial cold shoulder until she'd finished her task, and then, and only then, turned to face me. She leaned back against the counter, folded her arms and glared at me with what I suppose she thought was the scowl I knew so well. It was there, all right, but only in spirit. The physical reality of her deteriorating condition made it seem way more like a grimace. Finally, her voice rough and wet, cracking and bubbling from the crap in her lungs, she croaked: "You had no right to do that."

I gave a sarcastic snort and followed it with a more sarcastic response. "You are so right,

Mother. I had no right to want to protect you and save your life. How silly of me! I promise I'll have myself shot at my earliest convenience. It was selfish, really. I was only thinking of myself and the fact that I'd just seen your brother, my uncle, get his head blown off. Boy, do I suck!" I stormed through the kitchen and out, slamming the back door in righteous indignation, and feeling like a real shit doing it.

I was too wrapped up in my own self-absorbed pity party. The weight of recent events and responsibility (self-induced or otherwise) had squeezed down upon me, and rather than sack up and be a man, I'd lashed out at the one person who mattered to me most. Worst of all, I'd done it while ignoring how wrecked she looked.

Her skin had been pale, her eyes red and swollen and sunken into her skull, with an entire travel set of luggage under them in dark circles. She looked like she was dying. That, above all, was the one thing I couldn't deal with; not then; maybe not ever. And so I pushed it aside and propelled myself into the dawn in search of anything to occupy my mind.

The problem of Jericho seemed an obvious (and as it happened, essential) avenue of intellectual occupation. He needed to be stopped – cold and hard. William Tecumseh Sherman famously said "War is Hell." I wanted and needed to prove its truth.

Ian had instilled a love of history in me (so I suppose you could blame him for all the annoying historical asides within this bit of literary whatever you choose to call it), and the history of the world is the history of war. No other human endeavor has had a greater effect, save religion, which in its own way has started more wars than I can count.

I've read a lot of books over the years, something both my uncle and my mother encouraged, so I suppose what happened at the Battle of Rogue River could be seen as a result.

One of the books I read was Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. It has been taught in military academies for centuries. It has been used in the boardroom as a tool for planning hostile takeovers and the art of the deal. Its wisdom is undeniable. As I walked through the dark and quiet streets of Gunter's Gap, a passage from this book kept swirling around my brain: "*But a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being; nor can the dead ever be brought back to life.*"

Santayana was famous for saying, "Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it," (which is a bastardization of what he actually said, but who cares?). After several thousand years of human civilization, pretty much everything has historical precedent. History repeats itself. War is no exception.

Jericho was undeniably psychotic and well outside anything considered normal – even in the midst of the most abnormal time in recorded history – but it didn't make him unique.

As long as there are people, there will be those like Hitler or Pol Pot or Papa Doc or Stalin or Thomas Jericho, willing and eager to lead equally enthusiastic followers into madness. Kill one and another pops up, ready to bring out the worst of humanity. Thus it has always been; thus it always shall be. They cannot be eliminated. But they can be discouraged.

Had Hitler been crushed when he invaded Poland, the Second World War might never have happened. Had the people of Cambodia risen as one and ripped Pol Pot to shreds, the millions he murdered might still be alive. Had George W. Bush finished the job of hunting Osama Bin Laden, instead of invading Iraq, thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis might have been spared.

Following 9/11, I was one hundred percent behind the invasion of Afghanistan. They had

supported Al Qaida; the evidence for it was incontrovertible. The world stood behind us. Unfortunately, we didn't finish the job.

What they did on that September day, though horrible and unconscionable, posed no real threat to the security of our country. We were in no danger of being invaded. No one would be taking over the United States. It still, however, required a response.

If you were the big kid on the block – not a bully, per se, but the biggest and baddest – and some insignificant punk had a problem with you, but instead of attacking directly, went up and punched your little sister, what would you do? Would you push him away like the irritating gnat he was, or would you beat the living shit out of him so he never even *thought* of doing something like that ever again?

I suspect all Bush would have had to do was capture that crazy asshole. Had he done so, had he used whatever means necessary – up to and including invading Pakistan, if only to grab Bin Laden and go – and then, in a public event rivaling the greatest Super Bowl in history, had he strung that son of a bitch up by his nut sack and then looked into the news cameras and said to the rest of the world: “Do you really want a piece of this?” the majority of the “War on Terror” would have been over.

Instead, he invaded Iraq, who had nothing to do with 9/11. In doing so, he pushed Bin Laden away like an irritating gnat, rather than going after the punk who punched our little sister. And the “War on Terror” dragged on and on and on.

As long as there are lunatics insane enough to strap a bomb to their chest and walk into a crowded marketplace filled with innocent civilians, terrorism will always be with us. But had we shown nations who have and continue to support terrorism just how far we were willing to go in

bringing those responsible to justice, it would have made them think twice before allowing such madness to flourish within their borders. Such, at any rate, was my belief.

I intended to act on that belief by kicking the living shit out of Reverend Thomas Jericho and his followers. All I had to do was figure out how.

History seemed to hold the key: a battle called *Cannae*.

On August 6th, 216 BCE, during the 2nd Punic War, the Army of Carthage, under Hannibal, faced eight Roman legions – some eighty-seven thousand men – and kicked the living shit out of them. Henceforth, any military massacre has been called a Cannae.

The Roman Consul Fabian, who in modern terms I suppose would be the Supreme Commander like an Eisenhower or Grant, had been employing a strategy of attrition against the Carthaginians, and it was working, but it did not make for very good copy. Attrition is a slow, grinding, boring process wherein a superior force simply holds the opposing army in check until it starves or dies of boredom or gives up due to lack of interest and goes back home. As this does not readily lend itself to riveting tales of daring-do, the Roman Senate and public soon tired of the monotony and demanded something be done. The first something they did was to fire Fabian.

Roman Consul Varro, Fabian's replacement and a rather reckless general prone to bluster, took charge and attacked Hannibal. They fought a small battle – more a skirmish – and the Romans won, but it had little or no strategic value. What it did, however, was make the Romans cocky, which is exactly what Hannibal wanted. Varro attacked in exactly the way and

in exactly the place Hannibal wanted him to, thus allowing his legions to be encircled. The result was a massacre.

The way to win a war is to destroy the enemy's army. Forget about taking territory or cities or anything else. If you destroy the enemy's ability to fight, you win.

With this in mind, ever since Cannae, generals throughout history have tried to recreate this perfect strategic situation. Grant did it at Appomattox, or would have had Lee not surrendered. Eisenhower had two opportunities, at Falaise, after the breakout from Normandy, and again at Houffalize, following the Battle of the Bulge, but failed to capitalize on them.

I wanted to do the same to Jericho. All I needed was time.

But as nothing could be done about it at five-thirty in the morning, I once again walked with no clear destination in mind and with thoughts of massacre swirling around my brain, and was, therefore, a bit surprised to find myself wandering up The Crow's driveway. He lived about two blocks from Ian's in a natural log home surrounded by poplars and pine trees, with a clapboard workshop of almost equal size behind it. In the midst of an otherwise darkened street, the glow of light from the shop might as well have been a beacon, and so I headed toward it like a moth to a flame with the single-minded idea of picking his not inconsiderable brain.

The overhead garage-type door was tucked open and I could see the man himself bent over his workbench, tinkering by the sputtering yellow light of a camp lantern. As I drew closer I could hear him singing an old blues tune I recognized but couldn't place. I stood listening for a moment before I realized the tune might have been familiar, but the words were being made up

as he went along.

“Bah Dah-Dah Bah Dah
The earth she trembled
Bah Dah-Dah Bah Dah
Began to shake and shout
Bah Dah-Dah Bah Dah
The volcano she rumbled
Bah Dah-Dah Bah Dah
And tried to take us all out
And now we got the blues
The Yellowstone blues...”

He might have carried on for three or four verses had I not interrupted by giving him a rousing round of applause. He turned in surprise and a certain amount of embarrassment, but it quickly dissolved into his typical open and friendly crooked smile. “Mister Campbell!”

“Morning, Crow,” I said, shaking the hand he offered. “And please, just call me Jake. Mister Campbell—” *was Ian* I started to say, but couldn’t finish.

His grin slipped away. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks, Crow. I mean that.”

“We all lost a good one,” he offered.

I nodded. It seemed appropriate.

“What can I do for you, so early in the morning?”

I smiled then, grateful for his empathetic response. Getting right to business was exactly what I needed. I started to launch into my reason for being there, but then noticed what he’d been working on: a strange conglomeration of recognizable parts creating an incomprehensible whole. He’d apparently taken an old exercise bike and attached it to a car alternator via pulleys,

and then the alternator to a car battery. I couldn't for the life of me figure out what it was for, so I asked. "Whatchya got there?"

"A man-powered generator," he responded with pride.

And so I once again proved my non-existent linguistic prowess. "Huh?"

"Get on her and I'll show you." I did as he asked, feeling (and I'm sure looking) like an idiot. "Start pedaling." As I did so, he hooked leads from the battery to a car cigarette lighter into which an adapter had been fitted. This, in turn, was attached to a battered boom box. He waited a few moments as I continued to pedal, and then turned it on. When nothing happened at first, he scowled, then smacked himself in the forehead, called himself a moron, and hit the play button on the tape deck. John Lee Hooker (appropriately) growled "Boom, boom, boom, boom," through the speakers.

I looked at his wide, infectious grin stupidly for a moment before the answer hit my addled brain. The exercise bike turned the alternator, which juiced the battery, which powered the boom box. Just as he said: a man-powered generator. "Crow, you're a genius," I praised him in amazement over what would become known hereafter as the *Crow Cruiser*.

"Thank you, thank you."

Something else dawned on me as I stopped pedaling and got off the bike to the strains of the still-playing music. "You're also psychic," I declared. Now it was his turn to be confused, but I soon enlightened him. "I came here to talk to you about alternate power sources."

As it happened, this wasn't the only indication the people of Gunter's Gap were way

ahead of me. When I suggested to The Crow he go see Dennis Brown about hydroelectric sources, he told me he'd already done so and that they were planning to rig up larger flywheels on each of the waterfall's seven cascading steps, increasing the power potential exponentially. They'd also talked about rigging wind-power generators up on top of The Ridge. And then he showed me his homemade battery.

With the double purpose of alternate power and a way to get rid of all the change he had lying around the house, he'd melted several hundred pennies, turned them into one-inch diameter flat discs, each an eighth of an inch wide, and then stacked them into neat layers of disc, vinegar-soaked paper, tinfoil, disc, and so on, and then taped them together until he had a number of D-sized batteries. And then all that was needed was to ground it on one end, attach a lead to the other end, and there you had it: battery power.

If the town hadn't already loved Jackson Cromarty, they would have after Yellowstone. Bad times make good people shine.

I left his house that morning with a glow of gratitude and admiration for the can-do entrepreneurial drive of two of our local residents: The Crow and Dennis Brown. I was to learn they were not alone.

Joey Witherspoon, owner of the Gap House Hotel (and chairman of the town Real Estate Board), had taken it upon himself to gather his staff and start allocating summer-resident housing for the refugees. At my suggestion, he reserved three of those houses (all within a block of the Brown home) for use as indoor gardens. It'd be a drain on our hydroelectric capacity once Dennis and The Crow got it up and running, but it would also provide us with a year-round

growing season.

Karen Osigawa, owner of the too-cute Hot Buns Bakery, had organized a team consisting of Martha Breninger, Carla Rosenthal, Jeannie Bonner and Clea Demitri (all owners of the various and sundry souvenir, antique and curio shops lining the Town Square), into a food committee bent on keeping the newcomers fed. And good old grouchy Sammy Dundee simply handed me his up-to-the-minute inventory the moment I asked for it.

Even Ronny Gibbons got into the act by saving me the trouble and organizing a town meeting, set for seven that evening. Granted, I felt pretty sure he'd done it for something other than altruistic reasons, but what the Hell? It worked. I only hoped George got back in time.

One by one, alone or in groups, the good people of Gunter's Gap were taking care of what needed to be done, all without any of my fumbling attempts at organization. I will be forever grateful to them and proud as Hell to say I lived in such a community. God Bless America. It still makes my heart swell, even after all the not-so pleasant stuff following the battle, and so I think I'll move on before I start blubbering into my freshly opened brunch of cold canned pork and beans.

34

“Tyranny is always better organized than freedom.”

Charles Peguy

George slipped back into town about an hour before sunset and came straight to Ian’s house, bringing his two fellow scouts, Charlie Dinwiddie and Dean Chadwick. The news they brought confirmed my paranoia.

“They’re coming,” George said as I laid glasses of my uncle’s best scotch in front of them on the kitchen table. “Lots of talk about coming to get our prisoner.”

“How soon?” He shook his head and shrugged, but didn’t say anything. His body language said all he needed to. “So what are they doing?” I asked.

“Oh, they’re busy little beavers over there,” Charlie jumped in. A native of our fair town, born and raised, forty-odd years ago, buried his folks there, and raised a family there while working at a heating and ventilation company down in White City, just north of Medford. He stood about five-ten, with close-cropped blonde hair atop his rather large round head.

“Do tell.”

“They’ve got teams out removing all the trash, cleaning up the debris from the riots,” he told.

“And the bodies,” George added.

I chuckled and shook my head in amazement. “Four weeks and the City of Medford

couldn't or didn't do anything about the garbage," I said. "How is it Jericho did?"

"There's a lot of red jackets," George replied, as if it explained much of anything. I guess that's what I get for sending the most laconic man in town to gather intelligence.

"Can you be a bit more specific?"

"They're being very persuasive," Dean jumped into the conversation. He was a giant of a thirty-something year-old man who'd grown up in Phoenix but moved to The Gap after a stint in the Army and three tours in Iraq (thanks to the Bush Administration's force-retention), primarily because it looked nothing like the desert. I could relate. He'd stumbled upon the town while visiting Crater Lake and fell in love with the place. He found work as a handyman, taking care of the summer resident's houses, and then filled in his income with whatever jobs he could find during the winter, which this year had been a sweet maintenance position at the Medford Center. It had looked as if this might become permanent – right up until everything went to Hell.

His Nordic features were also topped with blonde hair. George had chosen his team well; they both looked like they could be members of the Aryan Nation.

"A little too persuasive, if you ask me," Charlie groaned, rubbing a welt on the side of his neck. It goes to show my powers of observation: I hadn't even noticed it. I winced at the sight, feeling pangs of guilt for being oblivious and for sending these guys into such a dicey situation.

"The red jackets are in charge of everything," Dean said. "And they're pushing everybody around."

"And the people are putting up with this shit?" I asked, incredulous.

"Guess it's easy to do if you round up anybody who protests," George shrugged. "And

anybody you don't like."

"You mean colored people."

"I mean," he agreed. "The ones who ain't being pressed into work gangs, he's got crammed into the high school gym under guard," he continued. "Those he hasn't had shot, that is."

"He's executing people?"

"He rounded up all known junkies, alcoholics, prostitutes and homosexuals," Charlie chimed in. "And then he lined them all up against the wall at the Medford Center and shot them dead."

"Oh man," I groaned.

"A couple hundred so far," George added.

"Yeah," Dean spat. "And he found plenty of people just lining up to point the finger at others, the rotten bastards."

"Jesus."

"There's a lot of that, too," Charlie continued the report. "His flock of fanatics is spread through the town, preaching up a storm. He's marking the faithful with ash on their foreheads."

I gave him a WTF look in response. "Some kind of symbol," George said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a folded piece of paper, which he handed to me.

It contained a Biblical quote, Ezekiel, 9:5-6. "*...and said to him 'Go throughout*

Jerusalem and put a mark on the forehead of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it. As I listened, he said to the others 'Follow him through the city and kill without showing pity or compassion. Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark...'

“Holy shit,” I swore, after reading it.

“Exactly,” he replied.

“And how many are getting this mark?”

