

Stretch – A Vignette

Gene Pool, oh, how he hated the name his parents had given him, stood silent and still, in emotional shock, as he looked at the pink slip in his hand, which was actually regular white copier paper.

With the termination notice was a severance check for one month's salary, payment for unused sick leave and vacation time, and instructions on how to collect or roll over his 401(k) money.

"What am I going to tell Giselle?" Gene whispered aloud. A hard look from his former boss got him moving toward the exit. When he reached the eight year old Subaru Outback, he got behind the wheel and then reread everything in the envelope he'd been handed. And came up with the same whispered question. "What am I going to tell Giselle?"

Finally, after sitting in the car for several minutes, Gene started it and slowly drove home. He parked the Outback next to the three year old Subaru Forrester his wife drove. With a sigh he got out of the Outback and went into the house.

"Gene!" exclaimed Giselle, one hand going to her chest. "You nearly scared me to death! What are you doing home? Are you ill?" Giselle's hand moved from her chest to Gene's forehead.

She couldn't check his temperature, since he was shaking his head no. He pulled the envelope from his suit jacket pocket and handed it to his wife. She began to cry almost immediately.

Gene sat down in another chair beside her and put his arm over her shoulders. When she'd read everything Giselle turned toward Gene and he held her in his arms until her crying slowed and then stopped.

"What are we going to do?" she asked Gene, sitting back in her chair and looking intently at him.

"Well. There's the severance and sick leave and vacation time. Plus the 401(k), if I don't get a job before I can still roll it over. After that, twenty-six weeks of unemployment."

"Gene, we're just barely making it now."

"I know, Honey, I know. We still have some room left on the credit cards. I guess we can use those and just pay the minimums until I find something. Stretch the other money out as much as possible. I guess we should start cutting back on some things, too."

Giselle frowned. "What? We're not that extravagant."

"I know. But there just isn't going to be enough money to live the way we have."

“Well... I guess I could give up going to the gym three times a week. Cut that back to just one. But you’ll need to cut out the golf weekends with your buddies from work.”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

The two sat down and began to make a list of things to cut back on to save money. It was a short list. Both were accustomed to the lifestyle they were living and neither really wanted to give up much, despite the circumstances.

“See. We did good,” Gene said, sitting up straight and smiling. “This will save us some money, for sure.” Giselle didn’t notice, but Gene’s heart really wasn’t in what he was saying.

“Oh, look at the time!” Giselle said, glancing at her watch. “It’s getting late. I’ll go pick up Bobby and pick up something for supper on the way back.”

Gene just couldn’t quite bring himself to ask that she get something inexpensive to cook, rather than stop at one of the good restaurants that had takeout available that they often used.

Of course, he ate his share when Giselle returned with a full slab of ribs from their favorite rib joint.

Three months later Gene was drawing unemployment. The severance was gone. The vacation and sick leave money was gone. The 401(k) money was gone. And all seven credit cards were maxed out. The unemployment wasn’t enough to even pay the minimums on the cards. Gene began to pay a token amount on each card, less than half of the minimum.

“Gene,” Giselle said, starting to cry, her tone accusatory, “You said you’d take care of me when we got married. That you’d provide for us. That I wouldn’t have to work.”

“I know, Honey. But we’ve got to get some additional income. My unemployment just isn’t enough. And it’ll run out pretty soon. Maybe we shouldn’t have taken that cruise with Jan and Howard...”

“Oh, Gene! That was so much fun! I was able to forget about our problems for a week and just enjoy myself.”

“I know, Honey. I know. But it maxed out all the cards and then some. We have to start cutting back more, as well as both of us look for jobs. I played my last game of golf for awhile last Sunday.”

“Oh, Gene! I don’t want to give up the gym! What if I bloat out like I was? You hated it when I was heavy.”

“I’ve got a feeling none of us are going to have to worry about gaining weight,” Gene replied softly. He took Giselle into his arms when she began to sob.

Two days later, after seeing yet another credit card debt consolidation commercial on the television, Gene made the call. Giselle had come into the living room after doing the evening meal dishes and caught part of Gene's end of the call.

When he hung up, Giselle asked, hopefully, "Can they help us?"

"Well," Gene replied with a sigh, "They probably could, if we had some income. Even with consolidation and some forgiveness of part of the debt the card issuers are likely to do, we still don't have enough income to make the payment. I've only got a few more weeks of unemployment, anyway."

Giselle's face fell. "I still have to look for a job?"

"I'm afraid so. I've been on the internet looking for work. And ideas on how to get by. Found a couple of weird sites. Preppers, they call themselves. Most getting ready for nuclear war..."

Giselle had a disproving look on her face. "Survivalists! We don't want anything to do with survivalists!"

Gene was shaking his head. "I know. I know. But I did find some ideas on how to cope... Nutritious food at low cost. And even a list of home based jobs that we might do until we find permanent work."

"Permanent? You mean for you. I don't plan to work the rest of my life. I'll get a temporary job, if I can find one suitable. But as soon as we're back on our feet, that's it."

It sounded like a threat to Gene, but he said nothing in reply, for fear of hearing that is was, in fact, a threat. Instead, he said, "I printed out the list one guy posted. Don't know where he got his ideas, but there were some we might be able to do. We can both look it over and see if there is anything you might want to do."

