

Triple A-7 – A Vignette - Prolog

Albright Artemis Abernathy the Seventh. That's right Triple A-7. Probably heard the name before. Family is famous. Originally for their wealth. More recently for the loss of that wealth. This Albright, the Seventh, was born into the lap of luxury. But that lap didn't stay luxurious for very long. The Fifth and Sixth Albrights played fast and loose with the family money. What the Fifth didn't fritter away, the Sixth gambled away trying to recover from the losses in the stock market.

The family money was all gone before Albright, the seventh one, hit high school. But he did come from a family that, at one time, consisted of hard working, intelligent, conservative, patriotic personalities. The genes were there. Only time would tell which ones Triple A-7 would have. Those of his early namesakes, or of the latter ones.

So, when I met Albright the Seventh, he was just another college senior, like me. Broke most of the time, but willing to lend a hand with a dollar or two when he had it. I'd transferred in from California to finish my college days in University of Missouri Rolla School of Mines and School of Engineering when my Mom got sick and wanted to go home to die.

She died a month after we arrived. But that's all beside the point. The real point is I met Albright. Met him when we both answered an ad for a low cost, off campus apartment, just before senior year.

It turned out that the apartment had two bedrooms, though small. Mrs. O'Connor took a shine to Albright. Not like that, mind you. He reminded her of her late husband. Same tall, lanky, long haired, aristocratic face. I didn't see it. Well, not until I saw a picture of Mr. O'Connor. They did sort of favor one another. As long as it got us into the apartment. Albright didn't seem to mind lending a hand around the place. Mrs. O'Connor was in her nineties and couldn't get around very well, so Albright, and then with my help, kept the place up for her.

Besides sharing the apartment, we spent a lot of class room time together. We were both after degrees in Civil Engineering. Albright was aiming to be a city planner specializing in environmentally friendly, low cost housing. I, on the other hand, was into the big bucks of designing major buildings and groups of buildings like skyscrapers and megamalls.

That was then. Things have changed.

Triple A-7 – A Vignette

“You sure your family won’t mind me tagging along?” Albright asked me.

We were packing up the apartment. We had our degrees in hand, and were ready to take on the world. After a break. I’d asked Albright to ride along to the old family home, where I was planning to lay low for a couple of weeks before setting out on my career path. Besides just the company, Albright had gas money I was badly in need of.

“Sure,” I replied. “I’ve mentioned you in my letters and phone calls. Sis would like to meet you.”

“Because of my family...”

“Well,” I had to admit, “That could be part of it. Sure. But Sis is pretty good people, if I do say so myself. You’ll be welcomed for yourself, not your family.”

“Then sure. I guess I could use a break, too. But I can’t stay very long. I have to get the resumes out. I don’t have enough to live on for very long.”

“I understand. You can crash at the house and work on your resume and help me with mine. My sister will be glad to help us there. She’s a wiz with resumes. Got one of my no good buddies a job based on a resume. Didn’t lie about anything, but she sure made him out to be twice the guy he really is.”

Albright smiled. I guess I could concede why the ladies always favored his company over mine the last year. He did have a killer smile. One good thing he inherited was good teeth and a winning smile. And they always seemed to be intrigued with his long brown hair with reddish highlights.

So, off we went, in my fifty year old Volkswagen Bug, headed for Spokane, my home town. As you can guess, we never made it. The War happened and we were right out there in the middle of it.

The mushroom cloud that appeared in the far distance, right in the line of our travel, was the first notice that something was going on. Like a genius, I said, “Uh-oh.”

Albright didn’t say anything for a couple of seconds. “I think we’re in trouble. That’s undoubtedly Kansas City. If nothing lands any closer, we’re going to get fallout in a few hours.”

“Dead men driving,” I said. “I guess this is it.” I pulled over onto the shoulder, after passing three vehicles that had suddenly slowed down, right in the middle of the Interstate.

“I don’t plan to go out that easy,” Albright said. “I’ve worked too hard to get to where I am to just give up. Get back on the road and cross over. We passed that construction site a few miles back. We need to get to it as fast as we can.”