“Hundreds. Maybe thousands. We didn’t stick around,” Dean answered.

I took a long pull straight from the bottle, even though I don’t like scotch. It seemed the appropriate thing to do. The implication of what I’d read had been too monstrous to contemplate without alcohol.

“You haven’t heard the worst,” George warned after I set the bottle back on the table. I stared at him, waiting. “The ash is from the bodies they burned: the Sheriff, the Mayor, and... others.”

I didn’t want to think about the others, but I couldn’t help the image of my uncle’s head exploding in front of me. None of us spoke for almost a minute. Finally, I said the obvious: “That son of a bitch needs to die.”

35

“Democracy is a device that ensures
we shall be governed no better
than we deserve.”

George Bernard Shaw

The school gymnasium doubled as a public event center when the summer folks were in town. With the two sets of bleachers pushed back against their opposing walls, it held quite a few people, and so we succeeded in fitting pretty much everybody – residents and refugees, although it quickly became clear a lot of the newcomers hadn’t bathed in a while.

We’d set up our largest generator, using what little fuel remained in the reserve tank. We could ill-afford it, but the uncertainty of our current situation cried out for the comfort of electric light.

We had a mixed-bag crowd, with the residents mostly up front, conspicuous in the fact of their seated positions. Even with every folding chair we could find set up into rows in front of the portable stage and split down the middle so people could come and go it left lots of standing room only.

I sat along the aisle, three rows from the front, next to Mom, Frank and Bobby. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something. “What are we waiting for?” I asked, mildly annoyed. I’d started the day with a hangover and the scotch I’d guzzled hadn’t helped my temperament one bit.

“You, dumbass,” Frank suggested.

“Why me?”

“You got us into this mess,” Mom grumbled, and the effort threw her into a fit of coughing. Her skin, when I reached out to touch her arm in the age-old and utterly useless manner of responding to a sick person, felt cold, even though beads of sweat glistened in the florescent light. I would have to mend that fence pretty quick. Looking at her wasted condition, I didn’t think I’d have much time.

“So, what? That makes me the designated asshole?”

“Yes,” my mother croaked, struggling to regain her breath.

Perhaps this might sound like sour grapes to anyone who is not me, but I did not like it one bit. I didn’t seek the job, didn’t want the job, and resented having it dropped into my lap. But if I were to look at it objectively, I suppose she had a point. The one who sent the prisoner and the refugees from the hospital here was me. I sent George and company to Medford. I went around talking to people, getting organized, taking the proverbial ball and rolling it right into the town square. I had no one to blame but myself.

As it happened, I needn’t have bothered with such self-absorbed whining. Ronny Gibbons had no compunction whatsoever about stepping right back into the role for which he had been so resoundingly beaten by my uncle. He demonstrated this by stepping up to the podium, gavel in hand, and pounding on the lectern.

“Let’s call this meeting to order,” he spoke into the single microphone, his amplified voice emanating from the twin speakers set up on either end of the small stage. The crowd slowly quieted, all eyes facing the front, all faces carrying the same question: what now?

“I’d like to welcome our new guests,” he began, putting a bit too much emphasis on the last word, as if making certain they knew their place in these proceedings. He introduced himself, being sure to mention his three terms as Mayor and glossing over the *former* aspect of this fact, except to point out the “recent tragic death” of our current one.

The mention of Ian jammed a sharp spike into my heart, and must have done the same to Mother, as I heard her gasp, just before falling into another coughing fit. I ineffectively patted her back, because it seemed the appropriate thing to do, and then left my arm around her shoulders when it subsided. She didn’t shrug me off, so I guess that was a good sign, but I couldn’t help noticing how fragile she felt.

“So,” Ronny continued. “I guess the first thing we need to do is elect a new Mayor. Any nominations?”

As if on cue (which I’d bet is exactly what it was), his wife, Janice, stood and declared: “I nominate Ronald Gibbons!” to which a number of the town’s residents groaned and snorted. And again, as if pre-arranged, The Dickster stood and trumpeted: “I gladly second the motion!”

Ronny stood upon the makeshift stage with puffed-out chest like some ridiculous imitation of *Il Duce*. If the man were anymore full of himself, he’d have exploded. He waited as long as he could to see if the smattering of applause turned into the thunder he’d wished to hear, until it became obvious it wouldn’t.

Slightly (but only slightly) deflated, he carried on. “Any other nominations?”

I glanced around to see if anyone else wanted the job, but saw no takers. And then my cousin came up with one. She stood. “I nominate Jake Campbell!”

My neck would have been whiplashed had I turned to glare at her any faster. “What the Hell are you doing?” I snapped sotto voice.

But she didn’t get the chance to answer as Bobby stood and shouted: “I second!”

Old Ronny seemed none too happy about any of it. “Well, uh, I’m not sure that’s possible,” he stammered. “Mister Campbell is not a resident.”

And then Mother did shrug off my arm as she stood (a bit unsteadily), cleared her throat, coughed, cleared her throat again, and then lit into the ex-Mayor. “You know as well as I do, Ronny, he was born here,” her gravelly voice cracked. “And even if he hadn’t been, what happens here concerns everybody here. Everybody—“

She would have continued, but her wasted body was wracked with yet another tremendous cough. Frank eased her back down and then turned to deal with Mister Gibbons.

“It concerns everybody,” she took up the argument. “Not just those who happened to be here before Yellowstone. That’s the way my father would have approached it.” She turned to address the residents seated all around us. “You all knew my father. Most of you loved him.”

“Not damned likely!” Dickless Coolidge barked.

Frank ignored him. “You all know he’d have included everybody. He’d have used some annoying historical reference and quoted some historical dead guy to explain why we needed to do it, but you know that’s what he would have done. And he’d have been right.”

I sat there stunned at my cousin’s diatribe. I honestly didn’t think she had it in her, and in spite of the implication, in spite of the gist of what she was saying, I loved her for it.

“Ronny here,” she resumed, “would start right out segregating us into residents and non-residents – people who matter and people who don’t. And while that might work for Ronny Gibbons, it would not work for the people of this town, and it would not be democracy; one man – one *person* – one vote. That’s what my father would have done.” She waved her hand as if throwing it back to the assembled residents. “You decide.”

She dropped back into her seat, her face suddenly about three shades of red. Mom took her in a one-armed hug and kissed her cheek as Bobby took up the challenge. “Call the vote!” he shouted, jumping to his feet.

The roar from the seats proved to be all the answer necessary, but of course it wasn’t what Ronny wanted to hear, and so he once again pounded the lectern with his gavel. “Order! Order!”

Whether from democratic spirit, or a general dislike of Ronny Gibbons, or from a simple delight in being able to *do something*, the people of Gunter’s Gap voiced their opinion as one tumultuous voice. A good percentage of the refugees joined in the festivities. He banged his little hammer a few more times with a predictable lack of results and then just threw his hands up in defeat.

“Fine,” he snapped. “The vote has been called. All those in favor of allowing all to vote, signify by saying—“

Whether or not he finished his sentence is debatable. The shouted “AYE!” seemed to say it all. The entire crowd erupted, applauding for the sake of doing it; applauding themselves.

“All those against?” he said, after the noise had died down a bit. Naturally, of course,

Dick Coolidge shouted “NAY!” but he stood alone. Even Ronny’s wife couldn’t bring herself to be publicly humiliated. At first, the response was silence, but it didn’t last long as first one, then two, then five, then a whole bunch started laughing.

The former mayor hammered the gavel a few more times to no effect. The dye had been cast; the choice of the crowd, obvious. Giving the lectern a half-hearted kick, he walked away and down the three steps to the floor of the gym. It seemed as if he might just keep walking right outside, but stopped just long enough to wordlessly hand me the gavel before resuming his ignoble exit. He did not, however, actually leave, deciding instead to stand at the back, sulking.

I stared at it for a moment, feeling its weight and the moistness of the handle from his sweaty palm. I might have sat there for quite a while had Mom – and her elbow – not prodded me into motion.

Had she not done it, perhaps none of what followed would have happened. Something would have, to be sure. Maybe it would have been good, or at least better. Then again, it could have been much, much worse. Either way, had she not jabbed her elbow into my ribs, had I not stood and walked to the lectern, at least I wouldn’t have gotten the blame.

36

“Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow.”

T. S. Eliot

We made it official and held the voice vote for mayor, but it was a foregone conclusion. The residents knew me (and maybe more importantly knew Ronny) and I suppose our new refugee neighbors took their cue from them in deciding whom to vote for. Of course, it didn't hurt that the fifty-three police officers and three National Guardsmen (all that remained after the disasters at Medford Mall and the County Courthouse) stood and shouted their approval of yours' truly.

When people are scared, the likelihood of them following the lead of those who protect them is high, to say the least, and so perhaps they can be forgiven for electing such a Nimrod.

Regardless of the questionable wisdom, I had been elected, and so I set about my new job, taking the proverbial bull by the horns and hoping against hope I wouldn't screw it up. My first act was to get rid of the damned gavel. Once the laughter and applause died down, I pointed out the obvious fact of our inadequate supplies. Talk about a buzz-kill! Impending starvation being an excellent motivator, it sobered the crowd right up. Amidst the resulting silence, I laid out the problem and suggested the only real solution.

“We cannot expect outside help for the foreseeable future. We are on our own,” I said, trying to sound as if I knew what I was talking about. “We're going to have to find our own

supplies, and there's only one place I can think to look: to the east.”

I let the idea sink in for a moment as I looked out into the crowd in an attempt to gauge their comprehension. Some got it right off, and I could tell from their “*oh shit*,” expressions they weren't happy. Others took a bit more explanation. “There are plenty of supplies out there, plenty of cities and towns to the east that were either abandoned before they could be stripped clean, or in which none survived.” I could tell a lot of people didn't want to accept the cold, harsh reality of my assessment, but I wasn't about to coddle them.

“Ain't nice to think of, but it's the truth,” I told the assemblage. “It is what it is, and denying the fact won't change it. But we can use this fact, unpleasant though it might be, to help us survive. All it takes is the will to do so.”

Bobby stood. “I volunteer.” Half-a-dozen others, all former or current police officers save one – Charlie Dinwiddie – immediately followed suit.

“Charlie, you can go,” I said. “But the rest of you can't.” Before they could protest, I brought them up short. “We have very real security issues to deal with. No police officer or anybody with military training can be spared.” This met with a great deal of grumbling, but all I had to say was “Jericho's coming, and we need to be ready,” and it silenced them all.

This was the nut of our problem, as I saw it. While the possibility of starvation had to be dealt with, we had at least a little time in which to do so. I doubted Jericho would wait – at least not for long, and said so. “You refugees are here for a reason. You didn't just decide to pay us a visit. For those of you who aren't refugees,” I addressed the residents. “If you get a chance, talk to them. I doubt they'll paint a pretty picture.” I paused to let it sink home. Richard Coolidge had other ideas.

“Let’s talk about the refugees,” he demanded, rising to his feet. “Why are we taking them in at all?”

The ensuing protests were loud, vociferous and profane, but most came from the refugees themselves, rather than the residents. Dick Face had raised a point shared by a large percentage of the people being asked to sacrifice for hundreds of strangers. I saw no advantage to shutting him down, even though I really wanted to do so. “Please, let the man speak,” I requested into the microphone. I had to repeat this request a few times, but the crowd soon got themselves under control. It did not, however, help with the disturbing fact that I found myself agreeing with His Dick-ness. The plain and simple truth of the matter remained: we had limited resources, and they were growing more and more limited with each new refugee that arrived. Something would have to be done, but I didn’t see any benefit in broaching the subject in front of a crowd of frightened and confused people facing an uncertain future.

The smug, self-satisfied expression on Penis Breath’s face didn’t help, either. Truth be told, it irritated the crap out of me, but this was still America, and I still believed in the First Amendment. “Mister Coolidge...” I said, giving him the floor.

“Why should we give what little we have to people we don’t know?” I saw many heads nodding towards him from the seats. But one of them, Pastor Judith McGee, our non-denominational minister, rose from those seats with an answer.

“You consider yourself a religious man, don’t you, Richard?” she asked in her mild, reassuring voice. Her kind eyes and pleasant, unassuming face covered a mind I knew to be razor-sharp.

“I am, sister,” came his self-importantly pious reply.

“Then surely the answer must be obvious: simple Christian charity.”

Dick seemed unable to respond to having his own religious nature thrown back into his face, although from his constipated expression, he appeared to be trying really damned hard. Someone else – namely Ronny Gibbons from his self-imposed exile at the back of the room – took up the argument.

“Christian charity won’t keep us fed when we run out of food.” Agreeing murmurs mumbled from the seats. *This could get ugly*, I thought, but held my tongue.

“The Lord provides, does He not?” she asked then pointed to me. “As Jake has said, plans are already in motion to rectify our shortages. We have time, and patience is a virtue.”

“And so we should patiently starve to death while this idiot fumbles around, trying to use his uncle’s Anti-American Socialistic ways? I have zero faith in him, just as I had zero faith in his uncle,” Dick argued.

“In Corinthians we are told: *‘When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man – or a woman,’*” she corrected, garnering a good laugh and a few cheers from the women in the crowd. “*‘I put away childish things... And now abide faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.’*” She paused, looking around the room, perhaps to see if she was getting through.

“And if that’s not enough,” she continued, “how about a little Abraham Lincoln? In his Second Inaugural Address, he said: *‘With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nations wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and*

his orphan, to do which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.’ I’d say it applies, and it’s about as American as you can get, from probably the greatest president we’ve ever had. Wouldn’t you say, Richard?”

She was good. My estimation of her (already fairly high from the few times we’d met in the past) shot up about a thousand points for proving the wisdom of my faith in the Freedom of Speech.

Richard said nothing, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. But he did sit down.

“Okay, then,” I spoke into the microphone, seizing the moment to retake control of the meeting. “Let’s move on.”

“You were there this morning, Charlie,” I said, the conversation having returned to the subject of Jericho and his intentions. “So were you, George, Dean... You know what he’s doing now and what he’s getting ready to do. How much time you think we have?”

“Damned little,” George replied, and those two simple words from an ex-Marshall the residents all knew and respected did more to quell the argument than any twenty I could have said. Unfortunately, the audience wasn’t made up entirely of residents or law enforcement and military. It still left executives and laborers and trades people and housewives and politicians and frightened people of every stripe.

“Let’s not be so hasty,” Brenda Morgan (the Governor’s representative who’d been at most of the Town Hall meetings in Medford) cautioned. At the moment, she looked a bit worse for wear. Her tailored deep blue power-business suit had seen better (and cleaner) days and her

light brown coiffeur had grown a bit wild, but still and all, she carried herself with an air of professional confidence. “We need to take everything into consideration before we rush into what I think you’re suggesting.”

“What’s to consider?” I countered. “He’s executing people, and turning others into slave labor. And once he gets organized, he’s coming straight here.”

“Why?” someone in back shouted. “What’s he want?”

“He wants the rapist in our jail,” Dick Coolidge blurted, still searching for the limelight with the single-minded intensity of the truly ignorant. “And I say we should give the bastard to him!” The resulting tumult was the absolute last thing I needed or wanted.

Fear, more than any other emotional reaction, brings out the self-absorbed in us all. Once the fight or flight response kicks in, it’s hard to think of anyone or anything else, and we will say or do things we’ll regret for the rest of our lives unless we are stopped. That’s the point and necessity of society. If nothing else, it protects us from ourselves.

The general consensus appeared to be that we should give the man up, no questions asked; to wash our hands of him as Pilate did with Jesus; to relieve ourselves of the self-less responsibility of doing the right thing. I had no problem understanding it. As I said before, I’d have been happy to shoot the bastard myself, but I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt it would have been a slippery slope straight into the abyss.