Giselle 'harrumphed', but took the printed list when Gene went to the computer desk and retrieved it.

Courier work

Sell blood plasma a couple of times a week for a few dollars

House/apartment/condo sitting/caretaking

Lawn watering: turn on/off at night, and/or move sprinklers when needed

Messenger service

Bank messenger: money/papers transfers for businesses

Errand service: grocery delivery, laundry pick up, shopping, etc.

Business lunch delivery service: prepare food or arrange with a restaurant

Commercial building window washing service (could do for homes, too, but would need ad.)

Flower subscription service: pick up & deliver fresh flowers to businesses

Work as security guard

Telephone stenographer

List broker: travel the local area, note everything, compile lists & sell to businesses. Lists such as a needs list: roof, siding, painting, lawn mowing, tree trimming, etc. Own: boat, RV, dog, cat, old car, etc. Event occurring: graduation, marriage, birth, moving, etc. Any visible or researchable need for a service or possible sale.

Knife sharpening service

Gift basket service

Romance catering service

Clothes washing & drying (clothesline hanging for freshness extra)

Sewing & clothing repair

Dishwashing (for caterers or after parties, or in clients' home for lazies)

Firewood/log splitting/newspaper logs (delivery and stacking available)

Make fancy lamps

Make fancy walking canes

Make candles

Make sundials

Make fancy perpetual calendars

Make fancy Solitaire card game boards

Make fancy board game holders/layouts

Make fancy game sets (chess/backgammon/etc.)

Make/build-in secret compartments

Make fancy boxes/boxes with hidden compartments (also hide-a-books)

Make scarecrow kits for gardeners

Services that could be run from home but would need some storage space and/or equipment:

Closet organizing service

Karaoke service

Searchlight service (mounted on vehicle/trailer w/generator)

PA service w/unique vehicle/PA equipment rental (can tow searchlight)

Mobile billboard trailers

Mobile electric scrolling signs

Outdoor party truck/mobile disco (has food service equip and sound system)

Utility pick-up truck w/QD mount snow plow, QD mount deicer pellet spreader, winch, tilt pick-up bed w/bedliner, lift tailgate, swing arm hoist, platform hitch with QD equalizer arms & brackets, set of different size hitch balls on inserts, set of different light connections & adapters

Limo service

Rickshaw service (bike & hand pulled for use at holiday events or tours)

Scrap collection and sale.

Salvage buildings slated for demolition (only with consent of owner/demolition company, obtain and keep lists of the wants of antique/curiosities/collectables dealers

Own/place/service video games/vending machines

Teach/Supervise a skill you have for home owners & supply specialty tools for jobs

“We can’t do all of these!” exclaimed Giselle, after reading the list silently. “And I am not going to do other peoples’ dishes! Not even in their dishwasher!”

“It’s just some ideas, Honey. Things to make us think and maybe come up with some on our own.”

“Well, I think it’s silly. And some of these we couldn’t do anyway. We don’t have the equipment or supplies that are needed.”

“About that... Not just because of the things on the list... But I think we should sell the newer Subaru. Get out from under the payment and extra insurance, and give us a little capital to use to do something to generate income.”

Again, Giselle turned on the waterworks. “Oh, Gene! No! I love my Subaru! If we have to sell, we should sell yours.” She was sniffing and tears were running down her cheeks, but her voice was sharp.

“Giselle, even though it is paid off, we wouldn’t get nearly as much for it as we will for yours. And because it is paid off, we eliminate one of our payments. I...”

“I hate this! I hate being poor!” Giselle stormed off and Gene sighed.

“How did I ever let it get to this point?” he asked himself silently. Then started studying the list again.

Getting an old used truck and using it for a few of the things listed was what Gene wanted to do. But he sighed again. He really didn’t have the experience to be working with equipment like that, even if he could get it. He wasn’t that good with tools, either. Most of the ‘make something’ options were out of the question.

Gene looked up when something flew past him and landed on the sofa. It was a blanket and pillow. Giselle was gone when he looked around. “Guess I’m sleeping on the sofa tonight,” he muttered.

It took another week with no luck through the temp services for either of them that Giselle agreed to start doing closet organizing, if they could find people needing the service. Gene was already selling blood plasma, and making note of everything he saw on his solicitation trips, coming up with the types of lists on the list.

Giselle refused to do the blood thing, and the first night after her first closet organizing job obtained through a ‘work wanted’ ad, Gene found his things moved to the spare bedroom.

Giselle suggested bankruptcy several times. Gene finally went to an attorney specializing in bankruptcies and came back both relieved and disappointed. He hated the idea of bankruptcy.

But it turned out not to be an option for them. The lawyer said they'd never win a case based on their spending habits.

Most houses in the area had automatic sprinklers, on timers, so the lawn watering service didn't work out. Giselle's Subaru was sold and half the money applied to their debt. The other half Gene invested in a karaoke set up and a good used firewood splitter. Even Giselle got into the regular Wednesday night karaoke show that Gene arranged with the bar that he and Giselle frequented.

She was able to see some of her friends in a social situation, and show off one of her talents. She was an accomplished singer and usually opened and closed the show, doing a song or two when things were slow.

Gene was putting in sixty to eighty hours a week, sleeping in the spare bedroom, gone from the house more than he was there. Splitting and stacking firewood turned out to be a decent income producer, though extremely exhausting on a day-to-day basis. He continued to sell plasma every week, too.

