

Joe woke up. He rolled over and looked at the clock. The red numbers glowed 2:35 in the darkness. He normally slept through the night, but knew once he woke up like this, it would usually take a while before he could fall back to sleep. Careful to not wake up his wife, he rolled out of bed and padded to the kitchen where the family's computer was. The dull hum of the fan and the clicking of the hard drive greeted him as he plopped down in the chair and switched on the device. The flashing lights of the cable modem began and soon Joe was logged on and surfing the web. He was a regular at several of the bigger gun forums and he regularly checked in on a survival forum or two as well. He was paging through and reading some of the new posts on his favorite survival site when a new post appeared at the top.

"BREAKING RIGHT NOW – TERRORIST ATTACK IMMINENT"

Joe laughed to himself. The tin-foil-hat brigade was always posting something like this just because gas went up ten cents a gallon or some other meaningless event that they somehow twisted into The-End-Of-The-World-As-We-Know-It. He looked to see who the paranoid loser that posted this at almost 3:00 in the morning was. Joe was surprised to see the handle Ben Franklin next to the post.

Ben Franklin was a man that Joe admired. He had never met the man, but knew from his posts that he was no kook. Ben was a moderator on this message board and was highly thought of for his fairness and objectivity. Joe knew that he worked at a nuclear power plant, but didn't know what his exact job was. It seemed that he was one of the top men at the facility, but Ben had never been real forthcoming about his exact title.

Joe nervously clicked the link and a message that appeared hurriedly written appeared on the screen.

"I just got a call from my boss. There are confirmed reports that terrorist have bombs with nuclear material that they plan to detonate during rush hour in the morning. They found a dirty bomb in Boston about two hours ago and the guys they arrested told them there were a lot more of them. Estimates are that they are in ten or twelve major cities. It's possible that one or two of them could be full nuclear devices. Even if they are all just dirty bombs, the panic will be horrific. This is not a joke! My boss only found out because the NRC called and told him to shut down the plant. If you are in a major city, get out now! The information I got is a little sketchy, but New York and DC are sure to get it. I don't know where else is going to be hit, but any big city will panic whether they get hit or not as soon as word gets out. This may take a few minutes to hit the mainstream media and maybe that will give the members here a few minutes head start. I've got to go load up the truck. I plan to be out of here in ten minutes. Good luck and God bless."

Joe's heart jumped into his throat. It was really happening. He always knew that it could, that's why he hung around in the survival forums. He just never expected that it would be this soon. He had first become interested in survival in 1999. He had stockpiled food and supplies for Y2K, but it had not happened. Since then his level of preparedness had fallen off some, but he still had a lot of things put back. He jumped up and ran into his bedroom.

"Linda, wake up. Wake up!"

"What?" his wife of twenty years moaned. "What do you want?"

"We've got to get out of here! There is going to be some terrorist attacks and we've got to get out of the city!"

"What are you talking about?" Linda asked, while propping herself up on an elbow. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"I wish," he replied. "No, this is for real. There are dirty bombs in several major cities. There could even be one here."

"How do you know?"

Joe quickly explained about the post, who had posted it, and why he believed Ben Franklin.

"Maybe it's a joke," Linda suggested. "Maybe someone hacked his password and they're pulling a bad prank." She reached onto the nightstand and found the TV remote. She hit power and then tuned to CNN.

"He said it might not be on the news yet," Joe said.

"It has to be if it's true," she answered quickly.

The talking head was droning on about the 40-point increase in the NASDAQ yesterday and how it signaled that the bulls were back in control.

"Think about it," Joe said, "if the government told everyone, they would just panic. They're going to keep it under their hats as long as they can. Ben would not kid about something like this. We've got to get loaded and head to your parents' place."

"What if it's a joke or a mistake? We'll look like idiots to the neighbors and at our jobs."

"Who cares what people think? What if it's true?" Joe was almost screaming now.

Linda bristled. "Look Joe, you're being paranoid. CNN would know if something was going on and they would tell us about it. Your friend," she paused as she folded her arms, "is wrong."

"What are you guys screaming about?" Melissa, the couple's fourteen-year-old daughter, asked from the door of their bedroom while rubbing her eyes.

"Your father is going off the deep end," Linda said. "He wants us to pack up and go to Grandma's and Grandpa's because of something some idiot on the internet said!"

"That's nice," Melissa said.

As was too often the case, this would end up being a girls against the boys argument, Joe thought. He took a deep breath and tried to calm down. "Look, maybe it is a mistake and maybe it's not. But, what if it is true? I'd rather be safe than sorry. Wouldn't you? We can go to your parents' house and if nothing happens by seven thirty we can all call in sick or something. We don't have to tell anyone anything."

Linda stared at him for several seconds while what he said sunk in.

"Alright," she said reluctantly, "but I'm not driving all the way up there and back and then cooking dinner tonight. When we get back, you're going for take out or something."

"Okay," Joe agreed.

Linda threw back the covers and stood up. She looked at Melissa and spoke. "Go get dressed. But first, wake up your brother."

"Okay, Mom," the teenager answered. She turned and headed down the hall toward her brother's room. She opened the door and called his name.

"Andy. Andy, wake up! We're going to Grandma's and Grandpa's house."

Andy, seventeen and a slow riser, opened one eye and looked at his sister.

"Leave me alone. It's Wednesday, you dope. We have school in..." He looked at his clock, "...five hours? What the hell are you waking me up for?"

"Mom told me to. Dad thinks the sky is falling or something and he wants to go to the farm."

"Yeah, right!" Andy said as he pulled the covers over his head.

"Andy, get up now. Get dressed. I need your help," Joe said as he passed his son's room, threading a belt through his jeans.

Joe walked to the kitchen and tried to gather his thoughts. His in-laws lived 150 miles away in a rural area. Although they called their place a farm, it was only fifteen acres. Originally, the house and barn had been the headquarters for a large family farm, but once the old farmer died; his kids had divided the place up and sold it off. Linda's parents had bought the farmhouse and the few acres that surrounded it when they had retired. The larger tracts had been sold or leased to local farmers that used them for crops or hay.

All right, take care of the basics first, he thought. Water, food, and shelter are the most basic. For water there is the well at the farm. And, my generator will work the electric pump even if the power goes out. I just need to make sure we have enough gas to last for a while. That takes care of water.

Food, he thought as he opened the pantry. The shelves were almost bare.

"Linda," he called, "is this all the food we have?"

Linda scurried into the kitchen looking flustered. "I was going to go to the store today," she said quickly.

"Where is all the food we had put back for Y2K?"

"We ate most of it. Some of it got so old that I threw it out. But you have that freeze-dried camping food and those MER's or whatever they're called."

"That's not enough. I only have two cases of MRE's. That's just six meals apiece. There might be enough of the Mountain House food to last a week or so, but what if we need to help out your parents or your brother's family? We had enough food put back to feed 10 people for three months and now we don't have anything?"

"Well, after the millennium, you told me to use it up."

"I told you to use it and replace it," he said pleadingly. "That way the food would be fresh."

"If that's what you wanted done then you should have done it yourself. It was a pain in the ass to go through all those totes of food."

Joe realized that the argument was just wasting time. It didn't matter whose fault it was. They just had to fix it.

"You're right. I'm sorry," he said trying to calm her down.