“This is America, Goddammit! We don’t do that here!” I snapped. “He will be tried, and if found guilty, he will be executed,” I assured them. “But he will not be given up.” The rejoinder seemed to fall on deaf ears. Shouts of “Give him up” and “Hang his ass” banged

around the room like some Hellish billiard game. Bobby, George, Krickenheim, Gordon and about two-thirds of the remaining cops moved to the front as one and turned to face the crowd.

I raised my hands for calm, but I might as well been doing the old soft shoe, for all the good it did me. “Please, can we have some quiet?” I implored into the microphone, to pretty much the same effect. Finally, I’d had enough. “Shut your pie holes!” I shouted, and that seemed to get their attention.

“Look, folks,” I started, as the crowd got itself back under control. “What you need to understand, is that this has nothing to do with the prisoner. It’s not about him; it’s about us, about who we are.” I paused and gazed out at the faces, praying to all the gods I could think of that I wasn’t making a fool of myself. “We’ve been knocked down – you and I and everyone in this country – sucker-punched and thrown to the ground, good and hard. Question is: do we stay there groveling in the dirt or do we stand, shake our fists at Mother Nature and shout as one, ‘Is that all you got?’” I found myself the recipient of an honest-to-God rousing round of applause. All of what I’d said had been pulled straight out of my ass, but apparently, it worked. I raised my hand for silence again, and this time they actually paid attention and gave me what I wanted.

“All around us, from sea to shining sea, society is tearing itself apart, but it’s not happening here. Not yet. There’s a quote that’s always stayed with me. I don’t remember the guy’s name, but he lived in Nazi Germany, and saw it all unfolding in front of him. It goes something like this: *‘First they came for the intellectuals, but I wasn’t an intellectual, so I didn’t say anything. Then they came for the Jews, but I wasn’t a Jew, so I didn’t say anything. Then they came for the Catholics, but I was a Protestant, so I didn’t say anything. Then they came for me, and by then there was no one left to say anything.’* And yeah, okay, everybody throws the

Nazis out there whenever anything vaguely oppressive comes up, and most of the time it's a load of crap. But in this case, I think it fits." I paused again, although in this instance it was so I could take a sip of water.

"Edmund Burke said, '*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*' Giving up the prisoner would be the same as doing nothing. In fact, it might even be worse, because once we give in to Jericho, the question becomes: what's he going to ask for next? We already know he's rounded up homosexuals and junkies and prostitutes and put them to death." I paused for effect. "Let me say that again: *he put them to death.* Who's he gonna come for next? You? Me? Your sister? Your best friend? You do not give in to the Jericho's of the world. You stand up and say NO!"

The resulting tumult was quite a bit more than I expected. I'd been shooting for them not tearing each other apart. Apparently, I succeeded. They might very well have carried me off on their shoulders and turned the gymnasium into a big damned mosh pit if not for my mother, who picked that moment to collapse.

37

“The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality.”

Dante

The “hospital” was still in the process of being set up in the very elementary school where we held the meeting, so we took Mom home, pausing only long enough to grab one of the four oxygen rigs we’d liberated from the actual hospital in Medford. Medical supplies were woefully inadequate and this fact would need to be addressed much sooner than later. Not that I could do anything about it right then, but at least it gave me something other than her rapidly deteriorating condition to occupy my mind.

She was dying, and no amount of denial could change the obvious fact. Her breathing was shallow, labored, and sounded like wet gravel. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth whenever she coughed. And still, she fought on. Hope might have left the building, but she wasn’t dead, yet. I clung to that singular thought, boxed it up and stuck it firmly into a protected corner of my brain as I wandered back downstairs to face the crowd of people who’d followed us home.

The meeting had more or less ended with her collapse. People remained, or so I’d been told, and the arguing continued unabated, but all order and purpose left when we did. Bobby, George, Krick, Brenda Morgan, Edgar, Charlie Dinwiddie and Dean Chadwick, Sammy Dundee, Joey Witherspoon, Karen Osigawa, Ronny Gibbons and Pastor Judith McGee followed Frank, Peter McAllister (the doctor who’d escaped from Medford with us) and I to our house. The Dickster had wanted to come as well, but I nipped that idea right square in the bud. The last

damned thing I needed was his contrarian ass. The Doc remained upstairs and Frank helped me find enough chairs to fit everybody else into our kitchen. They all looked to me for direction.

Just how in Hell I was supposed to act as glorious leader and chair some kind of vaguely useful meeting of the minds as my mother lay dying in one of the upstairs bedrooms escaped my limited capacity to understand. But there it was. You makes your bed and you lies in it; the buck stops here; it's lonely at the top. Feel free to add your favorite happy horseshit about the responsibility and burden of leadership. Not that it matters.

"I know how upset you must be," Brenda Morgan began, placing a comforting hand on my forearm, which served about as much purpose as her platitude.

Do you? I felt like asking. Do you, really? Do you know what it's like to witness the murder of the closet thing to a father you've ever had? Do you know what it's like to be certain the most important person in your life is going to die, and all you can do is wait for it to happen? Do you know what it's like to do all this while being forced to listen to a bunch of whining assholes who wouldn't know reality if it punched them right square in the face? Do you, really?

I felt like saying all that, but of course I said none of it. What would have been the point?

"We still have important matters to consider," she continued.

"Like what?" I asked.

This took her back a bit, but only a bit. "Like your apparent determination to rush into a conflict with Jericho."

I raised my eyebrow at her. "There's nothing apparent about it. He's coming. We know he's coming. We need to be ready," I retorted. "What's to consider?"

“You cannot unilaterally decide on a course of action and drag the rest of us with you,” she declared.

“Especially since you’re basing it on your emotions,” Ronny, ever-willing to pile on, jumped in with his two cents. I felt like punching him, but, while personally satisfying, such an action would have served no useful purpose. I refrained.

“What do you suggest?”

“We need to consider all our options,” Ms. Morgan replied, “develop a consensus. And then and only then decide on a course of action.”

I gazed at the faces assembled around our kitchen table, each in turn, trying to gauge their reactions. Brenda and Ronny were obvious detractors. Sammy, Joey Witherspoon, Karen Osigawa, and Pastor McGee seemed uncertain. The rest remained neutral, except Frank, who busied herself with getting liquid refreshment for everybody. Our eyes met and she gave me a quick nod then returned to her self-appointed task. I loved her for it.

Essentially, I was on my own. So be it.

“Allow me to steal a page from my uncle’s playbook,” I begged. “Once, during the Civil War,” I continued amidst no small number of rolled eyes – even from those I felt certain supported me, “the Union Army, at that time under the control of Hooker or Burnside or one of the other loser generals before Grant, came upon a river they needed to cross. So this group of generals stood there scratching their heads and wondering aloud about how deep the river might be and whether or not it could be forded there. They discussed it amongst themselves for a matter of some minutes until George Armstrong Custer, then a colonel, rode out into the middle

of the river, turned on his horse and said, ‘It’s *this* deep, General.’”

I looked out at the assembled gaggle to see if any of them had gotten my point. Some had, but many just stared at me with a blank expression of utter cluelessness, so I made it clear for all. “You don’t need to waste time forming a consensus when the problem is obvious and the solution is right in front of you. While you’re ‘considering all the options,’ Jericho’s going to destroy this town, kill a bunch of us, and turn the rest into slave labor.”

Dismissive cries of “Alarmist” (mainly from my pal Ronny) and some less extreme, yet equally negative epithets greeted my statement. Even after recent events should have made it abundantly clear as to Jericho’s motives and methods, these people just couldn’t grasp that the world had turned. Things weren’t like they used to be and so the old assumptions no longer applied.

“Look, guys,” I said, pinching my nose between my eyes and shaking my fatigued head. “We have three choices. We can run, but where are we going to go?” I allowed a moment for it to sink in and then continued. “We can give up, and everyone who isn’t a white Christian racist can become a slave.” They started to blanch again but I cut them off at the pass by slamming my palm down onto the table. “Take a trip to Medford if you don’t believe me.” None of them appeared ready to take me up on the offer so I gave them the third option. “Or we can stand and fight.”

“We could reason with them; negotiate a treaty, if you will,” Ms. Morgan offered.

“We could give up the rapist,” Ronny said. “It’s what they want.”

“My uncle tried that,” I said. “Tried to stop Jericho by ‘reasoning with him’ and telling

him the prisoner was gone, and so the reason for storming the courthouse was also gone. You know what it got him?" I asked, but received no response. "It got his head blown off." Frank's sudden gasp immediately made me feel like a shit for being so blunt. I managed to mouth "sorry," to her before she turned away to hide what I knew were her tears.

"You still have no right to make this decision for everybody," Ronny countered, bringing my attention back to the table. And he was right.

"Fair enough," I agreed. "Those who want to give up and turn themselves over to Jericho may feel free to do so." I was thinking mainly of the Dickster, who I didn't want around in any case. "Those who want to run... Be my guest. The rest of us will stay and fight."

"No, dammit," Ronny argued. "All of this hinges on the rapist. What we do with him affects all of us, so all of us should decide."

"The law isn't a democracy, Ronny," I told him. "It's not subject to a vote."

"The Hell it isn't," he replied.

"The Hell it is," Krick spoke.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who haven't met him, allow me to introduce Deputy John Krickenheim, the senior law enforcement officer, now that the Sheriff is dead – courtesy of the Reverend Thomas Jericho, I might add," I said. "He's the only person with the authority to make that decision."

All eyes locked onto him. He didn't waste any time. "The prisoner stays."

38

“In this day and age, ignorance is not only inexcusable, it is criminal and perhaps fatal.”

William Powell
The Anarchist Cookbook

The meeting/bitch session/whine-fest finally broke up a bit after ten. I'd been up since the day before, for all intents and purposes, and felt every moment of it. I didn't consider my tossing and turning in a drunken stupor sleep. I needed someplace to get horizontal for eight to ten hours, but I had way too much to do before it could happen.

We needed three immediate things: help, defense, and supplies. The first would be the most difficult for me, personally, so I decided to address it right away.

As people departed, I asked Bobby, Charlie, Dean, George, Krick, Edgar, and Ms. Morgan to stick around. Frank started cleaning up, but I stopped her because what I had to say involved her as well.

“I know you don't agree with my course of action, Ms. Morgan,” I started, “but I need the kind of support only you can provide.” Her interest piqued, I continued. “No matter what we do, no matter what happens, we're going to need the Governor's help. Specifically, we need him to call out the National Guard.”

“Last time I talked to the Governor,” she replied, “at the beginning of last week, both he and the National Guard were busy responding to the rioting in Portland. They have their hands full.”

“I have no doubt,” I said. “But here’s the thing: whether we give up or run or fight, what happened in Medford, and what continues to happen there cannot be allowed to stand. People are being executed and turned into slaves. And when Jericho’s done doing that, he’s coming here.” As she tried to voice her disbelief, I reached into my pocket and withdrew the folded flier George had given me earlier. “I didn’t say anything about this because I didn’t want to cause a panic.” I handed her the paper and watched her face turn white as she read its insanity.

Her wide-eyed stare told me I had her attention. “He is marking people with ash, just as the paper says” I resumed. “And even if he doesn’t intend on killing absolutely everybody, it’s clear the guy’s a lunatic. He must be stopped.” Her well-honed rhetorical powers stunned into silence, the politician nodded, but said nothing. “In any case, regardless of Jericho’s intentions, we need medical supplies and equipment that only the State has the capability to supply. So I need you to go back to Salem, or wherever the Governor’s at these days, and get him to send us help.” She blinked, stared at me for a bit, blinked again then finally nodded. “I need you to leave tonight.”

She took a deep breath as if to steel herself. “Okay,” she said, nodding again. “Okay.”

“I want you to go as well, George. You were there. You saw first-hand what he was doing.” He nodded, but didn’t respond. I didn’t expect him to. “Plus, you’ve got the whole ex-Federal Marshall thing. It ought to carry some weight.” He nodded again, added a shrug, hitched up his pants, and uttered: “Will do.”

Now for the hard part: “I want you to go with them, Frank.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” I said. What she suggested I do was both profane and potentially crippling to my person. I ignored it and carried on. “You are my direct representative. And you’re Ian’s daughter. Your presence and the fact your father was murdered by that crazy son of a bitch should carry the seriousness of the situation home to the Governor in a way nobody else can do it.” She still didn’t seem convinced. “Please, Cuz,” I begged, using the familiar form of cousin as a dirty and underhanded way of reminding her we were family. “I need you to do this.”

It took a bit more convincing and cajoling (and a few more daggers thrown at my personage) but she finally caved. And while she was upstairs getting ready to leave, I took George aside (and out of the earshot of Brenda Morgan) and told him my real reasons. “I need you to keep my cousin safe.” He nodded. “Win or lose, this fight that’s coming is gonna be ugly. If we lose and he wipes us out, I don’t want her anywhere near this place.” I gazed at the ceiling toward the room in which my mother lay dying. “She’s all I got left.” He nodded again. “And if the little plan I’ve got cooked up works and we win, it’ll be a massacre,” I added, once again thinking about Cannae. He raised his eyebrows, but as usual did not reply. “I don’t want her having any part of it.”

As Frank readied for departure, I tackled the next issue: defense. We weren’t doing too terribly bad in terms of weapons. The fifty-three police officers and three National Guardsmen who escaped Medford, all of whom were armed with more than one weapon apiece, brought with them an Army truck containing a dozen M-16’s, a thousand rounds of ammunition, two cases of tear gas canisters, and another of smoke grenades, along with launchers for both. It wouldn’t be

enough if Jericho came in force, but then this was, after all, America.

About half of the year-round residents owned guns of one type or another, from shotguns and hunting rifles, to pistols. In addition, a rather large number of refugees brought with them a veritable arsenal. We were by no means a well-regulated militia, but at least we were well-armed. God Bless America.

We'd need a complete inventory, of course, but it could wait until morning. What couldn't was the fact that we still didn't know Jericho's plan. We knew he'd be coming. We didn't know when and we didn't know how many he'd be bringing with him. This would have to change. Dean would have to return to Medford. We needed intelligence, or, failing that, we needed a warning.

They'd be able to communicate via the Police Band, using the large repeating antenna up on The Ridge, but this was limiting, due to the fact that Jericho would be able to listen in, so we also sent them out with CB radios. These, in turn, were limited by basic line-of-sight, due to the mountainous terrain between Medford and The Gap, so we needed to post human repeaters in between. After discussing various strategies, we decided to post one of them on top of The Ridge, thus giving us a better line-of-sight range, and another guy on our side of the last of three bridges between Gunter's Gap and Medford. He would act as relay station between us and the team that entered the town. He would also be rigging the bridge to blow.

Two things tended to happen around The Gap during the harsher winters: rock slides and avalanches. Occasionally, it became necessary to shake the snow on the ridges loose in a controlled manner so as to avoid having it come down onto our heads in an uncontrolled manner.

In addition, the freezing and thawing of the rock walls alongside the roads in and out of town caused landslides, which would sometimes block the road, thus cutting us off from the rest of civilization. As a result, the town maintained a moderate supply of dynamite.

We're only talking about half-a-dozen cases of the stuff, kept in storage well away from anything that might react badly to being blown up – just enough to reduce a medium-sized concrete bridge to rubble.

Only one road went between Medford and The Gap – the 62 – and there were three bridges along the forty-three mile stretch: one at Eagle Point, the second at Shady Cove, and the third just west of Dicky's gas station. Blowing any one of those bridges could not help but slow Jericho's approach.

He'd be forced to either rebuild the thing, or take the scenic route east through Klamath Falls, and then north through the southwestern edge of Crater Lake National Park, which, at an elevation of almost eight thousand feet, tended to be snowed-over during winter. Since freezing to death had never been a recommended tourist activity, the powers that be never bothered plowing the road. Assuming Jericho didn't intend to lead his army from the cab of a snow plow, odds were he'd have to stop and rebuild. This would give us at least a couple of days. I intended to put that time to good use.