Giselle used all the money she made in her endeavors for herself. Gene's went to household expenses and reducing their debt.

Gene picked up a little bit of work in his regular line of work through a temp service. And he managed to work with all the credit card companies, one after the other, to get their card debt reduced to a level where he could meet the new payments if he could stay busy.

He found himself drawn to the prep site where he'd found the job list when he had a few minutes to spare. He and Giselle weren't alone in their situation. There were many people trying to prep for various disasters on limited incomes, just like him. Though he wasn't preparing for anything special, just to make it through the tough times, he began to do many of the other things other people wrote about in the forums.

Much to Giselle's disgust, they began grocery shopping exclusively in stores that were running specific sales. Gene insisted they spend the little extra money to buy extra of the items on sale. They actually began to build up a pantry. It meant Giselle had to cook, rather than open up and heat, but she actually had a knack for it and finally quit complaining about it. And she moved Gene's things back into the master bathroom.

The only constant the last several months had been not to let their financial situation adversely affect their eight year old son, Alan. It was the only place that Giselle willingly sacrificed. If it was for Alan, then she went along with it without complaint.

He'd been asking to go camping for some time even before their financial situation changed, and had asked just recently to get a sleeping bag and some other gear so he could camp out with his friends that had invited him along.

It was an expense they didn't really need. But both were committed to letting Alan experience the outdoors. And Mike Jenson was one of their oldest friends. He was one of the few

that Gene had admitted to that they were in financial trouble. He'd thrown Gene some wood splitting jobs and Gene trusted the man implicitly. Enough to allow Alan to go camping with Mike's family, un-escorted.

Another of the things that Gene had learned from the various prep forum sites he was on was to buy quality first, even if you had to forgo some purchases for a while. So when Giselle and Gene took Alan to REI to shop for camping gear, they scrapped together all they could so Alan could get good equipment.

When they left, Gene had a dollar ninety-eight in his pocket and that was all. But Alan would be going camping with equipment as good as that the Jensen family had.

With the situation they had found themselves in, neither Giselle or Gene had paid much attention to the news. Giselle wasn't one much to, anyway, but Gene had always kept a weather eye on the news, especially the financial news, since he was an accountant in a large firm. Even without that job, now that the family was at least making ends meet, and because of some of the things Gene was seeing on the prep sites, he began to watch the news religiously again.

Though he didn't put it to Giselle the same way, Gene realized that they were both lucky, and had made some good decisions on how to manage the situation. They'd been foolish getting into the trouble, but were doing some of the right things to resolve it. And the world around them was falling apart in a dozen different ways.

Now, besides just getting themselves out of the hole they dug themselves, Gene decided the family needed to prepare for even worse times. Both financially and from a physical safety standpoint.

The first step was to go to the local shooting range when Giselle was otherwise occupied. Several people on the forums had said that someone at just about any range would be willing to lend a hand to a new shooter. Over the period of six months, Gene shot a total of sixteen different firearms, from twenty-twos to a single-shot .50 BMG sniper rifle. Rifles, shotguns, and handguns.

He decided on what he wanted to buy, and began to set aside a small portion of the money he was making toward it. Gene didn't tell Giselle. That is, until the incident at the mall. They were shopping for new school clothes for Alan when a robbery was attempted. Fortunately, there were three concealed carry weapon permit holders in the mall at the time and the would be bank robber was stopped and apprehended without a shot being fired.

Giselle was scared, but seemed to be fascinated with the CCW permit holders. One of them she and Gene knew. And had never suspected she carried a gun in her purse on a daily basis.

When things had calmed down, and it looked like Alicia had a moment, Giselle went over to her and the two women began to talk. Gene was left to go with Alan to get his new clothing.

That night, as they were preparing for bed, Giselle asked Gene, “Gene? You know how Alicia carries a gun and what happened today? Do you think I could learn to shoot and carry a gun? There are so many things going on... Seems like there is a case like the one at the mall every few days. I’ve always just been scared. Like I was today.

“Alicia said she was scared, all right, but confident of her ability to handle the situation. I want to have that kind of confidence.”

“Giselle, you’ve always been rather anti-gun, when the subject came up.”

“I know. But being there, with Alan, in danger from someone with a gun. I want to be able to protect Alan and myself.”

She wouldn’t quite look at Gene, fully expecting him to explain to her that he would be the one that would protect them. But she was ready with the argument that he couldn’t be there all the time to protect them.

But Gene surprised her. He simply nodded, and then said, “I think it’s a good idea. We’ll both take lessons and even get Alan to try his hand at recreational shooting.”

Giselle wasn’t so sure about that idea, but she’d deal with it later. Right now just getting Gene to agree to let her get a gun was a triumph in her mind.

Another six months and not only had Gene and Giselle paid off not one, but two more credit cards, but they were confirmed shooters. And Alan was a crack shot with a Ruger 10/22. They couldn’t afford to buy any weapons yet, but they did have enough income to be able to rent what they had decided they liked and practice once a month.

It was one of the few things they could do together. Giselle and Gene continued to work, Giselle’s attitude having slowly changed over the months. Since it had been Giselle that brought it up, as soon as they could afford one gun, it was the Walther PPK in .380 that Giselle liked so well that they bought, along with a supply of ammunition and accoutrements so all three in the family had a way to carry it.