Linda was surprised. He usually would have argued longer, even though she would have still won. She saw how scared he looked. Maybe there was more to this than she thought. Joe certainly thought so. Her hands fell from her hips as she began to feel bad that she had disappointed him. Not that she could admit it to him, but her tone softened significantly. "What can we do?"

"We have to get some more food. Look, I'm going to send you and Andy to the store. Buy as much dry and canned food as you can. Fill up the back of your SUV if you can. Melissa and I will stay here and load the truck." Joe looked around. "Andy, hurry up. You need to go with your mother."

"Okay, Dad. I'll be right there."

"It's almost three in the morning. The grocery store isn't open," Linda said.

"But the Super Wal-Mart is," Joe said. "I know I don't like us going there, but that's our only option at this point."

"Can't we just wait and see if your Internet buddy is right and buy food from the store close to my parent's place if we need it?"

"I'm afraid that if there is a big panic, the stores will get stripped quickly, even where your parents live."

"Well, how do you want me to pay?"

"Write a check."

"But, we don't have that much in the bank. You don't get paid until Friday."

"Look, we'll worry about that if nothing happens. Right now we just need to get what we have to have and get out of here. I want to save whatever credit we have on the cards for gas and other stuff. Do you think you could be back in thirty minutes?"

"We'll try. Come on, Andy, let's get going. I hope I don't see anyone I know without my makeup on."

Linda snatched up her purse and the mother and son were out the door.

"Alright, that takes care of food. Next is shelter," Joe said to no one. He looked at his daughter and smiled. "Grandma and Grandpa have plenty of room for all of us. Even for Uncle Larry and his kids. I better tell your Mom to call him."

Joe grabbed his cell phone and hit the speed dial for Linda's phone.

"Hello," she said.

"Hey, it's me. You think you should call Larry and your folks?"

"I don't think so. At least not yet. Remember how crazy Larry thought you were for buying all the Y2K stuff? He still makes fun of you. And, there is no sense waking Mom and Dad since they don't need to do anything. If it hits the news then I'll call Larry, okay?"

"Whatever you think," he said

"Okay, Bye."

"Bye," he said and hung up the phone.

"Alright," he said to Melissa, "the next priority is clothes and personal items. Let's get our Bug Out Bags." He knew that defense was really next on the list, but he needed to get Melissa on something. Besides, he thought, getting my guns out of the safe and into the car will be easy. I'll do that last.

Joe walked to the hall closet with his daughter in tow. He opened the door and a ton of junk fell out around his feet.

"Damn it! I've told your brother a million times not to stuff things in here and then close the door."

He reached down and picked up a bag of golf clubs and kicked some of the smaller items out of the way.

"Here, set these in the corner for me, will you?"

"Sure, Dad," Melissa said as she took the bag from her father.

Joe got down on his knees and started digging through the closet that was a catch all for his family's junk. He pulled out three daypacks and then kept digging.

"I can't find your brother's Bug Out Bag."

"I think he used it a couple of months ago when he went camping with his friends."

"Great, these are supposed to be ready to go all the time," Joe said.

"Give me mine, Dad. I think I need to put some stuff back in it."

Joe handed his daughter her pack and gave her the look. It told her that he wasn't happy without him having to say a word. She disappeared into her room and Joe could hear the dresser drawers opening and closing. He noticed that Linda's pack looked a little empty as well. He opened it and found that it only held a ratty pair of jeans and a couple of shirts with a few odds and ends. When Joe had made everyone pack their BOB, they held enough clothes and toiletries to last at least three days. It seemed that everyone had raided their bag when they needed something and had not replenished them. He opened his and found it was in pretty good shape. There was no underwear in it, Linda must have taken them out to replace some of his old ones, and his toothpaste had leaked. Fortunately, it was in a Ziploc bag so it didn't get on anything else.

"Melissa,"

"Yes, Dad." She answered, sticking her head out of her door.

"Hurry and finish repacking your BOB. Then see if you can find your brother's and make sure he has enough clothes and stuff in it. You need to repack your mom's after that. I'll put it on our bed. Also, turn on the TV and listen to it. If they start talking about an attack, come get me right away. Don't let it slow you down, though."

"Okay, Pops."

Joe grabbed his bag and took it to the bedroom. He threw the busted toothpaste away and got three pairs of underwear out of his drawer and stuffed them in the pack. He wondered if they should take more clothes.

"Melissa."

"I'm in here."

He found her in her brother's room, digging through his closet.

Listen, when you're finished with the Bug Out Bags, come out to the garage and get a big duffle bag from me. I want you to get some more clothes for all of us and get all the stuff you can out of the bathroom closet, too. Got it?"

"Yeah, Dad, I got it," she said as she nodded her head.

Okay, what's next, he asked himself. I better get the camping stuff in case the power does go out for a while. He headed out to the garage. At least this is organized, he thought as he looked at all his emergency equipment stacked neatly on shelves. Much of it was still brand new and in the original boxes. He walked over and started pulling things down that he thought he might need and stacking them in the middle of the garage floor. He also grabbed the generator out from under his workbench and put it next to the pile. What about gasoline, he thought. He looked in the corner and saw two five-gallon cans. He picked them up. One was almost empty and he had no idea how old the gas was in the other. He could pour it out and refill them both on the way out of town, but ten gallons would not last long if they really needed the generator. He called Linda's phone.

"Hey, have Andy run over to the automotive department and get me six five-gallon gas cans, okay?"

"Alright," she said.

"How much have you got done?"

"Not much, we just got here a minute ago."

"Does it seem like anyone knows anything?" he asked.

"No. The place is dead as a doornail."

"Good. Hurry as fast as you can, okay."

"I know!" she said.

He could almost see her rolling her eyes at him. "Okay, thanks," he said as he hung up.

"Your father wants you to go get six gas cans for him."

"Do you want me to go now?" Andy asked.

"No. Let's get the groceries first."

They each had a cart and were pushing them up and down each isle. Linda would point at things and tell Andy how many to get and he would load them onto the carts. When one of the carts was full, she told him to park it where it was and go get another. When all three carts were full, top and bottom, she decided that it was enough.

"Go grab one more cart and run over to automotive and get the gas cans. Make sure they are the five-gallon size."

"Yes, ma'am."

Andy took off to the front of the store and Linda tried to move two of the baskets at a time by pushing one and pulling the other. She could barely budge them. She gave up on the one she was trying to pull and concentrated on pushing just one. It was so heavy that she even had trouble getting it going. When she got it to the main isle. She went back for the other basket. She pushed it about halfway to the front where they had left the first full basket. She went back for the second basket and was pushing it when her phone rang again. It was Joe again.

"What!" she answered.

"I'm sorry," Joe said, "but I need some propane for the Coleman stove and the lantern. Have Andy get about ten of the one-pound bottles. They should be in sporting goods."

"Alright. We're almost done here."

"Good. See you in a few minutes."

Joe looked at his watch. It said 3:40. He had hoped to be on the road by now, but as long as they got out before 4:00 or 4:15 they should be okay. He wondered why Melissa had not come to get the duffle bag. He grabbed the duffle and walked into Andy's room where he found her looking at the TV while she was lazily stuffing clothes into his pack."

"Melissa! I told you not to get distracted by the TV. You should have had that done fifteen minutes ago."