Before Dean left, he took me aside and pointed out the obvious, yet unstated, aspect of my bridge demolition plan. "If we blow the bridge, we cut off all the refugees on the other side of the river."

“Yes,” I agreed, looking him right in the eye. “We do.”

“Can we live with that?”

“Can we afford not to?”

His eyes lost focus with mine as he considered my question. What he said was true, we would be cutting those people off – possibly thousands of them – and that was the point. Dick Coolidge had been right: if we tried to feed them all, we’d all starve. Starvation stared us in the face as an all-too real possibility – if not *probability*. An unpleasant fact, to be sure, but a fact nonetheless, and one not lost on Dean. Finally, he nodded, saying nothing and seeming unable to look me in the eye. He would do what needed to be done, but he didn’t have to like it.

George, Ms. Morgan and my cousin departed when Dean and his team did. Their route would take them too close to Jericho’s army for my tastes. I wanted them to have an armed escort.

I gave Frank a hug and asked her to please be careful. She grumbled one more time about my making her leave, said: “I hate you,” then hugged me again and whispered: “No I don’t” into my ear, then smacked me upside the head and left.

The problem of supply came next. We needed food and fuel. There were a lot of other things we lacked, but those two were the primaries. To Bobby and Krick, I said: “I want you guys to have a chat with Dick Coolidge out at the gas station.” Bobby, knowing Dick, seemed none too happy about the prospect. Krick remained blissful in his ignorance, at least for the time

being. Neither knew what I had in mind, but I quickly enlightened them. “The gas station is too exposed,” I explained. “We can’t defend it, so I want to move as much of the gasoline to the reserve tank as possible.”

“Oh, Dicky’s gonna love that,” Bobby snorted.

“I really don’t give a rat’s ass,” I told him, with no small amount of pleasure. “He’ll say no, but the least we can do is ask. And when he says no, tell him too bad, we’re taking it anyway.”

“And if he resists?” Krick asked.

“You can’t kill him,” I replied, then added: “But if he happens to get roughed up a bit...”

Bobby suddenly loved the idea. “This is gonna be fun.”

“Truth is, I don’t trust him,” I admitted. “Of all the people in town, he’s the most likely to join Jericho, so it will be in our best interest if he’s encouraged to do so – after we take the gas.” Krick nodded his understanding and Bobby gave me an enthusiastic thumbs-up, relishing the possibilities. “Jericho’s coming. I have no doubt,” they both nodded and Bobby’s smile left his face as I got serious. “I’ve got a few surprises in mind for him, but most of them are right at the gap into town, which is right at Dicky’s gas station. I don’t want him anywhere near that place.”

Strictly speaking, what I’d asked them to do didn’t mesh with basic American values. Here I was trying to defend our way of life, and my method of doing so threw the core values of ownership and private property right out the damned window. Perhaps to some it may seem as if

I were starting my career as a democratically elected official by acting quite a bit like a banana republic dictator. So be it. Suffice it to say I had a job to do and so I did it. If history wants to condemn me for the way in which I did it, fine. I didn't care then. I don't care now.

Having dealt with half of our supply problem – fuel – I turned my attention to the other half: food. As Charlie had already volunteered to lead an expedition east, I simply gave him a list, suggested he find a few good men, and turned him loose.

We primarily needed dry goods, such as flour and sugar, salt, boxed goods like oatmeal and cereal, powdered milk and oh-please-dear-God coffee (I told him I'd worship the ground he walked on if he could find a Starbucks), and canned goods, such as vegetables and fruits. I also asked him to try and find ammunition and weapons, and perhaps a conveniently full fuel tanker truck, but food (and coffee) was to be his primary goal.

He set out that night with five others in a three-pickup convoy, towing flatbed trailers holding four snowmobiles and a Snow Cat with treads like a small tank. If those machines worked in snow, it seemed reasonable they might work in ash as well. They planned to head north toward Bend, then cut east on the 26, until they found an abandoned town. They all went armed.

Finally, only Edgar and I remained. I brought him into the kitchen and emptied our next-to-last can of coffee into the pot. The night was far from over. "Edgar my friend," I began, putting my arm around his shoulder. "We need to build ourselves a wall."

39

“Chance favors the prepared mind.”

Louis Pasteur

The concrete plant we'd been using for the refugee housing project sat in an industrial complex astride the highway on either side of the 62, just north of Eagle Point, on our side of the first bridge north of Medford. The same complex contained the saw mill from which we obtained our lumber, as well as the rebar supplier and fabrication shop. In addition, it held a contractor's supply house, providing the myriad items necessary, such as soil compaction machines (called Wackers), ditch-digging equipment, and trench plates (inch-and-a-half thick steel plates used to bridge trenches), and, finally, a masonry block manufacturer and distributor. Essentially, the place served as a one-stop-shopping center for local construction. I intended to make full use of it.

My plan was to build a wall in the narrowest portion of the western gap, a span of some three-hundred and fifty feet; its scope and makeup to be determined by available materials. This meant our next task had to be finding out just what was available.

The problem as I saw it lay in the obvious fact that anything we could think of, Jericho could think of. And so Edgar and I, along with Deputies Gordon, Gadson, Barber, and Richardson – the men who'd nearly shot me as I foolishly entered the holding cell bullpen in Medford without knocking, along with Barber, who'd almost shot me at the hospital after I sucker-punched my mother – took a heavily armed midnight run to Eagle Point.

Wearing body armor (in which Edgar and I felt safe but extraordinarily uncomfortable)

and armed with M-16's and a shitload of ammo, we crept through the fog-shrouded, moonless night, driving without headlights. Edgar and I sat in front, jumping at the slightest shadowy movement, with Gordon and Gadson behind us and Barber and Richardson crammed into the back storage area with the tailgate open, ready to jump into action.

We needn't have bothered. The place felt and looked like an industrial ghost town; its plants and mills and storehouses devoid of anything human. Apparently, Jericho had been too busy executing and subjugating to think about rebuilding. I'd have been better off bringing truck drivers.

Edgar and Richardson knew how to operate the large trucks we liberated; the rest of us did not. Seeming every bit like so many fifteen year-olds trying to drive Dad's stick-shift for the first time, Barber, Gordon and I ground the gears of three trucks carrying ditch-diggers, Wackers, and rebar, respectively, as the two experienced drivers led the way with more rebar and pallets of masonry block, while Gadson followed in my SUV. The angry red and purple morning lightshow colored the eastern sky as we pulled to a stop at the entrance to town.

By this time, my sleep-deprived brain felt like fifty pounds of mush atop my sore and tired neck. Discretion being the better part of valor, I decided (or, actually, Edgar decided for me) it would be best for the safety of all concerned if I collapsed for a few hours. I left him in charge and made my way home on auto-pilot, already dreaming of blissful oblivion. I should have known better.

Mother changed my mind.

40

“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Dylan Thomas

When I began this literary journey into what happened in the aftermath of the Big Boom, there were three moments, three places I really didn't want to go: the first was the death of my uncle; the last was the carnage I caused at the Battle of Rogue River. The second and worst was the death of my mother. And I suppose my mental masturbatory asides on what I saw as the reasons behind our societal descent into the abyss were my way of putting off the inevitable. Or maybe not. I just don't know.

Trying to understand the why of it all helps with the first and the last, but does nothing to salve the pain of the second. I don't know if anything can. There's an empty place inside of me, a hole I doubt I'll ever be able to fill. And I guess I now know what she felt like when I disappeared from her life to join the military, and so maybe it makes it easier to understand how she could have married that piece of shit, Freddy Perdue. Not that it matters. In the end, it's not the same. She at least had been able to take comfort in the fact I would be coming back.

All those bullshit euphemisms like “passed away,” or “gone to her great reward,” or “in a better place,” exist as a bulwark against the cold, harsh reality of death. When somebody dies, they're dead. They're not coming back. Color it anyway you like, wrap it in the pretty package of euphemism, obfuscate the truth to your heart's content, and it changes exactly nothing. Dead is dead.

She was waiting for me when I got upstairs to her room. Miss Molly Noodle lifted her furry head from Mom's lap and made an attempt to wag her tail in greeting, but her heart wasn't in it. I gave the good dog a scratch behind the ear and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Mom's breathing was shallow and labored, her skin pale and clammy, her eyes sunken into their dark-ringed sockets, but they locked onto me as I sat, and she smiled. Her voice, barely above a whisper, cracked as she gave me her favorite (if chronologically inaccurate) greeting: "Hey Kiddo."

"Hey, Mom. How ya doing?"

"Peachy," she replied, and the effort brought on a weak coughing fit, bringing an unhealthy touch of red to her colorless face as the blood rushed into her head. "Be up and around in no time," she finished as the fit subsided.

"Oh, yeah, sure... You'll be turning cartwheels any day now."

"Damn right."

I didn't reply. Her warm green eyes gazed into mine and broke my heart. I held her hand gently, her skin feeling cold as a dead fish, and her grip, barely there. I sat thinking and feeling I should say something comforting, but nothing came to mind; the pain filling my brain, my soul, my everything. Finally, I managed to croak, "I love you, Mom."

She smiled, said "Shut up," and died.

I buried her in the back yard myself, with only Molly Noodle to observe the solemn proceedings. I did it mechanically, feeling and thinking nothing.

People deal with loss and grief in a wide variety of ways. Some embrace it, wallowing in it as if mourning were a way of life. Some accept it, cry their tears and move on. I shut down. Like laughing in the face of utter lunacy, it helps me deal.

I finished my task, showered, and tried to feed Molly one of the few remaining cans of dog food, but she only sniffed at her bowl before turning away and heading upstairs to lie in Mother's empty bed. I watched her disappear around the corner of the landing and then just stood in the middle of the kitchen staring at nothing, waiting to see if tears would come. They didn't. After what could have been moments or hours, for all my empty head could tell, I climbed the steps to my bedroom, laid down and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

41

“There is nothing will kill a man so soon
as having nobody to find fault with but himself.”

George Eliot

I woke up feeling hateful, mad at the world and everyone in it, including myself. My shoulders and back hurt, stiff from grave digging. I felt mean.

Molly lay curled on Mom’s unmade bed. I left her there. I didn’t care. I felt mean.

The pantry contained one last can of coffee, already open and half-empty. I made a full pot, painfully aware I was the only occupant of this empty house, except for the dog, and she didn’t drink coffee. I didn’t care. I felt mean.

I wandered outside as the percolator did its job, taking my very last cigarette with me. A fine, cold drizzle fell onto the already saturated ground. If it didn’t stop soon, the whole damned valley would flood. Everything wet, everything rotting or rusting as it sat unused and unnecessary. My watch said eleven-fifteen but the gray, leaden sky looked and felt more like twilight as I stood in the rain smoking. I didn’t care. I felt mean.

Mother Nature (or God or Fate or millennia of built-up bad Karma) had destroyed my world, wrecked everything I knew, everything I thought important. She’d drowned my mother – my center – in choking concrete ash, along with thousands – tens of thousands, maybe *hundreds* of thousands – of others, randomly, with no more concern or discernment than I might have in stomping on a trail of ants returning to their hill. She had pushed humanity to the brink and left the door to madness wide open, and there wasn’t a damned thing I could do about any of it. I

could scream and shout and howl my anguish to the four winds and it would change exactly nothing. I didn't care. I felt mean, and I had but one place – one *person* – at whom to vent my hatred: the Reverend Thomas Jericho.

I hopped into the truck, thinking to take it up to The Ridge, but then considered our all-too limited supply of gasoline and decided to walk instead. I used to love walking; my long legs striding in an easy rhythm, one step after another, automatic and brainless, allowing my mind to wander. And wander it would, flitting from one thought to another as a hummingbird might zig and zag through a field of flowers. And in those early days of youthful irresponsibility, my meaningless contemplations could and would meander from sublime dreams of this or that young lady, to ridiculous plans and schemes for how I'd inevitably take the world by storm.

That was then; before adult responsibility and cold, hard reality; before unfulfilled expectations and shattered dreams; before broken hearts and pain and loss; before I became Mayor of a town filled with people looking to me for hope when I had none to give; *Before Yellowstone*. Dozens waved to me as I made my way toward The Ridge – none of them apparently doing anything useful or constructive. I all but ignored them beyond a brief nod of recognition, shining them on as I quickened my pace; letting my body language tell them I had places to go and people to see – people who were not them.

As I headed up the icy, sloping road, my not-so young body told me I shouldn't have had that last cigarette. Wheezing and coughing before I'd even reached the halfway point, I couldn't help but think of the all the times Mom gave me shit about smoking. I'd thought I was in fairly good shape. That's what I get for thinking. My knees ached, my head hurt and my heart felt like

it would explode.

Once my breathing stopped sounding as if I might drop dead at any moment, I made my way over to the single truck stationed up there to act as radio relay. David Kepelkowski, a tall, burly, brown-haired native resident who everybody predictably called “Ski,” stood outside of it, wrapped in a parka against the cold, listening to a battery-powered boom box. Take a wild guess whose voice tickled the airwaves.

“...Good Lord has seen fit to allow us to survive His Great Purge of humanity.” Jericho seemed utterly unaffected by what must have been just as long a previous day as I’d had. “Do you really believe it was just His whim? No, my friends! Everything serves His Great Purpose. He has allowed us to live so that we may restore the balance disturbed by the manipulation of those secular atheists so long in charge of our beloved country. For decades, we have been controlled by the ACLU and the NAACP and their Jewish masters who have taken our God-given Christian birthright and twisted it into something unrecognizable.”

I nodded a welcome to Ski and asked: “How long?”

“All night,” he answered. “They seized the radio station sometime yesterday afternoon, I guess. It’s either been him or one of his lackeys, and they’ve all been telling their flock who to blame. It’s all the Jews and the blacks and every other goddamned thing under the sun, on and on and on and on. And right now, I don’t care. It’s the only thing keeping me awake.”

“And look at what it has caused,” the Reverend continued. “Look at what happened. Look at what those Godless heathens did to our fair community. They did this, my friends. They brought the violence of the last couple of days upon us. The heathens, the atheists, the homosexuals and abortionists, the sub-human hordes and all who support them have brought this

to our doorstep. We did not ask for this responsibility, this burden, this Righteous Task. They have forced it upon us and it is God's Will that we should take up his mighty sword and vanquish those who have ruined our country, who have destroyed the Lord's balance. We did not ask for this cup of poison, but God has set it before us as He did with His own Begotten Son. And like our Lord Jesus, we cannot turn away. We cannot weaken our resolve to carry out the Lord's Will."

"I wish he'd shut the Hell up," Ski said. "Either I'm just too tired to filter out his bullshit anymore, or he's actually making a certain kind of sense."

"On what planet?" I asked, incredulous.

"I don't mean the God stuff," he corrected. "It's the rest of it. This stuff about what's happened to America." I just stared at him, so he continued. "He's right in that it's gotten fairly well FUBAR. The ACLU defending assholes, the NAACP crying racist anytime someone says anything about African-Americans, the wetbacks streaming across the border and none of the politicians doing shit about it... You can't deny that much is true." I didn't disagree. "We've gotten buried under the bullshit, and it's well past time somebody should do something about it."

Perhaps it was my contrary nature or maybe just the perceived need to put a stop to his train of thought before it went off the rails and started affecting the rest of the town, but it seemed as if I ought to say something. Jericho interrupted me.

"And the Lord's will begins with righting the wrong committed by that evil rapist who took one of our daughters. A reckoning must be made. We must go to where the atheist heathens have taken him. We will ask that he be turned over so that he might feel the righteous wrath of God's Chosen. If they do so, all sins will be forgiven – for now. But if they do not, we

will take him, and woe be it to any who stand in our way.”

“We need to give his ass up,” Ski declared.

“And then what?” I asked, pissed at having to revisit what I thought we’d settled the previous night.

“What do you mean? We give him up, they leave us alone. I’ll be damned if I’m going to die because of some fucking rapist.”