While they were still a long way from being as solvent as they once had been, money was much less a worry now than the ongoing world situation. Not only were governments around the world rattling sabers, but Mother Nature was acting up with a vengeance. Every time they turned the Weather Channel on, there were new reports of not only weather related phenomenon, there were earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis and a myriad of other natural disasters.

Gene introduced Giselle to the prep forums he was now a member of. It was a slow sell, but Gene finally won her over to the path he’d decided the family should take as they regained their financial footing. Giselle had changed over the months of doing without.

She was determined to get back to the financial security the family had enjoyed, but without making the same mistakes that put them on the track Gene getting laid off had started.

Even when Gene finally found a full time job, paying even slightly more than he'd made at the previous place, Giselle kept working. It was her 'prep' money, she said. Set aside for some of the not quite necessities, things she wanted to have in case things got bad again.

Gene didn't mind. She was fully on board now with becoming prepared for more than just being out of work. They even went camping together for the first time, after Alan's joyous retelling of all the fun he always had on the trips with the Jensen family.

It wasn't her cup of tea, but Giselle stuck it out, making sure that Alan was having fun. She'd never be an avid camper, but she turned into a capable one.

That was the position they were in when the mortgage company called their loan. It was the only payment they'd made sure never to be late with, much less miss. But the company was in the process of failing, like many others, and was calling in loans right and left.

Giselle surprised Gene when he showed her the letter.

"No. They are not going to treat us this way. We got into trouble on our own and are getting out of it on our own. I won't give them the satisfaction of taking everything else we have for something that is their fault. We start looking for a new place tomorrow. And we don't pay anything else on this one. They threaten us with foreclosure... Well, they can have it."

"But you love this house," Gene protested.

"Well, Gene," Giselle said, "I thought I did. It is a good house. But our needs are changing and I have to change with them. With the way things are going, mortgage companies are going to have some bargains on the market, just trying to survive."

"So what do you think we should look for?"

"Something in a gated community," Giselle replied.

Gene winced and Giselle saw it. "Nothing extravagant, Gene." She was smiling and Gene relaxed. Not all the gated communities around here are full of mansions."

"I hope not. Okay. We'll go house hunting tomorrow. Should we inform the mortgage company we are defaulting?"

Giselle was shaking her head before Gene finished the question. "We probably should... but the way this letter is written... The attitude. No. I say we just let them do their worst and worry like we have to."

Gene decided not to argue the point. They didn't have enough equity in the house to try and sell it, and the mortgage company wasn't going to give them anything back. There were steps that the mortgage company had to go through to evict them. He and Giselle had a chance to go looking without much additional worry for probably three months.

It took all three months. But Gene found a house that satisfied his new interests, had a huge fenced back yard, so Alan could have a dog, and satisfied all the requirements that Giselle had listed. Several of them meshed with Gene's, surprising him more than a little as they discussed the various places they found.

The house was only half the size of the one they were leaving, but had a full basement, one-fourth of which was finished as a family room and spare bedroom with a full bath plumbed in. There was a master bedroom with en-suite bath, a second bedroom and a hall bath. A more compact kitchen than the old house, but adequate, even for the home canning that Giselle promised Gene she would master.

The same back yard that allowed for the dog was eminently suited for a decent size garden. Something they discovered after they bought the house, was the proliferation of pecan and black walnut trees in the forest the lot backed against. There were also wild blackberry and raspberry patches.

Buy it they did, with much better terms than on their old house, resulting in a mortgage payment less than half of what they'd been paying. An angry mortgage agent watched as they moved their household from the old house to the new. Giselle was grinning when she tossed the keys to the woman. "Good luck," she said. The agent said something, but Giselle just walked away without responding to the taunt. She had a CCW permit now. The old outbursts were no longer an option for her. She had to be calm, cool, and collected at all times.

Alan was ecstatic with the place. Not only could he have the dog he'd always wanted, but he had immediate access to the forest. Under supervision, of course.

The moving expenses were paid for by the extra furniture they didn't need and sold for a modest sum. They were pretty much at a zero bank balance at the point the closing costs were paid, but Gene was getting a full check in two days and Giselle had a small check coming too. They already had more than enough food accumulated to get them through three months, if they so chose or had to.

As they accumulated some extra funds, half of which went into savings, the other half was spent getting the tools, equipment, and supplies to put in a garden and then dry, can, or freeze the products of that garden.

It was too late to actually plant anything, but the half of the back yard that was to be the garden was stripped of sod, which Gene managed to sell to a neighbor, fertilized with horse manure from a small farm not too far away, and tilled and plowed into ridges to hold the winter's moisture it would get.

Giselle, as she had feared, had gained some weight after giving up the gym because of the expense. Between the stairs to the basement, and the help she gave Gene in the garden, and a much better diet, she trimmed down to what she considered her ideal weight.

Both Gene and Giselle were monitoring the prep forums daily, making further plans to see to their physical and financial security. They even brought Alan on-board their new life style,

slowly, so as not to scare him or overwhelm him with the possibilities of disasters that were an inherent part of the forums.

Alan took to it like a duck to water, with most of his interest centered on wilderness camping and survival. But he listened attentively when his parents talked to him about the other types of things they were preparing to deal with if they ever happened.