Melissa was very sensitive to being yelled at, especially by her father. Tears began to well up in her eyes. "But, Dad, I just found Andy's pack a few minutes ago. It was stuffed under his bed."

"Okay. I'm sorry I yelled. We just need to be ready to go by the time your mom and brother get home. You should have just gotten a trash bag or something when you couldn't find his pack right away."

"Okay, Dad," she said, sniffing and wiping an eye.

"Here's the duffle. Anything on the TV yet?"

"Not yet."

"Okay, hon, let me know if you hear anything and try to go a little quicker, all right?" he pleaded.

"No problem."

Joe went back to the garage and pulled down some more camping stuff. That should do it. He spotted his chain saw and decided to take it too. If they had to stay until winter, a long shot he knew, but it was already fall, they could use it to cut firewood for the fireplaces. He put it and its accessories in the growing pile. He looked at it and couldn't think of anything else they might need. He opened the garage door to start loading his truck. He decided to back it in to make the job easier. Just as he was unlocking the door, Melissa called him.

"Dad, Dad, it's on TV!"

He rushed back into the garage and pulled the door down. When he got in, he heard the TV in his room. He ran down and saw Melissa working on her mother's bag. She was quickly packing the bag from a pile of clothes on the bed. Her face looked older than it should have, Joe thought. He turned his attention to the television.

...level has been raised to red. Authorities believe that the device found in Boston is the only one and that the terrorists are trying to cause a panic by alluding to others. However, the President has placed the military and FEMA on high alert and experts are searching other sites that might have a high probability of being a target. Authorities are urging all Americans to stay calm and stay in their homes. FEMA suggests that no one venture out until we have definitive word on where any other devices, if they even exist, might be. Moving from where you are might just put you in harm's way. Authorities inform us that a dirty bomb is not immediately dangerous to anyone except in the small blast radius. It would take days of close exposure to absorb a lethal dose of radiation. If evacuation is needed, authorities will let the public know in plenty of time for a safe and controlled withdrawal from any dangerous area.

Again, three men were arrested early this morning in Boston trying to plant a dirty bomb across the street from City Hall. A dirty bomb is an explosive device that has been laced with nuclear material. The arrest came about as the result of...

Joe hit the mute button on the remote. He looked at the time. It was five minutes until four. He wondered where Linda and Andy were.

Linda had pushed her three carts, using her one at a time method, almost to the check out by the time Andy showed up with the gas cans. He helped her push all four carts into the only checkout line that was open and then ran back to get the propane. The cashier looked like she was only awake enough to be annoyed at the four basketfuls that she would have to scan and bag. Halfway through the second basket, Linda's phone rang.

"What?" she said.

Joe was oblivious to her exasperation. "Is anything going on there? It just hit the TV."

Andy, who had returned quickly with the propane canisters, saw his mother go pale. She shook almost imperceptively and her lips became tight. She didn't say anything.

"Mom, is that Dad?" Andy asked nonchalantly. "I need to talk to him."

Linda, wide eyed, handed the phone to her son.

"Dad, hey, we're checking out now." He paused. "No, everything is alright." There was another pause. "Yes, I understand. We will. Bye."

Andy folded the phone and looked at the time on the display. He handed the phone back to his mother. "Dad says that we are behind schedule." He saw the clerk raise her eyebrows at what he had said. "And, you know Dad. He always wants to leave at the crack of dawn."

The clerk smiled and Andy wondered if her dad was really one of those 'leave at the crack of dawn' dads. He knew that his wasn't. A minute later, a tall, thin, prematurely balding young man came up to the register. His nametag said 'Barry'. Linda assumed that it was the night manager.

"Kathy, we're closing in five minutes," he said.

"Why, Barry?"

Barry gave her a story about corporate calling and saying that the computers were going down for some unscheduled emergency maintenance. He announced over the intercom that the store had to close because of a computer problem and that all shoppers should bring their purchases to the checkouts. He also called all cashiers to report to their registers.

Linda had begun to compose herself and she figured that the computer problem story was just a cover that the manager had made up or was told to use in case of an emergency. The cashier finally finished scanning the merchandise and gave Linda a total. Linda wrote the check, knowing that there wasn't enough money in the account. She hoped she could get to the bank before it cleared, and wondered if it would even make a difference. She and Andy loaded the carts back up with the bagged merchandise and pushed them toward the door. When they got there, two security guards were standing there with the keys hanging from the lock. The older man smiled weakly and reached to unlock the door.

"Could one of you help us with these?" she asked.

The two men looked at each other and the older one nodded once to the younger man. He grabbed a cart each from Linda and Andy and headed out the door as the other guard held it open.

It only took a few minutes to load the back of the SUV with the bags. The guard shoved the four empty baskets together and pushed them toward the entrance. Linda noticed that there were quite a few cars rushing into the parking lot as she climbed behind the wheel. She started the automobile and pulled out. As she drove by the store entrance, she saw several people banging on the door that she had just exited and a couple of them were yelling obscenities at the guards.

She pulled back onto the street and saw that there was a significant amount of traffic for this time of night. Everyone seemed to be obeying the traffic laws except for maybe bending the speed limit a little. She found herself doing about ten miles an hour over as well. She pulled out her cell phone and handed it to Andy.

"Call your Uncle Larry," she instructed. "I think it's number seven on the speed dial."

Andy did as he was told. A minute later he spoke. "Uh, Uncle Larry, it's me, Andy." There was a brief pause. "Here, I think I better let my Mom tell you." He handed the phone back to his mother.

"Larry, hi. Listen, turn on CNN, there's some kind of terrorist attack going to take place."

"Where, when?" Larry asked groggily.

"I don't know. But Joe has us leaving for Mom and Dad's. Andy and I just left from the Wal-Mart with a bunch of groceries and stuff and they closed the store as we were leaving."

"Okay, I have the news on. Oh my God. I don't believe it," Larry said as he tried to catch his breath. "We'll meet you at Mom and Dad's, all right?"

"All right," Linda agreed.

"And Linda," her brother paused a moment, "tell Joe that I said he was right."

"I will," she said, not needing him to say about what. "I'll see you in a few hours."

"Thanks, Sis."

The line went dead as she pulled into their driveway. Joe was outside making some kind of weird gyrations with his hands. Linda rolled down the window.

"What?" she asked.

"Back it in," her husband answered.

Linda backed the car out of the driveway and then backed it next to Joe's truck. Joe opened the back hatch. He pulled out the gas cans and placed them next to his truck. Linda and Andy came around to the back of the SUV.

"What do you want me to do?" she said.

"Go inside and see if Melissa has all the Bug Out Bags ready to go. Have her bring them out here and you see if we need to bring anything else with us."

Linda went toward the house and Joe turned to Andy.

"Thanks for going with your mom. You did a good job." Joe playfully punched Andy in the arm and was giving a return punch. "Now, get a couple of those empty totes and start stacking these bags of groceries into them. Then we'll start loading the rest of the stuff."

"Okay, Dad," Andy said as he walked into the garage.