“Apparently, you weren’t listening to what he just said.”

“I sure as Hell was,” he argued. “He said if we give that asshole up they’ll leave us alone.”

“You listened, but you didn’t hear. You missed the rest of the sentence.” He glared at me as if I’d just called him an idiot, which I suppose I had, but the stakes were too damned high to worry about his feelings. “He said if we give the guy up, all sins will be forgiven – *for now*.” He shrugged, obviously missing the point. “Don’t you get it? It’s the ‘for now’ part. It means sooner or later he’s coming for us. We need to kick his ass now, while he’s still getting organized, not later, when he’s stronger and we haven’t got a prayer.”

42

“I am patient with stupidity, but not
with those who are proud of it.”

Edith Sitwell

I checked on our own version of the Great Wall next. I'd been able to see it from The Ridge and had seen the beehive of activity, but from a height of two hundred and fifty feet, it appeared to be little more than a gash in the ground. A worm's eye view showed a different picture.

Through Edgar's able leadership and the efforts of a surprising number of volunteers and two ditch diggers, they'd cut a three hundred foot long by nine foot wide by three foot deep footing, placing the removed earth alongside the approaching road, creating a long low hill. By the time I arrived, men (and a few women) were busily removing the loose rocks from the footing and using the Wackers to compact the soil at its bottom.

Building a wall is a three-stage process: dig the footing, build the forms into which the concrete will be placed, and then place the concrete. The footing is what keeps it from toppling over, and so you generally dig it two-to-three times as wide as the wall is going to be. In this case, we'd decided on a three-foot thick wall, thus the nine foot-wide footing. Once that's dug, you clear out all the loose shit and compact what's left to limit the amount of settling that naturally occurs as a result of gravity. Basically every kind of structural construction is designed to serve this same purpose – to counteract the effect of that mean old bitch, gravity.

Once the footing is dug, cleared and compacted, rebar is placed to counteract the natural

limitations of concrete. Cement and concrete, contrary to popular belief, are not the same things. Without going into a highly technical (and exceedingly dull) explanation, cement is a powdered mixture of lime and pozzolan. Pozzolan is named for the fine volcanic ash originally discovered by the Romans in the area around Mount Vesuvius (which, again, gave us Pompeii and an awesome location for a Pink Floyd concert film). When mixed with sand, gravel and water, it creates concrete, which is incredibly strong in compression but not so strong in tension, and that's why you need rebar.

I found Edgar at one end of the long footing. Bobby and Krick were with him. "That's it, just stand around shooting the shit instead of working, you slack bastards," I joked as I came upon them, trying to seem a damned-sight friendlier than I felt. As anti-social as I wished to be, it would have served no purpose to snap at the people who were helping both me and the citizens – new and old – of Gunter's Gap. Bobby good-naturedly suggested I perform a sex act on myself – a suggestion I proceeded to ignore, as I launched into what I saw as task number one.

"There's an awful lot of people in town just standing around," I said to Edgar. "I don't mean to seem like a prick – or maybe I do – but in any case, you know what they say about idle hands. We need to find something useful to keep them occupied."

"Any suggestions?" he asked, removing his ever-present baseball cap (this one advertising a rather disgusting licorice liquor I'd imbibed far too strongly during one memorably ugly evening at Tisa's in Samoa) and scratching his bald head.

"No," I answered. "But work them till they drop. It'll keep their minds off other things I'd prefer they didn't think about."

I turned to Bobby. "Speaking of which, I'm not getting a warm and fuzzy from the guy

we've got up on The Ridge," When he responded with the obvious question of "What's up," I replayed the conversation I'd just had with Ski, adding to it my concern over the exhausted man's wavering support of our decision to hang onto the prisoner.

"I'd like you to send someone you trust to replace him."

"Why?" He asked.

My inner son-of-a-bitch threatened to rise to the surface, so I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before responding. "That's both our lookout and our radio relay. We need someone we can trust up there, and I do not trust Ski."

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a handheld radio of the type commonly used by law enforcement. He waggled it at me. "We don't need a human relay. The substation repeater is up there and we've got a base station set up at the Sheriff's office. Just then, the radio crackled to life.

"They're on the move! Blow the bridge! Blow the bridge!"

43

“This book is not for children or morons.”

William Powell
Introduction to *The Anarchist Cookbook*

I recognized Dean’s voice, although it sounded a whole lot more excited than I was used to hearing. I glanced at the other three, but their eyes were locked onto the radio as if watching events unfold on television.

“You’re on the wrong side! If we blow it you’ll be cut off!” Not sure who said it, but what he’d said poked my heart like an ice pick.

“I don’t give a shit! Do it! Do it now before it’s too late!”

Bobby keyed the mic he had clipped to his collar. “Mobile One, this is Base. Give me a SITREP,” he ordered, using military jargon for “situation report.”

“I don’t care who this is,” came Dean’s barked reply. “Get the fuck off the radio! Johnny, blow the goddamned bridge!”

“Here goes. Good luck. *Via con dios.*”

Afterward, some claimed to have heard the explosion, but it had to be bullshit, because that first bridge was roughly twenty miles away as the crow flies. In any event, the implication couldn’t be ignored: Jericho was on the move and headed this way. Praying to God the dynamite did enough damage to slow his progress, I started barking orders.

“Get those people out of the footing,” I told Edgar. “I don’t care if the ground is goo.

Lay the rebar and start pouring concrete.” I turned to Krick next. “We need two teams: one this side of the second bridge, the other about ten miles out the east road. Find out from the scouting party if they have any dynamite left, and if not, we need to find ourselves a Timothy McVeigh,” I said, referring to the crazy bastard who destroyed the Oklahoma City Federal Building using fertilizer and diesel fuel. “We gotta be able to blow stuff up.”

Bobby had a solution. “I know just the guy.”

We hopped in Bobby’s pickup and headed for the east end of town. As we drove, he reminded me of our very own token member of the survivalist community.

Mitch Reavy, who was said to be forty but looked more on the far side of fifty, had come from “somewhere back east,” the offspring of an apparently wealthy family. Following a brief stint in the Army, he reportedly applied and failed to be accepted at three police departments, five county sheriff’s departments (including Jackson County, Oregon) three state police, and the FBI, but that could just be rumor.

What we knew for certain was that he and his wife, Marie, settled on a twenty-five acre parcel of mostly wooded land about fifteen miles southeast of Gunter’s Gap, along one of the older logging roads on the western edge of the Rogue River National Forest. Even less is known of his wife, other than her reported love and knowledge of weaponry, because she tragically died in a car accident eighteen months after they moved in, a little less than ten years before the Big Boom. Neither of them came to town much, except to pick up consumables, such as toilet paper and the like. After she died, Mitch rarely made the trip.

A few people in town knew him – or came as close to knowing him as anyone can know a virtual hermit. Bobby had been one of them, mainly by benefit of his having gone hunting out that way on a number of occasions. Over the years, they had formed a sort of cautious friendship, primarily, I suspect, due to the fact that Mitch had been in awe of Bobby's service as both a cop, and a member of the elite Navy SEALs.

I had seen the man exactly three times. Frank and I used to joke about him being our version of Boo Radley. All literary references aside, Bobby pointed out the obvious: if anyone in town either had or could rig explosives, it'd be Mitch Reavy.

We parked the truck out on the logging road and walked in toward the house, Bobby having suggested caution as a preferable alternative to getting our heads blown off. The place sat within a fenced clearing, well back into the woods over a rutted trail that might have made a decent motocross run, except for the probability of bobby traps. We'd made it most of the way to the suspiciously open iron gate before we found him – or, rather, what was left of him.

By what we could discern from the mangled remnants of his bloody carcass (parts of which, upon further examination, we discovered as far as twenty feet away), we believed he had been setting a claymore and accidentally set the thing off, blowing himself to bits. This brought to mind a rather disturbing conclusion: we'd stumbled in through a mine field.

“Oops,” I commented, demonstrating my capacity for understatement.

Bobby looked at me, then down at the body, then back down the road, and then back to me again. “Well, shit,” he said.

“Exactly,” I replied. “Took the words right out of my mouth.”

He scratched his goateed chin, re-did his visual inspection of the situation, and then gave me his assessment. “We’re what, about a dozen feet from the gate?” I nodded. “When you set a mine field you know you’re going to have to walk through – especially one that’s almost certainly going to get covered in snow – you gotta do it such a way that you can easily remember where you put the trip wires.” I shrugged, accepting his logic because he obviously knew more about the subject than I did. He then called my attention to the well-used Humvee parked in front of the house. “He wouldn’t put the trip across the road, because then he’d have to remove it every time he went through the gate. So either the trigger is remote, or...” His voice trailed off as he surveyed the scene yet again. “Follow in my footprints,” he ordered, finally, and set off toward the gate, keeping to the center of one of the wheel ruts. I stood my ground, not budging an inch until I saw he’d successfully made it through with all his limbs intact, and then I followed.

After disabling three more booby traps – one on the porch and two on the front door – Bobby led the way into a survivalist’s dream. First checking absolutely everything for traps (and finding over a dozen more of them), we discovered a cache of weapons, ammo, survival gear and Meals-Ready-to-Eat worthy of a *Survivalist’s Monthly* Special Edition. Among the wide variety of items, we found enough MREs and dried foods to last one person for a decade, twenty-three cases of canned fruit and vegetables, about a hundred pounds of beef jerky, enough alcohol to float an aircraft carrier, three tents, four arctic-grade sleeping bags, full climbing gear, two expedition-grade backpacks, five Kevlar vests, the largest collection of knives I think I’ve ever seen, tens of thousands of rounds of ammo in various calibers, five shotguns, twelve handguns, fourteen rifles, two WWII-vintage Thompson sub-machineguns, three Uzis, four Mac-10s, and (I

swear to God) two – count them – two .50 caliber machineguns. I don't know what the hell this guy had been planning, or where he'd gotten all this stuff, but I thanked God he had, especially after I stumbled upon the fifty-one three-pound cans of coffee. I could have kissed the guy – if he hadn't already been dead.

We also discovered a collection of at least a dozen empty bottles of jack, which may have explained how he'd managed to blow himself into hamburger. Alcohol and explosives: not a good mix.

And as if that weren't enough, as if his excessive preparation for the end of the world hadn't proved to be a magnificent boon from Heaven above, while we were roaming about the place like two kids in the most dangerous candy store in the world, we discovered what (aside from the coffee) were probably the most important items in a sub basement he'd concealed behind a shelf-unit at one end of the main basement. When we opened the hidden door (which we found because the cans we tried to remove from that particular shelf had been glued to the thing, thus arousing our suspicion), and descended the stairs, we couldn't help but stand at the bottom, gaping in wonder and more than a little fear at the three hundred square-foot room filled with explosives.

Once we'd loaded both Bobby's pickup and the Dear-Departed Mitch Reavy's Hummer (after checking it for booby traps, of course), we headed back toward town, stopping at the roadblock Krick had established in our absence. The senior law enforcement officer himself was there, overseeing the operation. When we told him what we'd found and showed him a few of the items we'd brought with us, it looked as if he were about to have an embarrassing accident

of the masturbatory variety, but he managed to maintain control of himself before such a social faux pas could occur.

And then, of course, reality reared its ugly head.

44

“War is a great asshole magnet.”

P. J. O’Rourke

“...Base, this is Mobile One. Base, this is Mobile One. Over.” Dean’s voice came through the radio on Krick’s belt as if he were whispering.

Krick keyed the mic clipped to his collar. “This is Base. Go.”

“Gotta keep quiet,” Dean cautioned. “I gave them the slip, but I don’t know how close they are.” We all glanced at each other, the tension visible in all eight pairs of eyes. Along with Bobby, Krick and I, five others stood watching the radio as if it were a TV set. I didn’t know three of them – all Deputies we’d inherited from Medford – but Mark Hamilton, whose machine shop sat on the eastern edge of town, and Officer Jim Barber, who’d nearly shot me at the hospital a scant two days before, were both familiar.

Krick gave him a subdued “Roger,” and waited for him to continue his report.

“The center span of the bridge is gone, but the ends are still intact. It’ll only take them a

couple days to repair it and they've apparently got an engineer that knows what he's doing. They're pissed, but they're organized, and they've already started stripping everything from the housing project Jake was working on. Don't know if it's gonna be enough. My guess is they need the concrete plant. Not sure how they're gonna get it, but they seem awful damned determined. Those red-jacketed bastards are making sure of it."

I grabbed Barber by the arm. "Get your ass to the other end of town and tell Edgar about this. Tell him we need to send reinforcements to the plant. We cannot let that fall until we finish the wall." He gave me a quick nod, then started to take off but stopped when he realized the six of them had come out to set up the road block in only one truck. Krick tossed him the keys and off he went.

Dean continued his report. "They've got themselves an army – maybe a couple thousand strong. And I guess they've got plenty of ammo, because they're using it like mad to execute people in White City."

I gave Bobby a questioning glance, to which he explained: "If they were conserving ammo, they'd be hanging instead of shooting. Unless they're idiots. I guess that's possible. I hope it is." I nodded my agreement as we continued to listen.

"I think it's that ash thing. They're killing everybody they don't need for rebuilding the bridge. And people are doing it." Even over the radio, the emotion in his voice came through loud and clear. "Women, kids, old people; they're killing them all. And the red jackets are making sure they do it. I saw a couple that balked. One of them was even a member of Jericho's flock, I think. – you know, the guys in the robes. One of the red jackets took out a sword – an actual by God sword – and chopped the guy's head off. Made sure everybody was watching.

Nobody argued after that.”

I glanced at the others, at the horror and disbelief reflected in all their eyes – all except Bobby, who appeared to have no problem believing. I gave him a questioning raised eyebrow. “Somalia. Early Nineties,” he explained. “Some of the villages we went through...” He visibly shuddered, the memory of it being that strong, that bad. “ Assholes,” he spat, then cracked open his ever-present scattergun. “These motherfuckers need to die. Whatever else happens, we need to kill as many of them as possible.” With a snap, he closed the scatter and stood there glaring at us as if daring us to argue. Nobody did.

“And Jericho is keeping them fired up,” Dean’s disembodied voice reported. “He’s broadcasting a never-ending sermon from the Medford radio station and the red jackets have made sure there are boom boxes everywhere. Everybody’s gotta listen. It’s like that psy-ops warfare shit we did to Noriega back in the Eighties, with radios blaring at all hours. He’s got— Wait a minute. Something’s coming up the road,”

“What now?” I asked. Naturally, no one answered.

“Looks like they got themselves some artillery; old, like maybe World War Two, and I don’t think it’s American. Like it matters.” He paused for a moment, and in my mind I could see him scanning whatever it was through binoculars. “They got ammo for it, too. Where they found a cannon I have no idea, but they’ve got one”

I did. I kept thinking about the Japanese cannon in Alba Park I saw on the day everything went to Hell – a whopping two days before this.

What a two days! Medford had gone insane. My uncle – the closest thing to a father I’d

ever known – got his head blown off. Gunter’s Gap had become a refugee center. I had been elected Mayor. My mother had died. Two days... Jesus!

And then Mark Hamilton spoke up. “All they got is one cannon? Hell, we got three.”

“What the Hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“Dickerson’s Howitzers,” he explained, thus once again making me feel like a low-grade moron. “We have three big, beautiful and fully functional cannons sitting right in our town square.”

“Those things actually work?” Krick expressed his incredulity.

“Damn straight they do! We give a twenty-one gun salute every Fourth of July. And I’m the guy who does it.”

“Ammo?” Bobby inquired.

“Twenty five blank loads and a dozen empties,” he replied. “Shouldn’t be too hard to turn ‘em into live rounds.”

“Make it happen,” I told him.