Giselle, being Giselle, chafed a bit under the constraints they had with money. She wanted to prep more quickly, but the money just wasn't there. So she and Gene finally settled into a rather easy pattern of improving their situation.

Gene looked at the termination letter he'd received four years ago and smiled. It might have been the best thing to happen to the family, since they'd become a family. The three of them had become closer, and while nowhere close to the point they wanted to be with their preps, Gene was satisfied that if things continued, without getting much worse, they would eventually meet that goal.

But not right this moment. Right now, Gene, Giselle, and Alan were watching the satellite television intently. The President was about to address the nation.

He never got the chance. The television went blank. Gene flipped through the channels. Everything was blank. The three looked at each other in the gloomy darkness. "I think... I think we'd better get to the basement." Gene's voice was tight.

Alan, almost twelve now, had his pocket flashlight out in just a moment and twisted the head to turn it on.

"Good job, son," Gene said. "Light my path to the kitchen." Alan did so, and Gene took the crank flashlights from the kitchen cabinet closest to the garage door. He handed one each to Alan and Giselle and began to wind-up the one he kept.

Though they'd only practiced this particular scenario once, all three knew what to do and went about it. Giselle wasted no time. She opened the refrigerator and began to hand things to Alan. Alan placed them in the cotton canvas bags they used when they went to grocery store.

When one of the bags was full, he took it to the basement. Giselle followed a moment later with another bag, this one of frozen food from the refrigerator freezer. She added the contents to the large chest type freezer in the basement, then, with Alan's help, wrapped the freezer in a couple of the spare blankets for the basement bedroom.

Gene had pulled the main electrical breaker in the garage and was in the process of closing the shutters on all the doors and windows, except for the back door. He would close it just before he went to the basement.

Gene looked around the area. He saw no light except for the stars. The shutters closed, Gene next ran to the propane tank and closed the valve. Back inside the house moments later, Gene closed the back door shutter and went down into the basement to join his family.

“Dad, do you think this is it? Global Thermo-nuclear War?”

“I don’t know son. But I don’t want to take any chances. Let’s get into the shelter.”

Giselle was shaking, her face pale in the light coming from the three windup flashlights. Gene took her in his arms and guided her into the small shelter that took up half of the unfinished basement space.

Built against two adjoining outer walls of the basement, the two new shelter walls were at right angles to each other. Gene, with a little help from Alan, had built them himself. They were parallel concrete block walls, filled with sand, with more sand between them.

The roof of the shelter consisted of close spaced two by twelve rafters. Three-quarter inch plywood was securely screwed to the underside of the beams and the cavity lined with plastic and filled with sand. Another layer of three-quarter inch plywood was laid on top of the rafters and an eighteen inch wall built on the two outside edges of the roof. This tub was lined with plastic, too, and filled with more sand.

The construction had taken some time, since a section at a time had to be completed in order to place the sand on the roof of the shelter. When finished, there was only a one inch gap between the floor joists of the house and the completed roof of the shelter. A jack post supporting the middle of a four by twelve laminated beam running the length of the shelter provided extra support

Fortunately, the basement was full height and the interior height of the shelter was a more than adequate six feet three inches. Gene had a tendency to duck quite a bit, and bumped his head a couple of times on the support beam, but Giselle and Alan had no problem.

Even Shep, Alan’s Airedale pup had a place in the shelter. It was in the entryway, and therefore had slightly less protection, but bringing him into the shelter had been discussed and the decision made to let him stay in the entryway with plenty of water, food, and a bed.

With four windup flashlights hanging from the ceiling, there was adequate light to perform a thorough inspection of the shelter and do an inventory of their supplies. As soon as that was done, and the fact that everything was as it should be noted, Gene hooked up a wire running from the shelter outside to the roof to the antenna of a crank-up radio. He ran the AM dial, and much to his surprise, found a station broadcasting.

“We are broadcasting using our back-up transmitter, powered by a generator. The only word we have is that a single high altitude nuclear weapon has produced a devastating electromagnetic pulse that has disabled much of the electronic and electrical infrastructure of the United States.”

FEMA reports that this is not, I repeat, not, an all out nuclear war. Only the single warhead has been detonated at this point. Those of you with working radios please inform others around you of these facts. To conserve fuel, and protect our transmitter, we are transmitting only ten minutes per hour. We will bring you more information when we have it, on the hour."

The message was repeated several times, then, at ten after the hour, cut off. Gene ran the dial of the AM and FM bands, and even the one shortwave band the radio boasted. He got nothing else. He looked over at Giselle and Alan. "Let's make sure we try the radio again in fifty minutes."

"Do we need to stay down here, if it was just the one bomb?" Alan asked.

"What if there are more, without any warning, just like the one?" Giselle asked Gene.

"I don't know, Honey. We're certainly safe here. But it will get old really fast, I know." Gene was silent for several moments and then spoke again. "I think we'll be all right if we go up and prepare a meal and wait for another broadcast. Let's just take up enough of the fresh food for the one meal and leave everything else ready, just in case."

Gene didn't want to turn on the propane for the cook stove, in case they had to shelter quickly again. Alan brought in his camping gear from the garage and set up the liquid fuel single burner stove. The easiest meal was to make a quick soup from some leftovers. Giselle prepared the meal by the light of Alan's tent lantern and two of the wind-up LED flashlights.

When the clock rolled around to the next hour, Gene had the radio wound up and ready to listen to. There was nothing new. After talking it over, they decided to go back down to the shelter and go to bed.