Joe finished packing the rest of the gear he had assembled into the back of his truck. Then he placed the two old gas cans right next to the tailgate, followed by the six new ones. That done, he turned to his gun safe. He opened it and pulled out all twenty-one of his firearms. He put most of them into rifle cases or pistol rugs and put them into the extended cab of his pickup. He kept four rifles and four handguns out. One of each for each of them. He loaded the handguns from the ammo on his ammo shelf. Next, he loaded several magazines for each of the rifles. He had more magazines, but not more ammo. He had been meaning to buy more, but just never seemed to get around to it. Just like a lot of things he had been meaning to do. He had meant to start running to get rid of the spare tire around his middle. He had meant to get everyone out to shoot. He had meant to have a Bug Out drill. He just never seemed to be able to get around to any of these things. Well, perhaps there would be time for some of them now, and hopefully he could find a gun store close to his in-law's house and buy or trade for some ammo if they needed it. The few boxes that were for his other guns he put inside the truck. He put Linda's and Andy's guns in the SUV and his and Melissa's went into the truck.

The girls brought out the BOB's and the big duffle bag with the extra clothes. Linda also had another medium size bag that she handed to Joe.

"Here's everything else that I can think of," she said.

Joe nodded and loaded all six bags into the SUV, almost filling it to capacity. He looked at his watch. It read 4:52. Joe couldn't believe it. It had taken them just over two hours to get ready to go. He looked up and down the street. There were a couple of houses with activity, but it looked like most of his neighbors were still unaware. If he had known any of them well, he would have knocked on their doors and told them. He really only knew the names of three or four of them. Even though they were more than an hour behind when Joe had wanted to leave, they were still ahead of 90% of the population if his neighborhood was any indication.

"Andy, you ride with your mother," he said. "Melissa, you're with me in the truck. Everyone has a rifle and a handgun. I don't think we'll need them, but just in case, I want to be ready if we run into any trouble. How much gas do you have in the SUV, Linda?"

Linda lowered her head. "Just over a quarter," she replied.

Joe had continually nagged her about filling up when she got down to half a tank. Unfortunately, Linda's indicator that she needed gas was the little light that came on at about one eighth of a tank. "Damn it," he said through clenched teeth. "That will barely get us to the next town. I was hoping to get at least halfway to the farm before we had to get fuel."

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"I know a station that leaves the pumps on for credit card purchases when they close. Maybe we can get there before they get mobbed. Let's get going. Stay right behind me, but if we get separated, use the radio."

Joe turned on one of the GMRS radios, looked at the channel display, and handed it to his son. He twisted the power knob, which also controlled the volume, on the second radio to find out that it was already in the on position.

****! Someone left this one on and the batteries are dead. Does anyone know where the AA batteries are?"

"Melissa took the last ones for her Walkman," Andy said.

"Well, you used a bunch of them up in your Gameboy," she countered.

"Are any of them still good?" Joe said.

Both children shook their heads sadly.

"Did you buy any batteries?" Joe asked Linda.

"Did you tell me to?" she shot back, happy that this, unlike the low fuel status in the SUV, was not her fault.

"We don't have any in the house?" Joe asked them all.

"I might know where some are," Andy said.

"Go see if you can find them. Hurry."

Andy nodded his head and ran into the house. Joe rechecked the gear in the back of his truck to make sure nothing was where it could blow out. He glanced again at his watch. He walked around both of the vehicles and noticed a low tire on the front of the SUV. Well, he thought, how can I expect her to keep air in the tires when she won't even keep gas in the tank? He would air it up at the station.

Where was Andy? Joe walked to the door and stuck his head in. "Andy, did you find them?"

"No, not yet. They weren't in the junk drawer. I think maybe I saw them in one of the desk drawers."

"Come on. We've got to go."

Andy raced past his father and got in his assigned vehicle. Joe quickly locked the house door and tripped the switch on the automatic garage door. He walked up next to Linda's car and motioned for her to roll down the window.

"Just try to stay right behind me. Maybe we can find somewhere to get some batteries."

She nodded her head and started the car. Joe got in the truck, cranked it, and put it into gear. He glanced at the time on the radio as he turned onto the street. 5:01. He was exasperated that it had taken this long. Ben Franklin had said that he was leaving in ten minutes. He was probably already at his bug out location. Next time I'll make sure I'm ready to go that quickly, Joe promised himself.

There was a little more traffic than he would have expected, but it was moving well. When he entered the Crosstown Expressway, it looked like rush hour. There was a lot of horn honking and finger gesturing, but not much more than there usually was at five o'clock on Friday afternoons. At least they were moving, not as fast as Joe had hoped, but it wasn't too bad. Joe worked his way over to the left lane and made sure with each lane change that Linda was behind him. He calculated that at the speed they were moving, they would be at the gas station he wanted to fill up at in twenty minutes.

Along the way, every open gas station had a line of cars. Even the ones that were closed had cars at the pumps. Joe figured that those drivers believed it was quicker to wait for the station to open than to get in one of the long gas lines.

As they drove, the traffic got heavier and heavier. It took almost forty minutes to get to the station. It was a few blocks off of the access road. Joe only knew about it because he had needed fishing bait one time and a local had sent him here. The station closed from midnight to 6:00 AM, but the gas pumps would still work with a credit card. As they pulled into the lot, there was a car at every pump. Some had another behind them. Compared to the other stations, this was a dream though. Since only a few of the outside and none of the inside lights were on, most people probably thought the pumps were off too. Joe waved Linda behind a car at one pump and he pulled up behind another.

Linda didn't have to wait too long before she was able to pull up to her pump. Andy jumped out, swiped the credit card that she had given him and began to pump gas into the SUV. Joe was behind another truck that the driver had finished with one tank and was now beginning to fill the second. He began to reach into the bed of his truck and pull out 5-gallon jugs to fill as well. Joe, not angry since he planned to do the same, was anxious to get back on the road. He noticed that a car pulled out from one of the pumps and the car behind it did not move. Joe looked and could see no one in the vehicle. He put his truck in gear and pulled in next to the pump. Swiping his credit card, he was pumping gas seconds later.

"Hey, I was next!" A man said, startling Joe and making him turn.

The younger man was coming from behind the store. He was quite a bit taller than Joe and appeared to have a bad attitude. Joe wasn't sure if it was just because of the situation or if it was normal for him.

"I'm sorry. There was no one in your car and I didn't know where you were. I'll be done in just a minute," Joe said.

"I had to go take a leak," the man said as if it were Joe's fault that his bladder had filled. He sat on the hood of his car and stared at Joe's truck. The pump soon kicked off as Joe already had more than half a tank when he pulled in to the station. He reached in the back and started pulling out the jerry cans.

"Oh, no," the young man said as he jumped off his hood and clenched his fists. "You're not gonna fill those up too." He took a step toward Joe.

"It'll just take another minute or two."

"You're moving that truck now or I'm moving it for you!"

He stepped to the back of his car and lifted the hatch. When he reappeared from the back he had a tire iron in his hand. Joe had no idea what the man meant to do with the bent metal weapon, but he didn't want to find out. He reached in through the open door of the truck and pulled out his Kimber .45 Auto. The man, seeing the weapon and the almost half inch hole of the muzzle, seemed to shrink in size. He quickly backed up.

"Sorry, Mister, I don't want no trouble," he told Joe.

Joe prayed that the man couldn't see his hand shaking. "I...I...I think you better get in your car until I leave."