The radio crackled and Dean’s excited voice came through loud and clear. “Holy Christ, they’re burning White City! I see four – no, five – five fires, big ones. Oh my God!” Seven pairs of eyes all staring at the microphone clipped to Krick’s chest; all of us just trying to fight the rising horror we all felt; the same horror we heard in Dean’s voice. “They’ve set up a ring along the northern perimeter of town. They’re shooting anybody that tries to escape the fire. They’re burning people alive!”

45

“Indeed I tremble for my country
when I reflect that God is just.”

Thomas Jefferson

Word traveled like, well, like word does when everybody in town has a vested interest in what’s happening – particularly when it’s playing out over the airwaves. This gave me an idea, but I needed to talk to Crow first. I found him, along with Dennis Brown and his new apprentice, Skeeter Willits, about halfway up the stepped waterfall at the back of Dennis’ property, tinkering with the hydroelectric generator Dennis had been using for his indoor pot farm.

“Can you boost the radio signal going through the repeater up on The Ridge?” I asked, after getting the three of them to come a bit closer to the ground. I didn’t think dangling precariously alongside a waterfall would be conducive to my planning and scheming. And, yeah, okay, that water was freaking cold and I was still a weather wimp from Nevada, but those facts were neither here nor there.

“Sure,” Crow replied. “It’s mainly a question of power. How much you want me to boost it?”

“Enough to overpower the signal coming out of the radio station in Medford.”

“Ooh, I don’t know,” he hedged. “It’s possible as long as we can drag enough generators up there—“

“Hook them in sequence,” Dennis added his two cents, finishing Crow’s thought.

“Exactly,” Crow affirmed. “The problem is: the antenna itself might not be able to take the necessary amount of juice.”

“It might if we increase the diameter of the cable, add insulators and...” The discussion between them quickly degenerated into *Peanuts* speak, “*Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah*,” so I cut them off before I zoned out entirely and forgot my reason for being there.

“Can you do it?”

The two men looked at each other and nodded then Crow asked: “Why do you want it?”

Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, lists five essentials for victory: knowing when to fight and when not to fight; knowing how to handle both superior and inferior forces; having an army animated by the same spirit throughout the ranks; being prepared and waiting to take the enemy unprepared; and finally, holding military capacity while not being interfered with by the sovereign. Of those, I could count on having the first, the fourth and the fifth.

We could run, we could give up, or we could fight. I had made my choice to fight, and while there were many in Gunter’s Gap who disagreed, there were enough – or at least enough of the right ones (the cops and soldiers and ex-soldiers) – who agreed and were ready to back my play. The trick was going to be buying enough time to get ready, while making it seem to Jericho as if we were not ready. And I was counting on that crazed preacher to interfere with the people he put in charge of his army. Screwed-up people do screwed-up things. This holds doubly true when those people are the ones in charge, especially if they’re provoked.

I also counted on the idea that the majority of soldiers in his army were there because

they'd been forced to join. He had a core group of fanatics, true believers who would follow him no matter how insane he got – and it was clear he'd lost his freaking mind. Killing women and children, burning them alive, was not a rational act, and while I believed a large proportion of his army were morons for ever backing him in the first place, for allowing that lunatic to manipulate them into what had already been done, I did not believe they were all irrational. They would not have done what they did to the people of White City had they not been forced.

When people are forced into a situation, they will do what they have to do, especially when the alternative is death. But they will not have their heart in it; they will not be animated by the same spirit throughout.

This belief did not alter my determination to kill as many of them as I possibly could.

As Dennis and the Crow were working to boost the radio signal, and as Mark Hamilton was making live artillery rounds, I headed for the wall, after dropping off the cache of weapons that filled Reavy's Hummer and sending Bobby, along with Krick and two others, back to Mitch Reavy's place to grab another load. The footing had been poured in concrete and Edgar had three different crews working on the wall forms and another four prepping the rebar.

To ensure we had concrete to pour on the rebar, I sent Deputy Jim Barber along with twenty-five heavily-armed others to the concrete plant to hold if Jericho made an attempt to seize the place before we were good and ready to let him have it. Because of its size and the way it spread out over both sides of the highway, we couldn't hope to hold the plant long, but long enough would suffice.

We needed two more days to get ready for Jericho. I sent Deputy Gilbert Gordon, who'd been watching the prisoner at our pathetic three-cell jail, along with a team of twenty deputies, National Guardsmen and other volunteers to hook up with our scouts on this side of the blown bridge. Their job was to wait for the enemy to finish repairing the bridge, and then to strategically withdraw back to The Gap, throwing as many obstacles in their path as they could.

The road north from the bridge at Eagle Point wound its way through a couple of gorges, and acres and acres of wooded land, as well as yet another bridge before it finally got to The Gap, providing both the opportunity and the material for blockades. I sent along twenty of the hundred and fifty pounds of C-4 we liberated from Mitch's storeroom, just to be sure.

There were two ways for Jericho to get to us without repairing the bridge, one of which was by taking the 5 north through Grants Pass and turning east on the 138 at Roseburg, a winding, probably snow-covered road that skirted the western edge of Crater Lake National Park. He'd need two things to make it happen: snow plows and an obscene amount of gas. The trip would be roughly one hundred and forty miles, and require at least a hundred vehicles to move his army. Vehicles needed gas. Gas was in short supply. It did not seem possible. Nevertheless, I radioed Dean and had him keep an eye out for the plows, and sent yet another team ten miles north to Union Creek with another twenty pounds of explosives and an emissary to try and recruit help. We would need it.

The second was the way I've already described, through Klamath Falls and Crater Lake – the same way Mother and I used to get to Gunter's Gap on the day Yellowstone went *Ker-Flooy*. But it also led through Union Creek, so in the event he chose not to repair the bridge, we'd still be able to slow him down.

The next thing I did was to post a road block on our side of the last bridge into town; not to keep Jericho out, but to keep anyone in who might go to him and reveal our plans. I had a number of nasty surprises in mind for him and I did not want him finding out until it was too late. I had no idea as to the nature and/or character of our refugees. I couldn't take the chance. I also didn't trust Dick Coolidge.

Rather than hit the road as I'd hoped he would after Bobby and Krick "persuaded" him to give up his gas, The Dickster sequestered himself within his house, which sat behind the gas station. I couldn't just leave him there. This left me with no alternative, so I had him arrested and put into a cell next to Harold Jefferson. I'm not proud of it, but I didn't see anything else I could do.

Next, we placed Mitch Reavy's twenty-five claymore mines along the road opposite from the Ridge. I shudder to think what our token Survivalist had in mind for all that ordinance. This didn't stop me from using every bit of it.

Claymores are essentially a curved steel sheet covered in explosive, behind an air space packed with ball bearings encapsulated within a plastic cover with the words "Front Toward Enemy" written on it. They sit on wire legs which are stuck into the ground, and then they are concealed with brush or something similar. When they explode, the ball bearings shoot out in a sixty degree arc, shredding anything within a couple hundred feet. And we had twenty-five of them.

It took Mister Hamilton, with the help of three other guys, a mere four hours to make thirty artillery shells. Thirty doesn't sound like much on paper, but thirty explosions can create a hell of a mess. They wouldn't be as accurate or have the range of a manufactured 155mm round,

but we were going for damage, rather than precision, and I didn't think we'd need to lob the things fourteen miles. I set him to work on my next nasty surprise.

Napalm is a combination of, essentially, paint thinner (benzene, toluene or xylene), polystyrene (that ubiquitous white foam found in the packaging of pretty much any fragile and/or electronic device), and gasoline. Paint thinner will dissolve polystyrene, turning it into a sort of jelly that sticks to anything it touches, so we first dropped foam into the thinner inside of ten fifty-five gallon drums we found in various places throughout the town, and which we spaced at equal intervals along The Ridge side of the road between the bridge and the wall, waited for it to dissolve, and then (carefully) added the gasoline. To ignite them, we placed quarter-pound C-4 charges with detonators beneath the Ridge side of the drums. I then had all the drums painted white to give the innocuous appearance that they were there as decoration or as a barrier, rather than as devices to set people on fire.

This wasn't exactly done in secret – I mean, the things sat in plain sight – but the only people who knew exactly what they were, were the people who made them. This was by design.

War – all war – is an obscenity. William Tecumseh Sherman – no slouch when it came to armed conflict – said: “*War is cruelty. There's no use trying to reform it. The crueller it is, the sooner it'll be over.*” The object of war is to kill as many of the enemy as you can, while not allowing them to kill as many of you. There isn't a single kinder or gentler, touchy or feely thing about it. It is well that most people do not have the stomach for it.

Hell, I don't have the stomach for it. I am thoroughly sickened by what we did at the Battle of Rogue River. I would not, however, change one bit – except, of course, I wish we'd

never had to fight the thing. Yeah, and if wishes were bottles of tequila I'd have died of alcohol poisoning a long damned time ago.

46

“History teaches us that men and nations
behave wisely once they have
exhausted all other alternatives.”

Abba Eban

And so the stage was set for our final bloody act. It had been thirty-four days since the earthquakes started this whole mess; a scant seven hundred and eighty some-odd hours to go from the land of the free and the home of the brave, to a place where food riots would kill hundreds and a nut job televangelist could raise an army and set them to burn.

Even now, a year after the fact, this seems bizarre and incomprehensible, like the fevered dreams of a heroin junkie going cold turkey. But I lived it. I know it happened. I helped it to. I *caused* it to.

No, I am not taking blame for the end of life as we knew it. Get serious. But I think you'd have to say I bear responsibility for some of what took place in the aftermath of Mother Nature escorting us to the woodshed and spanking our behinds with the biggest paddle in

recorded history. So do you. So do we all.

To Hell with it. There'll be plenty of time for recriminations later. I'll spank you and you can spank me – just as long as you're a six-foot blonde woman named Helga, scantily dressed in leather and thigh-highs. But I digress.

The morning of Friday, January 25th, 2013 – the eve of the Battle of Rogue River – dawned cold and windy. Much had happened in the preceding couple of days.

From all indications, Jericho had rejected the idea of bypassing the bridge. Using the lumber we'd stockpiled for the housing project, the repair proceeded, but without concrete, and with having to fight the near-flooded river and its powerful current, it progressed slowly.

Dean managed to steal a small boat and slip across the river, and his reports (including one about a construction barge below the bridge breaking loose and drowning its dozen occupants) kept us updated, but there was much we could not see, so I kept the team at Union Creek in place, even though our so-called “forces” had become dangerously dispersed.

Charlie and five others were someplace east of us, out of contact due to line-of-sight problems caused by the mountains. Maybe they were finding success, and maybe not. We simply didn't know.

George and my cousin had gone north in search of assistance we had no way of knowing whether or not we'd get. As Ms. Morgan had said, the Governor and National Guard had their hands full with the riots and social unrest in Portland – a much larger population and, therefore, dilemma than the tiny speck of Gunter's Gap. I honestly did not expect their effort to bear fruit.

As I told George, I wanted Frank out of town, away from whatever would happen when Jericho finally got to us. As the last remaining member of my dwindling family and the only person on the planet I still gave a shit about, I wanted her safe from harm and/or disconnected from any possible guilt that might arise if my plan actually worked.

Gilbert Gordon and his force of twenty linked up with Dean a few hours after the latter's amphibious retreat. From their radio reports, I learned they kept busy prepping the road so they could throw everything – up to and including the proverbial kitchen sink – in Jericho's way once the inevitable bridge repair was complete. The additional twenty I'd sent north to Union Creek were doing the same.

Deputy Jim Barber and another twenty-five men had gotten to the concrete plant quite literally in the nick of time. Less than an hour after their arrival, thirty of Jericho's men, including two of his Red Jackets, attempted to take it by storm. Hampered by the fact they had to cross the river in a limited number of boats with no more than they could carry on their backs, the force proved inadequate, was easily repulsed and cost them fifteen men – including the Red Jackets, who made a suicidal charge right smack into the center of Barber's line. Once their fanatical leaders lay dead, the others lost their zeal and retreated to the river, but we knew they'd try again. They didn't have any choice. We, on the other hand, did.

Edgar, along with the three hundred volunteers worked their asses off without rest for twenty hours straight and completed the wall just before midnight on January 24th. It wasn't pretty, wouldn't win any awards or appear on the cover of *Architectural Digest* by any stretch of the imagination, but it would work. Three hundred-thirty-four feet long, with a sixteen foot gap in the middle (effectively creating two walls), standing eight feet tall by three feet wide, and

capped with an additional four feet, eight inches of twelve-inch wide masonry block, our Great Wall of Gunter's Gap gave us a place to make our stand.

We drove one of the school buses, to which we'd welded two trench plates, into the sixteen-foot gap, giving us a semi-mobile doorway (the plates made it unbalanced to one side). It couldn't move very far or very quickly, but then it didn't need to.

We purposely left the patch-work wooden wall forms in place to give it a weaker appearance. Potential success of this ruse seemed questionable, at best. It wouldn't take a genius to figure out we'd defended the concrete plant for a reason, but every little bit helped. Once they saw us arrayed behind the wall in an easily defensible position, any leader with a few active brain cells would know better than to attack, provided he was given the ability to act independently.

The fifth of Sun Tzu's essentials for victory states: "He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign." The inverse of this is also true. If the man in charge of the army (I hesitate to call any of Jericho's red-jacketed psychos a general) has only as much control as the overall leader (the Good Reverend) gives him, then he is hampered in what he can do.

I counted on Jericho and his lunacy issuing orders to his "general" that had little or nothing to do with sound military tactics. This also had its basis in *The Art of War*. In the section on *Tactical Dispositions*, Sun Tzu said: "*To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.*" He also said: "*If your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, that he may grow arrogant.*" With a little help from our resident genius – The Crow – I planned o do

just that.

47

“No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: he is always convinced that it says what *he* means.”

George Bernard Shaw

“Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire; your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. So sayeth the Lord through his prophet, Isaiah. My friends, can you not see the Truth in the Word of God? Can you not see that this has happened – is happening?”

We sat at a table in the Sheriff’s substation office: Bobby, Krick, Pastor Judith McGee, Reverend John Warren, and I; listening to the ongoing madness of the Reverend Thomas Jericho on a boom box. It was about three in the afternoon. We’d been in a holding pattern most of the day; our collective fingernails gnawed to the quick as we waited for Jericho to make his move.

We’d been getting radio updates from the various teams throughout the day. Jericho had sent about a hundred men to retry taking the concrete plant we no longer needed. I didn’t want him to know this fact, so we left Deputy Barber and his team in place. When the attack came, I had them put up a token resistance, then pull back to the north. I’d considered blowing the plant, but then rejected the idea for the simple reason we’d almost certainly need concrete sometime in

the future. Just to be safe, Task Force Barber did their best to wreck the road as they went.

This made Dean's position untenable, because it effectively cut off their retreat, so I pulled most of them back when the attack started. They linked up with Barber's team about an hour later, giving us forty-five armed men with enough explosives to cause one hell of a lot of damage.

Dean elected to remain. So did two others. Their reasoning – that someone needed to keep an eye on the bridge repair – was sound, but this fact didn't lessen the hopelessness of their situation. In effect, I was leaving them to be captured or killed. For my money, the latter possibility seemed the best. I shuddered to think what would happen to them if they were captured. This did not, however, stop me from approving their decision. To tell the truth, if they hadn't volunteered, I'd have ordered them to do it anyway. Whether or not they'd have followed such an apparently suicidal directive, well, the point is moot.

"How long has he been at it?" I queried.

"Near as I can tell, he's been up for two solid days," Pastor McGee answered. "There have been pauses, but only for a matter of minutes, during which I suspect he was answering the call of nature."

"It's a miracle," Reverend Warren expressed with awe.

"Yeah," I replied, sardonically. "It's a miracle he hasn't suffered a psychotic break. But then that's assuming he was sane to begin with."