One of them would get up on the hour, each hour, and listen for additional information. Alan had to plead to be part of the rotation. Gene and Giselle both finally agreed. Alan would get up and listen at midnight, then Giselle and finally Gene again.

It was during the three AM broadcast that Alan hurriedly wakened his mother and father. "Dad! Mom! Get up! There's more news!"

Groggy for a few moments, the words they heard from the radio quickly woke Gene and Giselle up to full attention.

"To all our listeners... This in from the White House. The President has just announced on the emergency warning network that a single high altitude nuclear device has been detonated; creating a massive EMP pulse that has damaged much of the electrical and electronic infrastructure. No other attack has occurred and we have not retaliated to this attack.

Martial law is declared and there is a dusk to dawn curfew in effect until further notice, to be enforced by local authorities. Exceptions will be made for medical emergencies, but the local authorities must be notified at the earliest opportunity and the need will be evaluated by them and assistance rendered if deemed necessary.

There will be a no tolerance policy on looting. Legal authorities are authorized to shoot looters on sight. Price gouging, profiteering, and similar crimes against fellow citizens will be dealt with harshly. This is the time for all Americans to come to the aid of their neighbors.

Continue to listen for further announcements as we continue our hourly broadcast.

The signal died and Gene turned off the radio. "What does that mean, Dad?"

"It means there are hard times ahead, Son. Very hard, and dangerous times." Gene looked over at Giselle. "But this family will stand together and we will endure whatever comes our way."

"Yes," Giselle replied. "We'll be all right, Alan. The last few years... Well, we are reasonably well prepared for this." Her voice quivered a bit as she added, "If it doesn't last too long."

"Okay. It's very late... er... early... anyway, let's go back to bed and see what awaits us in the morning."

"Here or upstairs?" Alan asked.

"I think... let's stay down here for the rest of the night. We should know more tomorrow," replied Gene.

The next morning Gene checked the old pickup truck he'd bought to replace the one Subaru. The older Subaru was now considered Giselle's and Gene used the truck. The truck started right up, without a hitch. The Subaru started, but didn't run well, and soon died. It wouldn't start again.

He was back inside the house in time for the next scheduled broadcast. It was a repeat of the one at three that morning. "I don't know if I should go in to work, or not," Gene mused as he mixed up pancake batter, while Giselle poured juice.

"Just ca..." Alan looked sheepish. "Can't call, can you?"

Gene smiled. "Nope. But I did check the phone, just to be sure."

"Do you think we can get the Subaru to start again?" Giselle asked.

"I don't know. It's probably the computer system. That model was still fairly simple. I guess I should go to the parts place and see if they have a replacement module."

"Can I go with you, Dad?"

Gene hesitated, but finally said, "Okay. But we're going to have to be very cautious. I really don't know what to expect."

"Should I bring my pistol?" Alan was very serious.

Again Gene hesitated. "I think... Yes. You're a sharp cookie. I don't think anything will happen, and I'll have mine. But just in case... Nothing was stated about a restriction on firearms in the broadcasts."

Alan went to his room, using one of the crank-up flashlights, as Gene had decided to keep the shutters closed and it was fairly dark inside the house. The compact Beretta Tomcat was riding in an inside the waistband holster behind Alan's right hip when he came back to the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later Gene and Alan went into the garage. Alan opened the garage door manually as Gene started the truck. After Gene backed it out, Alan closed the garage door and the shutter and climbed into the passenger seat beside his father.

He hadn't even backed out of the driveway when his next door neighbor to the left ran over to the truck. Gene stopped and rolled down the window.

"Your truck runs? I can't get any of ours started. What do you think of all this? Can you give me a ride in to a towing service?" Simon was a short, rather obnoxious man. He'd moved into the house next door only a few days after Gene's family had moved into their house.

"Simon... well... I guess so." Gene looked over at Alan. "Slide over, Son, and let Simon get in."

Alan slid over next to his father and buckled up again as Simon ran around the front of the truck and got into the passenger seat.

"What do you think about all this mess?" Simon asked Gene, looking past Alan as if he wasn't there.

"I'm not sure what to think," Gene replied. He drove around a car stalled nearly in the middle of the street. Two men had their heads under the open hood.

The regular guard was at the entrance gate and waved at them. His motorcycle was parked in the guard's dedicated parking spot.

"You think we're at war and they're just not telling us?" Simon asked.

“Well,” Gene said, “Somebody sure shot at us, even if it was EMP.”

“What exactly is EMP?” Simon asked then.

“Electromagnetic pulse. Tell him what you know, Alan.”

Eagerly, Alan shared his knowledge, explaining the basic facts of EMP. “Zaps electronics like computers and things that have wires long enough to pick up the energy. Electrical stuff, like motors and all, aren’t as susceptible, unless they have a long run of wire going to them. Radios with longer antennas can get zapped through the antenna. Walky-talkies with antennas less than forty inches aren’t real prone to damage, depending on the actual strength of the pulse.

“Oh. And there is a pulse from ground burst nukes, but it’s much more limited than the high altitude HEMP device. But even ground bursts can zap things because the pulse can be picked up by power lines, shallow buried metal pipes, and even railroad tracks and re-radiated miles from the blast. Is that all, Dad?”

“Pretty much, Son. Good job.”