"Okay, okay man, relax. Don't shoot me. I'll get in the car." He opened the door and got into his car without taking his eyes off of the high-dollar pistol.

Joe stuck the .45 in his waistband and stood where he could watch the little car and its occupant. He looked over at the SUV. Andy was hanging up the hose, oblivious to what had just happened. Joe didn't trust the guy to stay in his car.

"Andy," Joe called, "tell your mom to pull over here and you come help me."

Andy did as he was told. "Finish filling those cans, while I watch this guy," his father told him.

"What happened?"

"I'll tell you later, just fill the cans as fast as you can."

Joe thought to get Melissa to help Andy put the cans back in the truck. He looked in the truck and saw that his daughter's eyes were the size of manhole covers.

"Melissa," he said. "Melissa! MELISSA!"

She jumped as finally heard her name. "What?"

"Get out here and put the gas cans in the truck as your brother gets them filled."

"Dad, you pulled a gun on that guy!"

"I know," Joe said as he glanced in the direction of the tire iron brandisher. "He acted like he wanted to hurt us, so I had no choice. Now get out here and help your brother so that we can get out of here."

Melissa opened her door and scurried around to the back of the pickup. Joe carefully watched and made sure that the man could see he still had his Kimber ready. Joe heard several thuds as Melissa swung the now full jugs on to the tailgate. It seemed to take forever for his children to finish. Finally, he heard the tailgate shut and Andy spoke.

"All done, Dad."

"Good. Load back up and let's get the hell out of here."

A moment later, they were on the street and headed back to the Interstate. Joe grabbed his cell phone and dialed 911. He figured that he better call the police before the jerk with the tire iron did. All he got in three tries was a busy signal.

The traffic seemed to have doubled or tripled while they were buying fuel. Joe wondered if they should try to find another route, but he didn't really know any others. He decided to go ahead and get on the freeway and then look for another route once they got out of town if the traffic got any worse. Linda was not able to get on right behind him, but there was only a car between them. Joe had no problem seeing her.

Traffic would move along at 45 or 50 miles per hour for a ways and then slow to a crawl for a few minutes. Joe couldn't see any reason for the disparity in speed, but he reckoned that there must be a reason. He hoped that the further they got out of town the better things would be. Joe mentally kicked himself again for taking so long to leave. Well, he thought, if I hadn't woken up, we'd still all be in bed right now. At least he could take some comfort in that. He wondered what the news was. He turned the radio on. The channel he liked played oldies, but a man's voice came over the speakers.

...is urging everyone to stay at home. Please keep the streets clear so that emergency personnel can respond. Also, the 911 Emergency system is being overwhelmed with calls. Please, only call 911 if you have true medical, police, or fire emergency. 911 is not an information service. Operators there cannot give you any information. Your best source of information is to stay here with us at KNAA Golden Oldies.

Officials in Washington believe that the device found in Boston was the only one and that the terrorists' plan was to start a nationwide panic. Local authorities assure us that there is no indication that any nuclear material is in our city. They have stated that even if the threats of twelve devices are true, it is not likely that we would be in the top twelve cities selected. The mayor is asking for everyone to cooperate. He asks that all schools and businesses close for the day and that only critical personnel report to work. The State Department of Transportation is urging everyone to stay at home. Please keep the streets clear so...

Joe turned the radio off. "Well, we don't have to worry about work and school now, do we sweetheart?"

Melissa ignored the rhetorical question. "Dad would you have really shot that guy?"

Joe was quiet for a long moment. "I was pretty sure that he would back off if I just showed him the pistol. I know I wouldn't have shot him for hitting the truck with the tire iron, but if he had tried to hurt you or Mom or Andy, I'm pretty sure I would have pulled the trigger. Would that bother you?"

"Yes and no."

"Me, too," Joe said thoughtfully. "Thank God it didn't come to that."

Melissa leaned over and hugged her dad the best she could.

The traffic continued to slow. It still moved okay at times, but the time they spent just creeping was increasing. Joe looked at the clock. 6:14 is what it read. Almost an hour and fifteen minutes since they left the house. They had only gone 18 or 20 miles. It was obvious to Joe that traffic was getting worse, not better. He had to get off of the interstate.

"Honey," he said to Melissa, "do you know how to read a map?"

"Of course, Dad. We learned last year in Geography."

"Good. Reach in the glove box and pull out the state map. Find where we are."

Melissa opened the box and found the map. She unfolded it and Joe saw her looking over the whole map again and again. He thought that, by now, she should have at least narrowed down where they were to half of the map.

"Having trouble?" he asked.

"This isn't like the maps we use at school. This one has so many roads on it, I can't find anything."

"Look for our city. It's in the southeastern part of the state. It should be in the lower right hand corner."

Melissa looked for a few more seconds. "Got it."

"Now find where your grandpa and grandma live. It should be toward the top center."

"I found it," she said.

"That's great. Now, come back to where we are and follow the Interstate north until you get to where it intersects with Highway 59." Joe knew they were only five or six miles from the intersection. He hoped that he could turn west and then find another route north that would not be so clogged.

"Okay, I've got it."

"Follow 59 west and see if there is a road or highway that intersects it and goes up close to your grandparents' place."

After a few minutes of tracing roads with her finger, Melissa spoke again. "I found one. It's just a thin line but it runs almost right to the farm. It's SH 983. You have to go about this far on 59 to get to it." She held her fingers about four inches apart.

"How far is that?" Joe asked.

"About this far," she said holding her fingers up for him to see again.

"I need to know how many miles that is. Look at the legend and see if it says how many miles to the inch."

Melissa folded the map over and studied the legend. "It says one inch equals 12.3 miles, Dad."

Fifty miles, Joe figured. That wasn't too bad. His in-laws were forty miles west of the interstate, so this should only be about 10 miles out of the way. If the traffic was moving any faster at all, they could make that up easily.

"Great job, honey. We're going to take your route."

Melissa beamed.

Joe looked to his right and could see the sky turning pink. He looked in the rear view mirror and saw that now there were two cars between him and Linda. There were more and more cars trying to shoehorn themselves onto the expressway at every entrance. Joe looked at his watch and figured it would take another twenty or thirty minutes to reach Highway 59 at this rate. He prayed that the traffic on 59 would be better.

A few miles up the road he decided that he had better start getting over so that he could exit. He looked behind him. Linda was three cars behind. It was starting to get light now, so she should have no problem seeing him change lanes. He put on his blinker and hoped that someone would let him over. Everyone on the road seemed so intent on getting out of town that no one would give him room to move right. He finally had to force his way over and ignore the response of horns and middle digits. He watched in the rearview and saw that Linda was able to find a generous soul to let her over.

He repeated the maneuver and now was in the correct lane. Linda was not as lucky this time. No one wanted to let her over and she was about to pull the same rude stunt that Joe had.

"I don't know why your father is getting over," she huffed. "The left lanes are moving better."

Andy, determined to help his mom, rolled down his window and looked at the drivers on his side, pointing his intentions to change lanes. The on comers just ignored him like he wasn't even there.

Joe was getting worried. He was getting very close to the exit for 59. He tried to wave at Linda to come on up and he would let her over. She didn't see him as she was spending more time looking back than forward. In addition, with a few cars getting off at the exit, Joe's lane was now moving faster than Linda's. Since Linda was ignoring him, he decided that he would go ahead and take the exit. That would force her to get over. Joe appreciated the fact that she was a very cautious driver, but in this situation she was just going to have to be a little more aggressive.