"Isaiah goes on to tell us in Chapter One," Jericho resumed his ceaseless sermon. "*But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured with the sword.* If you refuse, if you side with the

heathen, instead of the righteousness of our Great Cause, brothers and sisters, then the Lord's wrath shall be upon you. *For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. How is the faithful city become an harlot! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it.* Do you not see how this describes the den of iniquity that has become the town of Gunter's Gap, where dwelleth the evil heathen who raped our daughter? The Bible foretold of this day, brothers and sisters. Could it be any plainer?"

"Could Jericho be any more full of shit?" Bobby asked no one in particular.

"He is quoting the Bible," Reverend Warren countered. He was a pleasant, slightly rotund gentleman in his fifties, with short, salt-and-pepper hair.

"He's *mis*-quoting the Bible," Judith McGee argued. "Misquoting and misinterpreting, as thousands have done throughout history."

"And that's why I brought you guys here," I told them. They looked at me with curiosity, but we were interrupted by the arrival of Ronny Gibbons, who stormed into the office, filled with righteous indignation.

"I demand to know the meaning of this!"

"How ya doing, Ronny," I greeted him. I'd been waiting for his appearance ever since I had Krick arrest Dick Coolidge. The only surprising thing about it was that it'd taken him so long to find out. I guess being in a town preparing to be attacked by an army led by a lunatic had its advantages.

"Why have you arrested Richard Coolidge?" He demanded.

"Because I deemed it necessary," I replied.

“What gives you the right?” He was pissed, and I suppose he had good reason. Plain and simple fact of the matter was: I had *way* overstepped my authority. Our two religious leaders also looked to me for an answer to Ronny’s question. Bobby and Krick didn’t bother. They already knew my answer and approved, wholeheartedly, which worked to my benefit, because if they hadn’t, I’d have never gotten away with it. As it was, sooner or later, I’d have to justify myself to the rest of the town. Better to beg forgiveness than to waste time.

“Dick didn’t leave me any choice,” I explained. “Couldn’t take the chance he’d go over to Jericho and tell them what we were doing. I made a judgment call. I’ll live with the consequences later. Tell you what, if I don’t die in the battle that’s coming, you can prosecute me when it’s over.”

“I will not allow it!” He declared with all the righteous anger he could muster.

“You will,” Krick responded. “Or we’ll put you in there with him.”

I inwardly winced at his response. I’d never been the most political or diplomatic human being in the world, but I still knew Krick’s comment was tantamount to poking a hornet’s nest. I did not, however, correct him.

“The noise of a multitude in the mountains as of a great people; a tumultuous noise of the kingdoms of nations gathered together: the Lord of hosts musters the hosts of the battle. Howl ye for the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty.” Jericho’s rant continued unabated. “Our time has come, my friends. The Lord of hosts is calling us to battle against the evil of our enemies.”

I pointed to the boom box sitting in the middle of our seated scrum. “You want to know

why I did it? There's your answer."

"And what does it have to do with Richard Coolidge?"

"Come on, Ronny. You're not that naïve, are you?" I appealed to his intelligence – or at least I hoped he had some. "You know what Dick thinks about me. And you know how caught up he's gotten in the Good Reverend's sermons. Even before the riots, he was glued to the radio; hanging on that freaking lunatic's every word. If anybody was gonna go over to Jericho, it'd be Dick Coolidge, and you know it."

Ronny opened his mouth to retort, but then Dean's voice, though calm and concise, fairly well screamed over Krick's police band radio. "The bridge is done and they're coming across in force!"

48

“The good news is that Jesus is coming back.
The bad news is that he’s really pissed off.”

Bob Hope

I sent the Union Creek team racing south to link up with Barber and Gordon at the second bridge near Shady Cove, giving us a force of sixty-two with the singular objective of buying us time. They were to execute a fighting withdrawal, doing as much damage and throwing as many obstacles in Jericho’s way as possible, with the exception of the second bridge. I wanted that left intact, primarily because I wanted Jericho to believe we didn’t have enough explosives. I didn’t want him to hesitate in crossing the third – and final – bridge, which we had rigged to blow.

I told Dean to try and make his way overland, but I didn’t hold out much hope for his chances. This was where it would get ugly. This was where people would die.

We’d gotten lucky at the concrete plant. The original force Jericho sent had been under-strength, ill-equipped, and led by a couple of zealot fruit bats. We hadn’t lost a single man, although one of them got clipped in the arm. Little more than a flesh wound, it barely slowed him down. I knew we didn’t have an ice cube’s chance in Hell of being that lucky again.

I sent a convoy of twenty vehicles, including two of the school busses we’d taken out of Medford, down to Shady Cove. The residents had no choice but to evacuate. I’m sure they were none too happy about this fact, and I’m equally sure they blamed us – *me* – for their predicament, but I didn’t much care. Given what Jericho had done in White City, sooner or later the Reverend’s minions would have gotten around to them, whether we held the accused rapist or

not,.

The people in Eagle Point figured that out the moment we blew their bridge. By the time the dust from the explosion settled, the place looked like a ghost town. They hadn't waited for an engraved invitation. Some kept right on going north, putting Jericho as far behind them as they could, not slowing one bit as they came to the turnoff at Gunter's Gap.

I didn't blame them. I might have done it too, except, you know, the whole responsibility thing.

Somewhere around seventy-five percent of the adult men as well as about a third of the women, however, did join us – most scared, a lot of them pissed off, and every single one carrying some kind of firearm. We would need them.

I had Mark Hamilton drag Colonel Thomas Dickerson's three Howitzer's to the top of The Ridge. This constituted the first time the things had been moved off their pedestals in the Town Square since 1976, before I was born, when they did it to replace the concrete which had become cracked by twenty-some winters of freezing and thawing.

Bobby and Krick chomped at the bit to get involved, but I held them back, having other plans in mind for them. Of all the people who took an active part in the Battle and everything leading to it, these two men proved to be the most important. Without them, my job would have been impossible.

I take full responsibility for any failures or wrongdoing on our part. Any blame should come straight to me. Any credit for our success should go to Bobby Drummond and John

Krickenheim.

We were as ready as we were going to be. All that remained was to goad Jericho into doing what I wanted him to.

Through it all, Jericho's religious rant continued unabated. "Isaiah, Chapter Thirty-Four tells us: *Come near ye nations to hear; and hearken, ye people: let the earth hear, and all that is therein; the world and all things that come forth of it. For the indignation of the Lord is upon all nations, and his fury is upon all their armies: he hath utterly destroyed them, he hath delivered them to the slaughter,*" he quoted. "Brothers and sisters, the Lord of hosts is angry. He has set us forth to be the instrument of His Holy cause, and through Him we have followed victory with victory. Medford fell to His mighty sword. White City suffered His Righteous destruction and He hath delivered them to the slaughter."

I turned to Pastor McGee and Reverend Warren. "This crap is why I wanted you guys here."

Reverend Warren grew immediately indignant. "This 'crap,' as you call it, is the Holy Bible."

"And it's being used as an excuse to commit murder," Judith McGee countered.

"And I want you two to help me use it as an excuse to get under that nut job's skin."

From the expression on their faces, I could tell they had no idea what I was driving at. For that matter, neither did Bobby or Krick. Ronny, still stung from my disregard for his righteous indignation, stood mute. The Reverend Thomas Jericho, however, did not.

“Their slain also shall be cast out and their stink shall come up out of their carcasses, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood.”

I looked to them for confirmation. Judith nodded. “He’s quoting scripture. Isaiah. “

“For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Gunter’s Gap,”

“Not that,” she stated the obvious, as she pulled a small Bible from her jacket and began to search for the appropriate passages.

“...and upon the people of my curse, to judgment. For it is the day of the Lord’s vengeance, and the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion. And the streams shall be turned into pitch, and the dust into brimstone. It shall not be quenched night or day; the smoke shall go up forever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever.”

She looked up from her Bible and shrugged. “He’s glossed over it a bit, skipped a few parts, but it’s basically straight out of Isaiah.”

“Brothers and sisters, this day has been foretold by our Lord’s prophet and set down into the Holy Bible for us to see the righteousness of our cause. We have been called by God, touched by His mighty hand, allowed to survive His wrathful destruction of secular America so that we might be the swift sword of the Lord’s mighty vengeance. We cannot shirk our duty to the Lord. We cannot waver, we cannot falter; we must be strong as the Lord is strong so we can carry out His Holy Purpose.”

I pointed to the boom box. “How do I counter this? How do I use the Bible to jam those

words right down that lunatic's throat?"

Ronny spoke up. "Are you sure you want to do that?" We all looked at him. "Won't it provoke him?"

"Yes," I answered his first question, "and I hope so," to his second.

"Are you insane?" he cried.

"No." I foolishly hoped it would be a good enough answer, but I should have known better. "History has shown us again and again that the good leaders are the ones who keep their heads in a crisis – or in a battle. The bad ones are those who don't. Pissed off people get emotional, they make mistakes. I want him to be as insane with anger as possible."

I glanced around the table to gauge reactions. Bobby smiled, Krick nodded, pounded on the flat surface and declared: "Yes!" Judith McGee seemed to reflect for a moment then nodded her understanding and assent. Reverend Warren and Ronny Gibbons both thought I'd lost my mind.

"This is madness!" Ronny shouted. "You cannot be allowed to do this."

"No." Reverend Warren vehemently shook his head. "No. You cannot."

"I can and I will," I corrected. "You can either help me, or you can leave. The choice is yours."

"I will do neither!" Ronny declared.

"If I must go, then I will tell the people of this town what you're doing," the Reverend said. "It cannot be allowed."

Ronny nodded in agreement. “We will put a stop to this!” He took a step toward the door.

“Bobby!” I motioned toward the outside door. He rose and stood in front of it, barring the exit. I sighed. “We’ve still got an empty cell back there, don’t we, Krick?” He nodded. “Put ‘em in it.” I had travelled so far beyond the normal bounds of my authority I could no longer see them. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and this absolutely qualified. They could have me thrown in prison later – *if* any of us survived.

“This is outrageous!” Ronny yelled, and I agreed – it was, but it didn’t change reality. Gunter’s Gap teetered on a precipice, its people shaking with fear. One small push would send them running, and then we’d all die.

Krick stood and motioned with his hand toward the door leading to the cells. “After you, gentlemen.”

“I will not!” Ronny stood defiant, his arms crossed over his puffed-out chest.

“You will,” Krick told him. “Or I’ll drag you.”

Reverend Warren turned to his religious counterpart for help. “Judith, please. Stop this.”

“Sorry Paul,” she said with regret. “He’s doing the right thing. I hope you’ll see that, in time. And if not... He’s still doing the right thing.”

Once they’d been safely (if noisily) tucked into their joint cell, I turned to Pastor McGee, who told me she hated what I had done and what I was doing. “So do I,” I agreed. “But I don’t

see any other choice.”

“Neither do I,” she said. “Which is why I’m still here.”

“So... How do I counter it?”

“Use Christianity.”

“Behold, the day of the Lord comes; cruel, both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and he shall destroy the sinners. For the stars of heaven shall not give their light; the sun shall be darkened; and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. Do you not see the Hand of God in the disaster which has befallen us, brothers and sisters? And I will punish the world for their evil and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. Therefore, I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger. Everyone that is found shall be thrust through and everyone that is joined unto them shall fall by the sword. Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished. This is what the Lord has commanded. We must obey the Lord, and through his bountiful mercy—“

I nodded to Krick, who keyed his radio. “Go ahead, Crow.” This was answered by “Go.”

I keyed the base unit microphone. “We interrupt this commercial announcement by the insane Revered Thomas Jericho to bring you the following message: This is radio Free Oregon, broadcasting from The Ridge outside Gunter’s Gap; here to inform all within the sound of my

voice that we stand against the religious ravings of this lunatic. We will not submit. We will stand and fight. His so-called army has murdered thousands. Those who have been listening to the reports of our people know this to be true. He set White City ablaze and burned its residents alive. This is not propaganda. This is truth. This is fact. And he has done this quoting from the Bible to justify his actions. That is the lie. That is the propaganda meant to manipulate and spread fear. We say no more. And we use the same Bible to counter his propaganda, his lies, his manipulation.

“We begin with the third of the Ten Commandments: *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*. This does not, in the words of the bumper-sticker, mean God’s last name isn’t dammit. It means you cannot, you shall not use the name of God or Jesus to justify your political agenda, your insanity. Jericho speaks of vengeance. What happened to *vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord*? What happened to *turn the other cheek*? What happened to *love thine enemy as thyself*?” I read down the list of passages and quotations created for me by Pastor McGee, who sat beside me at the radio desk.

“In Romans 7:4-14, the Bible tells us: “*We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code*. Christianity follows the New Testament, the new way given to us by Jesus of Nazareth; not the old way of Leviticus and Isaiah, not the bloodlust of the Old Testament. To Jericho’s misguided followers, if you call yourselves Christians, it means you are followers of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Lay down your arms and stand against the insanity of your false prophet.

“And to Thomas Jericho, you psychotic nut job fruit bat lunatic. This is America. Go sell your insanity somewhere else. We will not submit to your demands. We will not give up

our prisoner. Not because we are secularists or liberals or members of the ACLU or the NAACP, but because we are Americans, and in America you are innocent until *proven* guilty; not guilty because some wing nut televangelist says you are.”

I took a deep breath and looked to Bobby and Krick and Judith for one last check to see if there was any doubt in their eyes, any question as to the right-ness of what we were doing. I saw nothing but support.

“You want the prisoner, you son of a bitch? Come and get him.”

49

“Accurst be he that first invented war.”

Christopher Marlowe

Task Force Barber and the Union Creek team pulled back across our bridge about three in the morning, having caused as much damage as they could. Eighteen of them were killed in the effort. I tried to keep this information from the general public, but since we had a virtual play-by-play over the police band, the attempt proved pointless.

The volunteers from Eagle Point and Shady Cove joined with those from Union Creek and gave us another two hundred and thirty people, well-armed and willing to fight. Added to the deputies, National Guardsmen and retired military and/or law enforcement, along with those year-round residents and refugees who chose to stand with us, it gave us a fighting force of just under six hundred and fifty to face the reportedly two thousand members of Jericho’s army.

They had the numbers. We had the wall. This was both a benefit and a limiting factor.

With a scant three-hundred and thirty-four feet of available standing room, we could only post a hundred and ten people upon it. Adding four feet of wooden scaffolding to the town side enabled us to place another hundred directly behind those who’d be doing the actual fighting, the idea being, they could load as the others fired and, if necessary, stand to replace those who fell.

The smartest thing I did that horrible day was to put John Krickenheim in overall command of our ad-hoc army. I am convinced his efforts and organization proved to be our salvation. I left the disposition of our forces entirely in his hands, with one exception.

I pulled Bobby aside about four a.m., with Jericho's army still a few miles away to the south. I had my only bottle of *El Tesoro de Don Felipe* – good sipping tequila – with me, and I gave it to him in almost ceremonial fashion after taking a long pull myself. He knew something was up so I didn't waste any time.

“Who's the best shot in town?”

“I am,” he answered, giving me a sideways glance as if he already knew what I had in mind.

“That's what I figured,” I said. “I have a special mission for you.” He nodded, but made no reply. “After the bridge is blown, I want you to find Thomas Jericho. We want to...make sure he's dead.” He pursed his lips as I allowed the essentially illegal nature of my unstated request to sink in. Finally, he nodded, took a drink from the bottle and passed it back to me.

“Do you think you can do it?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Without getting yourself killed?” I returned the bottle to him.

He took another drink as he contemplated his answer. “Does it matter?”

I paused, well-aware of the implications, then finally said: “No.”

“Thanks for being honest.” He placed the bottle in my left hand then reached out and shook my right.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “One more thing.” Bobby raised an eyebrow, waiting for me to tell him what it was. “Bring your ass back alive.” He winked, turned, and walked away.