“So what’s that mean for us? How long will the power be out? Do things just reset, like a breaker in the breaker box in my garage?”

“Not that simple,” Gene said. He pulled into a strip mall with a national chain auto parts store. There was activity inside, but only a few of vehicles in the parking lot of the entire mall. Simon got out, and so did Gene.

Alan started to get out, too, on the driver’s side, but Gene saw two rather rough looking men hanging around one of the vehicles, the hood up on it, and said, “Alan, stay here. Keep an eye open. If someone comes over, come get me, quick.”

“Okay, Dad,” Alan said, settling back in the seat. He’d seen where his father was looking and the same thought came to him. That the men might try to take the truck. Though he was too young to get a concealed carry permit, Gene had taught him everything he’d learned in the required class to get the permit. Alan took the responsibility of firearms ownership and use seriously. He made no move to draw the Beretta.

Alan made a point to look around once in a while rather than just watching the two men. Nothing happened for a long time, but then the two men put the hood down on the car they were working on and started to walk toward the truck.

Just about to get out of the truck and go into the auto parts store, Alan saw his father come out of the store. Simon was with him. The two men turned around and went back to the car as Simon and Gene got back into the truck.

“Sorry their tow truck isn’t running, Simon,” Gene said as he started the truck. “You want me to drop you off somewhere else or take you home?”

“Home, I guess,” Simon replied. “I’ll wait for the phones to come back up and make a few calls.”

Alan looked at Gene. Gene gave a little shake of his head. Alan had been about to tell Simon that it could be days, if not weeks, maybe longer for the phone system to be repaired. It might even be months. And that was if nothing else happened.

A few minutes later Gene pulled into the driveway and stopped. Simon got out and headed for his house. Gene and Alan began working on the Subaru after pushing it out onto the driveway so they’d have more light.

Gene wasn’t much of a mechanic, but the parts person had given him detailed instructions on how to switch out the computer module. It took a while, but Gene finally had Alan try the starter. The Subaru fired right up.

Gene started to put the hood down, a pleased look on his face, but suddenly stopped, thinking of the two men. He’d seen them headed toward the truck. “Alan, get your mother for me, would you?”

“Sure, Dad.”

When Giselle came out of the house, Gene showed both of them how to reconnect the wiring of the computer module after he disconnected it. “You’re not going to hook it back up so we can use it?” Giselle asked.

“I don’t think so, Giselle. A working vehicle is going to be a precious commodity. I’d rather keep the Subaru in reserve, in case something happens to the truck.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Giselle replied.

“Okay. Help me push it back inside,” Gene said, closing the hood.

That done, the three went back into the house. There had been nothing new on the radio the last hour. It was time for another broadcast and the three gathered around the radio after Alan cranked it several turns.

There was one new element in the broadcast. Everyone was requested to continue daily life as much as possible. Getting people to go to work to keep up what infrastructure there was seemed to be the goal. How most people were going to do that was beyond Gene.

But he did have the means. “I guess I should go in, according to that broadcast,” Gene said.

“You think it will be safe?” Giselle asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll take precautions.”

“Do you think I should go in?” Giselle asked then.

Gene immediately shook his head. “No. I think you should stay here with Alan. If the store contacts you and asks you to come in, I guess you’ll have to. But not until then.”

Giselle nodded. It was the answer she wanted to hear. Her job in the resale boutique couldn’t be considered important to the infrastructure, the way Gene’s job as the office manager/accountant at the truck repair place where he worked. Keeping the trucks running was going to be an important job, and his job, while not directly related to that, was important in the ability of the company to function.

Gene was glad he went in when Jack Albertson immediately asked him to help with the parts department as neither of the parts people had shown up. Though Gene didn’t know one part from another, he had revamped the computer system for the parts department early on after getting the job. So he knew the basics and knew how to reference the shelves, even without the computer.

Gene worked without a break, as the mechanics that had made it in to work in their mostly customized vehicles, without electronics, did everything they could to get some of the semi trucks running again. The drivers couldn’t bring the trucks to them, so the mechanics went to the truck in their private vehicles.

It was slow, and used up precious fuel, but after defining the problem, the mechanics would come back, tell Gene what they needed, and he’d search it out. Fortunately, the truck shop kept a large parts inventory, including advanced electronics.

Payment was cash on the barrelhead, or when people simply didn’t have any, fuel from the trucks’ tanks. Seals on the trucks were inviolate. No cargo was accepted for payment.

It was stressful work. Priority was given to reefer trucks, other food trucks, and fuel trucks. Some drivers didn’t like being turned down or made to wait. Gene was glad he was armed. But no shootings took place over the three days Gene went in to work.

There was no point in going in on the fourth day. They were completely out of electronic parts. And being in a working vehicle was becoming a risk. Though he didn’t shoot, Gene did pull his Walther PPK .380 and show it to a group of men standing in the middle of the road when he went home the third day.

With both vehicles securely locked in the garage, Gene and his family kept a low profile. They had stored food and the garden was doing well. They were able to draw water from their well with a hand pump and flush toilets with buckets of that water, since they had a septic system.

Whenever they were outside, all three family members went armed. They still did not have the arms and ammunition they planned on acquiring. But each did have a handgun. Gene and Giselle both carried a Walther PPK in .380ACP with three spare magazines. Alan had his own handgun, a well used Beretta Tomcat .32 ACP, also with three spare magazines.