Andy was still looking for space to get over. When the right lane moved some, the driver he was looking at seemed distracted and he didn't move. This created an opening and Andy told his mother to go. Just as she cut the wheel and mashed on the accelerator, the driver saw that traffic was moving and he gunned his pickup. The sickening crunch of metal was the result of the two vehicles trying to occupy one space.

Joe saw the collision in his mirror.

"Shit, shit, shit!" he said under his breath, hoping that Melissa wouldn't hear.

He pulled the truck over to the shoulder and put it in Park.

"Stay in the truck," he told his daughter.

Joe got out and loped back to the accident. Behind the bonded vehicles, traffic in both lanes had come to a halt. Only the left lane was moving and the rubbernecks wanting to see what had happened tremendously slowed it. The driver of the pickup was out of his car and surveying the damage. Joe, breathing hard, stopped next to him. Linda started to get out, but Joe signaled for her to stay in the car.

"You okay?" he asked the man.

"Yeah. I think so."

"Sorry about this."

"Why?" the man asked. "You didn't do anything. I appreciate you stopping."

"That's my wife in the SUV," Joe said.

"Oh," the man said.

"We could call the cops, but it will probably take them a long time to get here," Joe said as he looked at the impact site. The truck looked to have almost no damage. The bumper might be a little bent, and it was probably scratched up some. Overall, it could have been much worse. Joe saw that the truck's bumper was one of those heavy-duty steel pipe jobs and it had done its job of protecting the front of the truck quite well. The bumper had hit the front wheel of the SUV. There was a little sheet metal damage to his wife's fender, but it didn't look too severe.

"Naw," the man drawled, "I just want to get out of town. I don't think my truck is hurt. Just give me your name and address and your insurance info and we'll settle this later."

"Sounds good," Joe agreed.

They quickly exchanged names and the man got back in his truck, backed up a little, and went around the SUV.

Joe motioned for Linda to get going as well. Cars on both sides of her were creeping past. She started the engine, put the car in drive, and mashed the gas pedal. The SUV didn't want to move at first. She pressed the gas further and the big vehicle lurched forward with a horrible squeal. Joe looked back at the noise and could see that the front wheels were pointed in different directions. He held up a hand to stop Linda. He jogged back up to the front of her car while cursing their luck. He looked under the vehicle and could see that one of the tie rods was broken. They wouldn't be taking the SUV any further.

"The steering for one of the tires is broken," Joe explained to Linda when he got to her window. "I'll stop the traffic. Try to get it off of the road."

Linda nodded tersely. Joe stepped into the lane she needed to cross and held a hand up, becoming a human barricade. Tires screeched and horns blared, but the traffic stopped. Linda herded the beast with a wounded leg over behind Joe's truck. It sat catty cornered, half on the shoulder, half on the grass.

"Can you fix it?" she asked when Joe came off of the expressway.

"Not unless you have an extra tie rod."

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll just have to leave it here and go in the truck. I think we can stack most of the stuff in here on top of the stuff in the truck. You and Andy start bringing me everything."

Joe climbed in the bed and quickly stacked the cargo from the SUV as best he could. He covered it with a tarp from the camping supplies and laced a rope over the top to keep it secure. Joe was at least happy that he had these two items. When he had double checked everything, they locked the damaged vehicle and all climbed into the cab of the truck. It was crowded in the back for the kids with all of the guns and ammo. Melissa started to whine about it some, but Joe shut her up.

"Look, it's just for a couple of hours. You'll just have to make do, okay?"

The sun was up and Joe could see it in his rearview mirror as he rocketed west on Highway 59 at twenty miles an hour. He was glad to be off of the Interstate. Maybe they weren't moving as fast as he would have liked, but at least the traffic here wasn't stop and go. He looked at the time. The clock read 7:29. Joe couldn't believe it, but the wreck had cost them almost an hour. He had expected to be at his in-law's house by now and they were just barely out of the city. He turned the radio back on.

...were low yield backpack nuclear devices. For years, experts have warned that such an attack was not only possible, but inevitable. With many of the weapons of the former Soviet union" missing and unaccounted for, the material to build such a device is available on the black market. The other five bombs were only nuclear laced dirty bombs and pose little immediate danger to those not in the direct blast radius. Officials hope that any further devices are of the dirty bomb variety. They believe that the terrorist used all of the back pack nukes on New York and Washington. The authorities are asking that everyone stay calm. All of the bombs were detonated in the downtown areas of the attacked cities. Citizens only need to immediately evacuate if they are in the downtown area of a large city. Please listen to your local officials and obey their directions. If everyone tries to evacuate at one time, all arteries out of the cities will quickly become clogged.

As Joe listened to the radio for the next several minutes, he was slowly able to piece together what had happened. At around 7:45 Eastern Time, seven cities were attacked. New York was hit by three different backpack nukes. One hit the financial district, one detonated just outside of city hall, and the other exploded on the edge of Central Park. Each blast killed thousands of people in a five or six block radius. Washington was hit by two of these bombs. One was close to the White House and the other was near Capitol Hill. Deaths from these two blasts were not as high as New York as many of the federal officials were evacuated as a precaution.

Baltimore, Charlotte, Atlanta, Bangor, and Miami were all hit by dirty bombs. Widespread panic was proliferating through those cities and others like wildfire. Joe knew that he was far enough away from downtown that even if the worse did happen, they would be okay. However, the news still twisted his somewhat large stomach into a golf ball. He looked down at the speedometer and saw that they were now moving at close to forty miles an hour. He didn't know if it was because they were getting further away from town or if everyone now had more incentive to move quickly. He didn't care what the reason was. He was just happy to be moving.

At 7:45, the radio went silent. Joe punched all of the preset buttons but was not able to find a local station. He turned the dial by hand and found a distant station a state away. They reported that in the last five minutes, five cities in the central time zone had been attacked. Three of them, Chicago, St. Louis, and Dallas, had been major commerce centers, but two, including Joe's town, had been medium size. Joe looked south and saw a mushroom cloud forming over what he guessed was downtown. He didn't know why the terrorists would hit his town except to make sure that everyone felt threatened. The radio said that the bomb that hit Joe's town had been a dirty bomb, but he wasn't sure if that was right. Would a dirty bomb make a mushroom cloud and knock out all of the local radio stations? He wasn't sure. Everyone in the truck was grimly quiet as thoughts of what could have happened if they had not bugged out ran through their minds.

At 8:12 they were at the junction with SH 983. Joe made the right turn along with several other cars. Even though this was just a two-lane highway, it was moving much better than either of the multilane roads he had been on. As he sped toward his destination, relieved that he was making good time, something nagged at the back of his mind. If it wasn't just a dirty bomb that hit his city, where would the fallout go? The wind usually blew from the south here and he was heading north. Would they be safe at his in-laws'? How much fallout would a backpack nuke produce? These were questions that he didn't have the answer to. He hoped that someone would.

At 8:50 the news reported that two cities in the Mountain Time zone had been bombed. Dirty bombs hit both Denver and Phoenix. Panic and chaos were engulfing those cities. A few minutes later a report came over the air that a dirty bomb had been found and defused in Sacramento. Evidently, panic had also beset the west coast and the Freeways in the cities along the Pacific coast were grid locked.