We posted the two .50 caliber machine guns on opposite wings. We didn’t have much ammo for them, but I was counting on them more for their psychological effect (.50 Cals are really loud) and, one way or another, I knew the battle wouldn’t last very long. Either my plan wouldn’t work, and we’d quickly get our asses kicked, or it would work and they’d be massacred. Neither option would take long.

There remained around two thousand people within town who wanted nothing to do with our battle. It would have been easy to be disheartened by this fact, were it not for my knowledge of history. Throughout the long and bloody tale of war-like humanity, the burden of defense has always fallen on the shoulders of the few. We had them take shelter well back from the wall on the eastern edge of town, where we kept a token force to cover the back door.

Even within the ranks of those who chose to stand with us, we had probably a hundred or so who did it more out of some sense of obligation, rather than a belief in its necessity. Some, such as the volunteers from Eagle Point who’d seen first-hand the result Jericho’s madness in White City, were highly motivated. Krick put most of them up on the wall. The ones who seemed less convinced, he dispersed within groups of those who had no doubt.

He gave Mark Hamilton five people for each of the three Howitzers up on The Ridge. With only ten rounds for each, they wouldn’t be firing for any great length of time, but then they didn’t need to. Krick also dispersed another two hundred in various places along the hillside on that northern edge of the gap; pulling them back away from the barrels of napalm, and having

them chop down trees and pile up rocks to fight behind, thus providing us with the ability to fire into the enemy's flanks. He held the rest in reserve.

The granite walls of the promontory on the southern edge rose sheer and virtually impassable to human traffic. We supposed it could be possible for Jericho to send a force up it to flank our wall, but it didn't seem too damned likely. Plus, I'd spent the intervening hours on the radio, alternating between loud heavy metal (devil's music) and verbal assaults on his character in an effort to goad him into attacking us head-on. I don't consider it vanity to state the obvious: it worked.

The attack came as the first light of dawn turned the sky into an Edvard Munch painting. It began with Jericho sending a single red-jacketed representative under a white flag of truce.

Everyone crouched behind the masonry top of the wall, except me. I stood just to our left of the bus-covered gap, apparently alone, but they'd have had to be utterly delusional to believe it. I held a bullhorn in my left hand and Mom's cocked .357 in my right. One of Mitch Reavy's Thompson sub machineguns leaned against the block at my feet. I'd attached one of the police radios to my belt and clipped its microphone to my jacket.

Edgar crouched behind me, there to do my reloading. I glanced back at him and he returned it with a nervous thumbs-up.

The unarmed man in the red jacket stopped about five yards from the wall, directly in front of me. I could see the vertical stripe of ash upon his forehead. "You know why we're here."

“Yep.” My heart played the drum portion of *Wipeout* within my chest, but I did my best to ignore it. This crazy son of a bitch had been one of the murderous bastards who’d burned people alive in White City. That ash mark on his forehead told me so in a way no amount of words could have.

“We want the rapist.” I thought he’d established this fact by his previous statement, but apparently he thought it needed elaboration.

“Too bad. You’re not going to get him.”

“If you give him to us, we will go away,” he said. I didn’t believe him. “If you do not, we will destroy you. You have five minutes to decide.”

“Not gonna happen,” I said, and then I put a bullet through his brain.

Given the benefit of hindsight, is it possible I could have prevented what happened that day? It’s possible, I suppose. *Anything’s* possible. This entire tragic episode of American history could be nothing more than the delusions of a Thorazine-addled resident of a rubber room. It’s possible, but not damned likely.

I have spent the last year agonizing over my decision, asking myself that very question. My initial purpose in coming here to Boise, aside from a desire to find out how Jericho could have attained such sway over a mass of humanity as he did, was the vague notion of distancing myself from the one remaining member of my family so I could relieve my feelings of guilt by committing suicide. But a strange thing happened: I found this laptop.

The act of writing this – *whatever* it is – has enabled me to see the how and why of it all;

the reasons, the pathways, the historical precedent of what led me to do what I did on that horrible, bloody day. And you know what? I'm fine with it.

What they had done in Medford, in White City, and what they could have done had we not stopped them on that blood-soaked field, seems to me reason and justification enough for what I did. Others may disagree. You, as you read this, may be one of them. Make no mistake. I don't give a rat's ass.

They came on in force, pushing across the bridge, mainly on foot, but bringing with them three trucks, loaded with men. I watched them approach, still the only one visible upon the wall, the only indication of any resistance. Squeezed within the narrowing gap, they bunched into the center, between the line of claymores on one side and the barrels of napalm on the other – exactly as I had planned.

A little over a thousand of them had crossed, slowly filling the quarter mile between the river and the wall, by the time I saw the truck pulling their one cannon across the bridge. This is what I had been waiting for. I keyed the mic. “Blow the bridge.”

It went with a gigantic, rumbling *Ka-Whap*, sending chunks of concrete, cannon, and bodies flying into the air in a cloud of dusty fire. Those who'd made it to our side of the bridge pushed forward toward the wall as Krick, with another bullhorn, shouted “STAND TALL” and one hundred-ten people stood as one and leveled their weapons at them.

Everything paused except the falling debris, the sound of which slowly dissipated into an ear-ringing silence following the tremendous noise of the explosion. We stood on the precipice

of destruction, waiting only for a push in either direction. I offered one to Jericho's assembled army.

Bringing the bullhorn to my lips, I said: "You have exactly one chance. Lay down your weapons and surrender or you will be killed."

I stuck Mom's .357 into the shoulder holster I'd been given by one of Krick's deputies (whose name I do not remember) and picked up the Thompson, as I looked out at the mostly stunned mob of all white faces arrayed in the field before us. Nobody moved.

I glanced at the people on the wall to either side of me and a funny thing happened. I saw America – not white America or black America or this, that, or the other America, but *America*, the melting pot, the one out of many; a collection of individual people with individual hopes and dreams and desires, all acting with determination toward one common goal. A single tear rolled down my cheek as my heart broke to think it took something so tragic, so unthinkable, so God-awful *wrong* for it to happen.

I shook it off and scanned Jericho's army, looking for some sign of sanity. What I found instead was a single red-jacketed fanatic staring back at me with utter lunacy in his eyes. I watched him raise his weapon, a rifle, and aim it directly at me; a moment frozen in time at the cusp between what could have been and what was. I held my breath, waiting. He pulled the trigger.

The bullet clipped my left shoulder, the impact feeling like a shove in the direction of town, and then a gargantuan roar of sound filled the world as a hundred-ten guns went off at once. I dropped to one knee, the pain a huge, clawing thing. I might have stayed there for the duration had Edgar not done probably the only thing that would have worked: he slapped me

upside the head.

“Get off your ass, Campbell. You’ve got work to do.”

I looked back at him over my shoulder – the good one – said: “Ouch.”

He raised his hand as if to do it again. “Get to it.”

I nodded, leaned the Thompson against the block wall topping and keyed the mic.

“Blow the barrels,” I ordered, and with a mammoth *WHUMP* the napalm exploded, setting the field and everything in it on fire.

I waited a moment – not even popping my head up to see what I’d wrought – just long enough for the enemy to move toward the southern end of the cut, away from the napalm and directly into the path of the other nasty surprise. “Blow the claymores.”

Those who’d escaped the massive fireball ran straight into the thousand ball bearings shooting toward them at supersonic speed, riddling and mangling their bodies, turning them into hamburger.

I keyed the mic again. “Fire the cannons,” and the Howitzers up on the Ridge roared to life, sending flying death toward what remained of Jericho’s forces on the other side of the bridge. I stood, finally, raised the Thompson and pulled the trigger.

The noise filled my brain like a colossal satanic beast; the deep, rumbling *whap, whap, whap* of the .50 Cals, the staccato rip of my Thompson, the steady pop of the rifles, and over it all, the keening scream, beside me and behind me, above and below me, growing in insanity and desperation. And then I realized where it was coming from: it came from me.

After Yellowstone

The actual battle lasted no more than fifteen minutes – less, in all probability, but since I didn't bother to stop and check my watch, that time will do. Doesn't matter; whether it lasted a second or a day, the result is the same.

Massacre, as a word, seems inadequate, insufficient; too mundane and impersonal to describe the carnage we caused. The final tally, completed the next day as we dropped the last of the bodies into the mass-graves we dug using the ditch-diggers, came out as an estimated nine-hundred and thirty-two killed on our side of the bridge, with another three-hundred and fifteen beyond the river. Jericho's lay among the latter, a single bullet through his skull. Bobby's did not.

He appeared on the opposite shore about an hour after the battle, as Krick, Edgar and I were surveying the damage to the bridge. His left arm hung limp at his side as he waved to us with his right. I had the same problem, although by then my shoulder had been bandaged and my arm sat snug and reasonably comfortable in a sling.

“How am I supposed to get home?” He shouted to us.

“Quit whining!” I shouted back. “Be a man and suck it up.” It seemed appropriate.

Two days later, the National Guard arrived.

Epilogue

“If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same.”

Rudyard Kipling
If

Casualty is another one of those words that don't quite fit the reality. There's nothing casual about getting hit in the shoulder, and even less in seeing the person next to you shot in the head, their blood and brain and bone splattering your face.

Our list of “casualties” came to one-hundred forty-three wounded and thirty-eight killed. I'd like to say I'm haunted by those who died, but I'm not. Truth is: I don't feel much of anything for any of them, except maybe Dean Chadwick and his two brave volunteers, Eddy Gerardo and Lester James. We never found their bodies. I hope they went quick.

Frank and George returned with a thirty-five member National Guard force. Good thing we hadn't needed them. We did, however, desperately need the medical supplies they brought. We'd run out of pretty much everything, to the point where we were cutting up sheets for bandages, so their arrival – while too little too late – was welcome.

Frank, upon making her way across the river in one of the National Guard Zodiac boats (those rigid-hulled rubber things you see in all the commando movies) came up to me, paused for a bit as she surveyed my bandaged arm in its sling, then smacked me upside the head. “That's

for sending me away,” she explained. Then she said: “And this is for still being alive,” and gave me one of the nicest hugs I’ve ever had.

We traveled south with a National Guard contingent who technically held me under arrest. I say technically because it seemed as if they were only going through the motions. Apparently what they’d experienced in Portland made our little skirmish look like a schoolyard brawl. Once our perfunctory expedition saw with our own eyes what had happened in White City, the façade of technicality went away. If ever there was a textbook case of justifiable massacre, this had been it.

A few days after the battle, we relinquished our prisoner, Harold Jefferson, to the National Guard, a small contingent of which took him north to be prosecuted. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to life in prison. A bullet would have been cheaper but, oh well. Social order won out.

We released Dick Coolidge, Reverend Warren and Ronny Gibbons a couple hours after the battle. They had plenty to say about the liberties I’d taken with my authority. At first, nobody listened – apparently too elated by the battle’s result and, I suppose, relieved to still be alive. The party that night, held in the town square, gave new meaning to the word *raucous* and severely diminished our supply of alcohol. Luckily, Charlie and his team returned the next day with a load of supplies, including alcohol.

He also brought with him a present for me: a five-pound bag of *Starbucks* whole-bean. I

told him he'd been officially designated My Hero.

For the first few days, nothing could quell the spirit and pride of those who had fought. Interestingly enough, it seemed as if there were far more people crowing about their exploits than had actually taken part in the battle. This hardly mattered. We were, as I said, happy to be alive. After a while, though, that old bitch reality began to set in.

War makes us do things we don't like to talk about in polite company. There is pride for taking a stand and defending something, but it only goes so far. Sooner or later, in those odd, solitary moments when the filters and barriers we erect to keep harsh reality at bay no longer seem adequate for the task, truth slips in, and with it, horror. Images of mangled bodies flash across the mind, flickering like some twisted movie, stabbing at the heart and soul. Enter the god of rationalization.

It couldn't have been me, the mind declares. I didn't do this. Somebody else did. And so the blame game begins. Since it had to be someone else, reason and logic dictate a scapegoat must be found.

I was the logical candidate.

Once the glow of victory faded, once the justifiable pride of the brave few became overshadowed by the recriminations of the vast non-combatant majority, the inevitability of my fate seemed obvious. After all, I had been in charge; I had organized and executed the plan that resulted in one thousand, two hundred and eighty-five deaths. That I hadn't created the situation mattered not at all. Someone needed to be blamed.

So be it.

After Yellowstone

Spurred on by Dick Coolidge and Ronny Gibbons, the call for my impeachment grew louder with each passing day. Bobby and Krick were of the mind that I should stand and fight against the people they called “cowards,” but my heart wasn’t in it. I hadn’t wanted the job in the first place and I wanted it even less when the pressing needs of defense were replaced with the unmitigated bullshit of political office. I resigned.

I stuck around for a while, but it was mostly out of a sense of responsibility toward my cousin. A few weeks after the battle, she met a young refugee from Medford, Sean McNaughton. They fell in love. Good for them.

As the days turned to weeks and then to months, my excuses for staying began sounding more and more hollow, self-serving, pointless. Before long, I was left with one last useful purpose: as a member of the many and ongoing foraging missions into the wasteland. One led to another, and to another, and finally to this library.

And so there’s my tale told by an idiot. Don’t know about the sound; plenty of fury; and as to what it signifies, well, I guess that’s up to you.

As we progress toward the future, this seems to be the key: it’s up to you, to me, to all of us.

We, the People... Three words; so simple, so seemingly obvious, and yet it took somewhere around six thousand years of human history for us to figure it out. If it takes us that long again, we don’t deserve to inhabit this beautiful (if occasionally explosive) planet.

We are the ones in charge – you and me. We run the show. We control our fate.

We seem to have forgotten it. Who knows why? For that matter, what difference does it make? Knowing the why – assigning the blame – will not fix the problem, and therein lies the rub.

In 1957, the author Ayn Rand wrote a novel called *Atlas Shrugged*. It's just shy of twelve hundred pages long, but I think I can encapsulate its thesis into a single sentence. Sometimes the old adage of *if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem* is backwards, because sometimes by being part of the solution – by making it work in spite of the idiots in charge – you are allowing, in fact *encouraging* the problem to continue.

This I think is what led us to the abyss. Before Yellowstone, we had allowed – *encouraged* – the idiots in charge, be they politicians or religious figures or industry leaders or leaders of any stripe, to turn the good, solid, common sense foundation of America into a confusing, contradictory, bass-ackwards mess of goo. We did this – you and me. It's our own damned fault. But the beauty of America – the true power of it – is our ability to change, to fix the problem.

As we move into the future, away from life as we knew it and toward life as we can make it, we control our destiny. All we really need to do is pay attention. As Thomas Jefferson said, "*Whenever people are well-informed they can be trusted with their own government.*"

Being well-informed takes work. You can't simply listen to what one person or one group says and call it good, because it isn't. Every individual and every individual group has an agenda. Whatever they say is colored with this agenda. Of course it is.

I had an agenda in writing this. I'm not exactly sure what it was, but I had one. Maybe it was to assuage my guilt over what I did and caused to be done. Maybe it was mental

masturbatory self-serving and aggrandizing happy horseshit. Or maybe it was my psyche's attempt to pull me back from the brink before I did something stupid like cast off this mortal coil. I don't know and I really don't care. It doesn't matter.

Everything that took place Before Yellowstone had happened in our past – every bit of it. Will Rogers had joked about the ineffectiveness of trickle-down economics all the way back in the Nineteen-Twenties. We'd fought against the stupidity of *Separate but Equal*, and then allowed it to return in a different guise. We'd fought an entire war and killed hundreds of thousands of our own people over the absurd idea that certain human beings were less human than the rest for no other reason than who their parents were. We had allowed our politicians to blow smoke and sunshine right up our collective ass and bury us under tons of abject bullshit, over and over again. And we had allowed charismatic religious leaders to manipulate us into killing each other using the name of someone called the Prince of Peace, again and again for two thousand years.

We did this. Not them, not somebody else. We did it.

Hegel said "*We learn from history that we do not learn from history.*" This time around, we damn-well better.

THE END