The generator was used very little, as the skies were clear and the small solar PV array kept the batteries charged and provided enough electricity to get by. The jenny was used once a day normally, to allow the water pump to run so they could all get showers and do the dishes. Since the hot water heater was propane, they had hot water at those times.

For another week not much happened. But then people began running out of food. Even those that found alternative transportation, such as bicycles, couldn't find any food. The store shelves were empty.

"Gene..." Giselle said after the family had listened to another official announcement. This one was nearly a pleading call for those with, to help those without. "You know the Hendersons have that new baby..."

Gene nodded. "I know. I've been thinking about that a lot. And the Meiners. Six kids."

"Do you think we can help out some? Without getting ourselves into a jam?" Giselle asked then.

"I don't know, but I think we should try," Gene said slowly. His determination since he lost his job to see that his family never went without was weakened by the thought of the few children in the community going without.

"But none of the long term storage stuff. Just fresh from the garden and some regular grocery store canned and packaged goods," Gene added more quickly.

Alan was a great help in deciding who might need what. Though he was very closed mouthed about his family's preps, he was otherwise a gregarious and engaging young man. He was friends with all the children in the community near his own age, and knew about all the others.

With his guidance, care packages were made up appropriate for the families with younger children and babies. "I guess we just go around and hand them out?" Giselle asked when the packages were finished.

Gene was shaking his head. "No. I don't want anyone to know we're doing it, if we can help it. I think midnight delivery is in order." So that was what they did. Carefully, that night Alan would take the appropriate box up to the front door of a house while Giselle and Gene stayed out of sight with the other boxes.

Alan set each box down, knocked hard on the door, and then ran for the closest cover in the darkness. More than once the door was answered with someone carrying a gun, which surprised Gene immensely. He had no idea that there were that many armed people in the complex. He felt extremely under gunned with just the pistols the family had.

He cautioned Alan about the fact. "If you are caught delivering, stop, put your hands up, and let your mother and I handle the situation."

“Okay, Dad. I don’t want to get hurt.”

They only handed out things that night, and a night the following week. People started looking around for who was doing the handouts. Not just those that got them to thank the person, but people that didn’t get them, and wanted to know why not. It was simply too dangerous a program to continue, and Gene, Giselle, and Alan all agreed on that. Besides, it had already put a large hole in their food supply.

What they did do, when the garden began producing more than the family could process under the conditions they were in, Gene began to sell the excess fresh produce for a nominal sum out by the mailbox at the end of their driveway.

A few instances he simply gave away some of the food to those in most dire need with the admonition not to tell anyone else. Alan’s dog, Shep, was a great help. Already old enough to act as a guard dog, he stayed with Gene at the mailbox every time he went down to sell the food. The Airedale watched calmly as long as things went all right. But anyone that became angry or aggressive was soon under the hard stare of Shep, lips drawn back to show sharp teeth, emitting a low, warning growl.

Alan, after much discussion, was finally allowed to go into the forest backing the community and start collecting the wild pecans and black walnuts that were plentiful. They became a favorite at the mailbox food stand. So did the wild blackberries and raspberries.

“Dad, why don’t people go out and get these on their own? They’re just lying there, to be picked up. Why would people pay even the little that you charge them when they can get them for free?”

“I don’t know, Son,” Gene replied. “Some people just don’t think about such things. It’s probably a good thing they don’t. Might be some gunplay over who owns what. And I want you to be on the lookout for that, like I said before. Any confrontations you back away and come straight home.”

“Yes, Dad. But so far, there hasn’t been anyone but me out there. You think I should try and fish the stream?”

Gene looked surprised. “Never even thought about it. You think there might be fish in it? It’s awful small stream.”

“I don’t know. I could put out a couple of limb lines... Check them occasionally. I learned about them in one of the survival manuals. Won’t cost me much time, and if there are fish, the limb lines should catch them easier than a pole.”

“Sure. Give it a try. But be especially careful. People that wouldn’t try anything for some nuts and berries might for protein like fish.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Finally the largess of the forest and the gardens ended. It was mid September and starting to get cold. "People are going to start dying if something doesn't change," Gene told Giselle and Alan when he packed up the cart he'd built to use as the vegetable stand at the mailbox. He was taking it home to put it away for the season.

After the many weeks of near total confusion, and violence in many parts of the country, the Federal government finally got a handle on things. Power plants were slowly brought back on line as new parts arrived from overseas under rush production and shipment orders. Likewise the many substation transformers that had been destroyed by the EMP were replaced, again from mostly foreign sources.

Cellular telephone service was made a priority and finally was available in most of the country. Trucking was nationalized and all operating trucks run round the clock picking up and delivering food coming from abroad.

Gene went back to work, and even Giselle did, too. The little resale boutique became a booming business with clothing manufacturing a low priority in the recovery. Alan went back to school when the local district got power.

As soon as he could, Gene used the rather modest amount of money he'd collected over the weeks for food to re-fill the propane tanks and top off the diesel and gasoline tanks, as well as buy any excess food that could be stored long term.

It had been a trial, not without some danger, but Gene, Giselle, and Alan had weathered the worst of it, and were prepared for the next one, experienced preppers now, with more and better preps than they'd started out with, not to mention the experience.

End *****

Copyright 2009
Jerry D Young