Joe slammed on his brakes as the traffic in front of him came to an abrupt stop. He wondered what could be wrong. They had been moving along so well. Traffic started creeping forward and Joe noticed that more cars were coming the opposite direction. He finally crested the top of a hill and could see the problem. In the bottom of the draw between this hill and the next was a small creek. Over that creek was a bridge, barely wide enough for two cars. A tractor-trailer had been heading south over the bridge at the same time a big motor home was crossing it to the north. Somehow, they had collided. Both vehicles were wedged in a fashion where Joe thought that the guardrails on the bridge might have to be removed in order to untangle the mess. Even if they could be removed without disassembling the bridge, it would take a couple of those monster wreckers to do it. It looked like the occupants of both vehicles had abandoned their now worthless rigs. Joe figured that they caught a ride with someone.

There was a wide spot in the road just in front of the bridge and everyone was turning around as they reached it. Joe did not want to turn around and backtrack. He was already much later than he had expected. He also imagined that the interstate would resemble a parking lot by now. As he slowly crept toward the turn around, he pulled out the map. Melissa had been right in that there was no other way to the farm unless he wanted to drive quite a distance. He had the fuel to do it, but then there would be little left for the generator when they got to his in-laws'.

There had to be another way. He looked both ways. There were fields on both sides of the road with only barbed wire fences to keep him from crossing them. He wondered if he could find a place to cross the creek and come back to the road on the other side. If he could, traffic would not be a problem. He could really make some time. He pulled the truck over onto the narrow shoulder.

"You all stay with the truck. I'm going to go look for a place where we can four wheel over to the other side."

Joe walked across the ditch to the fence. It was old and rusty. He found a place where the wires were loose and he pushed them down and carefully stepped over. The ground gently sloped down to the creek and he was only mildly

winded when he reached the water. He walked along the edge noticing that the water was several feet deep in some places and only a few inches in other. About two hundred yards from the bridge, he found a spot that looked promising. There were no large rocks and the water was only six inches or so deep as it ran over a sandy spot that was only seven or eight feet wide. He hated to get his feet wet, but he had to make sure that the bottom was solid enough. He quickly waded across and was thankful that his boots seemed to be mostly waterproof. The bottom was pretty solid and the truck should have no problem crossing here. The bank on this side was a little steeper, but his mighty four by four would have no trouble making it back to the fence. He walked it, just to be sure, and found a route to the fence that would be within the truck's capabilities.

He walked back to the truck and pulled his toolbox from behind the back seat. He extracted a large pair of linesman's pliers and walked back to the loose spot on the fence. The four rusty strands of wire popped easily with the bite of the pliers. Joe walked back to the truck, threw the pliers into the seat next to him, and climbed into the driver's seat. He fully twisted the knob on the dash that activated the transfer case, putting the truck into 4x4 low range. He dropped the truck into gear and easily drove across the ditch and slipped through the hole in the fence. He was almost gleeful at his genius. He would now have an uncrowded road to his in-laws' where he could drive at a normal pace. With any luck, they would be there in a little over an hour.

As he approached the creek, wondering what the dolts in the two wheel drive vehicles sitting on the road and watching were thinking about his brilliant plan, he made sure he was lined up on the spot he had tested. Joe knew what the owners of the four wheel drive vehicles were thinking. They were watching to see if he made it. If so they would follow him. But he put that out of his mind. He was lined up on his spot.

"Everyone, hold on!" he commanded as he hit the throttle.

The truck lunged forward and the front tires plowed through the water with ease, sending a blinding spray up and across Joe's windshield. When they hit the ledge of the bank on the other side, the front of the truck bounced up as if it were doing a wheelie. This surprised Joe, and coupled with the fact that he could not see, he lifted his nine and a half doublewide foot off of the gas pedal. He felt the front of the truck began to fall back toward the earth and he breathed a sigh of relief. It quickly turned into a moan of agony as he felt the back of the truck sink. He stabbed at the throttle, but it was too late. His forward momentum had stalled and the tires only spun, digging him deeper into the creek. He let off the gas and opened his door. Looking at the rear tire, he saw a gray goop covering the half that was not sunk. He stepped out, and his foot sunk into the goo.

It seemed solid when I walked over it, he thought. Joe looked back into the cab of the truck at Linda. She said nothing, but her eyes could have bored a hole through the walls of Ft. Knox. He shrugged his shoulders. He looked under the truck and his heart sunk almost as much as the rear axle was. The truck would not come out easily he knew. He looked back toward the road and saw all the vehicles making an orderly turnaround.

Well, he thought, I can stand here feeling sorry for myself and wondering what went wrong, or I can do something.

"Everyone, out!" he commanded. "Linda, you and Melissa go see if you can find some big branches to put under the tires." He held his hands up in an eight inch circle to show them what he wanted. "Andy, help me get the jack and let's see if we can get these tires up so that we can put the limbs under them."

Linda and her daughter walked away from the road toward a clump of trees. When Linda was out of earshot of her husband, she began to complain about the situation they were in. "If we had just stayed home, we probably would have been alright," she said to Melissa. "Now, we're stuck, literally, in the middle of nowhere!" They looked around and finally found a couple of branches that looked like they might work. The two exasperated females dragged them back toward the truck.

Linda was surprised when she got back. Both Andy and Joe were covered almost head to toe in the mud. Joe looked at her sheepishly. "It seems solid on top, but once you break through the top layer, it's just soup underneath. We can't find a solid spot to put the jack. I don't see any way to get it out."

"So what do we do?"

"We walk," he said.

"What do you mean, we walk?" Linda asked.

"We have backpacks, food, and camping stuff. We load as much stuff as we can into them and take off for your folk's. It might take a few days, but we can get there.

"Joe, you must have lost your mind. The kids could probably do it, but my feet are bad and neither one of us is in any kind of shape to hike that far, with or without a heavy pack."

Joe knew she was right. Thirty years of wearing ill-fitting, pointy-toed, and high-heeled shoes had left Linda's feet where she barely made it through the mall for half a day. He was carrying an extra twenty pounds around his waist. They would just have to try to get the truck out. He looked up toward the road and noticed that the line of the cars was gone. Only an occasional vehicle was turning around in front of the bridge. Maybe he could find someone who could pull them out.

Joe stuck his .45 into the back of his jeans and walked up to the road. Every once in a while, a car or pick-up would come up to the bridge and turn around. Joe knew they needed a really big four by four to have a chance at pulling his truck out. Finally, an older Jeep came up the road. It was lifted and had huge tires on it. As it slowed in front of the barricaded bridge, Joe could see that it held four men. Joe would have been more comfortable if it had held a family, but he was desperate. He checked to make sure his pistol was in place and hidden, then he stood up and waved at the Jeep. As it slowed, Joe could see that it was loaded with farm boys. He had always heard how helpful country folks were. He hoped the reports were right.

"Hey man, watcha doin' out here?" the man in the front passenger's seat ask.

"My family and I got stuck trying to cross the creek in our truck down there," Joe said as he pointed. "I was hoping that you would see if you could pull me out."

The four young men looked at the floundered truck, then at each other and smiled. The driver looked back at Joe and flashed a big set of white teeth. "Sure, Mister, we'll help you."

"Oh, thank you so much. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this." Joe relaxed a little. His only knowledge of country folk came from movies and books. Some of them depicted them all as toothless, mean, uneducated rednecks. He was glad that they weren't right. "There's a hole in the fence over here. Just follow me."

Joe began to walk toward the opening he had cut in the fence. He heard the gears grind in the old CJ's transmission and a few mumbled curses from the driver. He turned to look and saw that the Jeep was now lurching backward. Joe wondered what was wrong with the vehicle. Probably something wrong with the reverse gear, he figured. The Jeep stopped and then pulled forward a little more smoothly and followed Joe through the fence.

Linda saw Joe and the Jeep behind him. Thank goodness, she thought. As they got closer, she got a little nervous about the truckload of young men.

"Andy, grab your sister and take her over there away from the truck."

"Why, Mom?"

"Because I said so."

Andy sighed, picked up his rifle and walked over to his sister.

"I'm going to go stand by your dad," Linda told the teenagers as they walked away.

"You couldn't you find anyone to help but a bunch of rednecks?" she asked in a whisper.

Joe glared at her in his best 'shut-up' look. "You're overreacting."

The Jeep pulled up behind the truck. The front passenger jumped out and looked under the truck.

"Damn, Mister, you sure did get stuck. You sure are lucky that we came along."

By that time all four of the men were out of the Jeep and surveying the situation.

"Yeah, you sure are lucky," one of the men from the back seat said. "You sure got a lot of stuff in there. Where were you goin'?"

"We are on the way to visit some family," Joe said. Suddenly, he didn't like the look in the man's eyes and his use of the past tense.

The other back seater was looking in Andy and Melissa's direction. "You coulda been here along time if we hadn't come along," he said. "And with your family and all. Lots of wolves in these parts." The man's smile suddenly looked sinister to Joe and he wondered if he had made a mistake.

"Enough talking!" the driver barked. "You three get the stuff we need to do this out of the back of the Jeep."

The three men walked to the back of the off-road vehicle as Joe and Linda watched them suspiciously.

The driver turned back to Joe. "I think what we need to do is hook a chain onto your trailer hitch. I'll turn the Jeep around and we'll see if we can pull her out this way. I don't want to take the chance of crossing the creek and both of us getting stuck."

Joe relaxed again. The guys were really going to help them. He began to thank the man again when he noticed that the man was backing away from him. Joe thought it strange and looked at the man's three accomplices just in time to see an AK-47 with an under folding stock come out of the small space behind the back seat of the Jeep. Joe tried to scream at Linda, but the words stuck in his throat. He reached under his shirt for his pistol and noticed that the driver was doing the same. Joe's right hand came up with the pistol and he swung it toward the driver since he was the nearest threat.

Joe grabbed Linda and started to pull her back with his free hand just as he heard the first bullet from the AK zing by his head. He fired his weapon, but didn't think that he had hit his target. The sound of vociferous gunfire thundered into one long deafening boom. Bullets were screaming past Joe as he desperately and vainly tried to squeeze the trigger on his expensive pistol as the sights were lined up on the driver's center of mass at the same time he was pulling his wife and his self back toward the kids.

Linda tripped and fell back onto Joe as he heard a sickening smack. The two of them ended up in a pile on the ground. Joe pulled his legs out from under his wife, got to his knees, and reached out to help her up. He was still trying to shoot the driver. His sights settled and held on the target now that he was momentarily stationary. The trigger broke and he saw the driver double over. He pulled on Linda but she was not trying to get up. He looked down and saw that part of her head was gone. If the adrenaline had not been pumping through his veins, he probably would have retched. He struggled to his feet and turned his attention toward the other three scumbags. He could see that the rifles they were holding were all the same. They held them in front of them and wildly sprayed bullets in his direction. He had to keep moving and get to the kids.

Andy saw his father stand and continue on without his mother. How could he? If he wouldn't save her, Andy would. He stood and continued to fire his rifle as he moved forward.

The slide on Joe's .45 locked back after he fired the last round in the gun. Joe realized that he didn't have a spare magazine. He would have mentally kicked himself, but he didn't have time. He turned to run back to the kids. As he did, he saw Andy advancing on the three shooters.

"No, Andy!" he screamed as he reached out and grabbed his son by his shoulder. "She's gone!"

Andy turned and looked at Joe. Joe could see that his son's eyes burned with a look that Joe had never seen before. He briefly wondered if his children would ever be able to get over the sight of their mother being killed. Suddenly, the look in Andy's eyes turned blank. He crumpled. Joe looked with disbelief at his son and saw his mouth barely moving.

"Go!" Andy barely croaked out as he used his last ounce of strength to push his rifle into his father's hands.

Joe saw the wound and knew that Andy was dying. He gripped the rifle and fired a few quick shots back at the hellspawn. He ran to Melissa. She didn't have a gun and Joe didn't know how many rounds the black rifle that Andy had given him had left.

"Run!" Joe implored his daughter who was looking back and forth from her mother to her brother and back.

"But, but, but..."

Joe grabbed her, twisted her into the direction he wanted her to go, and pushed her. She began to run and he did his best to keep up with her, turning and firing a shot behind him every few steps. They crossed the creek and continued to run. His mind raced. They had nothing. How would they survive? He realized that the firing behind him was slowing. At least we are alive, he thought. They could probably make it to Linda's parents. It would be hard with no food, water, or shelter, but they could do it. How far had they run? It seemed like miles to Joe. He looked back and was amazed that they were only about a hundred yards from the truck. Two of the men had quit firing and were bending over their leader. At least one of them paid, Joe thought. He turned back toward his daughter and saw that she was fifteen or twenty yards in front of him. He didn't know how much further he could run. His breath was short and his side hurt. He tried to call Melissa, but he didn't have enough wind to clearly verbalize her name.

Suddenly the pain in his side traveled to his chest and intensified exponentially. He grabbed at his heart and fell on his back. He couldn't catch his breath and it felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest. All he could see was the clear blue sky and the blazing sun. Not a cloud could be seen. Suddenly, Melissa appeared over him. Her eyes were bloodshot and her face looked as if she were old. She kneeled over him, sobbing. Joe tried to tell her to leave him, but either she couldn't hear him or he couldn't get the words out. She continued to hug him and he could feel the convulsion of her body against his.

Finally, she must have heard him. He felt her take the rifle from his hands. He was happy that he had been able to get through to her, as he knew his time left was measured in minutes. He looked up and terror ripped through him as he saw that it was one of the gang bangers that had Andy's rifle. He saw two dirty pairs of hands reach down and tear Melissa away from him. He had to save her, but he couldn't move. The demon with the rifle looked down at him and smiled. As his vision narrowed to a thin tunnel of light, the last thing he heard was his daughter screaming.

The Bug Out was posted around the web in 12/ 2005 including at Survivalmonkey.com in this thread:
<http://www.survivalmonkey.com/forum/reading-room/1806-bug-out-short-story.html>

This pdf version was created in 11/2010 with David's permission and will be hosted at survivalmonkey.com.

We are also getting ready to sell copies of Lights Out as soon as it's published. Please see here for details: <http://www.survivalmonkey.com/lights-out.html>