I hadn't a clue what he had in mind, but Albright was always a step or two ahead of me. I refuse to play chess with him. He can think ahead better than anyone else I know. So I got the old Bug on the pavement again and zigzagged my way around all the stopped vehicles. I couldn't figure out why everyone had just stopped. I learned later about EMP. At least one high altitude blast was set off high over Omaha and the EMP killed most of the electrical systems connected to the grid, and most of the electronics that had any length of wire connected.

I made it to a crossover on the Interstate. It was marked, as most are, for Official Vehicles Only. I decided we were official enough at the moment and headed back east. The old Bug still had lots of life in it and I rang every horsepower out of the engine getting to that construction site.

It being a Sunday, there was no one around. But that didn't stop Albright. We'd both worked construction during the summers, me out in California, and Albright right here in Missouri.

So it was no problem for us to get an old excavator going. I followed Albright's instructions. I began moving some of the other equipment around as Albright began digging fast and furious into the side of the newly constructed ramp going in for a new intersection. Fortunately the equipment was all pretty old and didn't have much electronics, so the EMP hadn't affected most of it.

The construction required a great deal of fill and there were several of the old, medium size Cat off road haul trucks parked together. Albright had me move three of them close, while he was digging. Then I got in a Cat track loader and began to move the dirt that Albright was removing from the ramp.

When Albright seem satisfied with the big slot he'd cut into the ramp, he signaled me over. "We're going to flip these haul trucks upside down in the cut and cover them with what I dug out."

"We are?" It was all I could think to say. While not the biggest off road trucks that Caterpillar made, they were big enough to present a problem in turning over. At least, I thought so. But Albright had me back one of them into the position he wanted and then used the excavator to lift one edge of the truck up.

It was a near thing, but the truck tipped to its side and with a push of the bucket, Albright had it upside down. I lined up another truck and he did the same thing. This time he had me help with the track loader to push it just where he wanted it against the other one.

By the time Albright had the third truck wheels up, I figured out what he was doing. He didn't have to tell me to start moving the dirt to cover the trucks up. He got aboard a Cat D-8 crawler tractor with a blade and began knocking down the ramp from above as I filled in around the trucks from below.

A crowd had gathered to watch what we were doing. They pretty much all stayed out of the way, fortunately. When we had all but one side of the third truck covered, Albright parked the D-8 out of the way and motioned me down off the track loader.

“Need to move those chemical toilets over here,” Albright said, heading for the four two wheel trailers, each with a Sani-hut portable toilet aboard.

Several people ran over to help as we began to man-handle the trailers toward the expedient fallout shelter. “If we help can we go in there with you?” asked one of the women that came up.

“Sure,” Albright said. “Get with everyone and see what food you can come up with.”

Albright left the portable toilet trailer move to me and my new helpers and headed off toward another piece of equipment.

It suddenly occurred to me that we would have shelter from the fallout, and the chemical toilets for sanitation, and hopefully some food. But what about water? I guess Albright had thought of that, too. I looked over when I heard an engine start. It was another piece of equipment. This time an ancient wheel scraper converted to a water tanker.

I watched as Albright moved it over under the downspout of a big tank trailer mounted on stilts. I had to look away when one of the helpers called to me to find out just where the trailers were to be parked.

When I had a chance to look again, Albright was backing the tanker toward the gap that was still left open on one side of the buried trucks. When he stopped he had plenty of hands to help string out the hose racked on the side of the truck. He connected it to a valve on the back of the tanker and turned it on, after making sure the fire nozzle on the other end of the hose was shut off.

As more people gathered around, Albright ran off toward another piece of equipment. It was another off-road truck, but a much smaller, articulated model. I figured out, on my own, that Albright was going to flip it, too, to make a right angled entrance to the cavities below the big trucks’ dump beds.

That’s exactly what he did. I got back on the track loader and Albright on the D-8 and we finished burying everything, leaving just a small opening to get under the bed of the articulated truck.

“Find some shovels!” Albright yelled to me as he headed somewhere on the D-8, the tracks making an awful racket as he got the machine up to its maximum speed.

I turned around when the woman that had been searching for food came up, in tears. “We can’t find hardly any food. What are we going to do?”

"I... ah... really don't know..." I stammered. "My friend... He seems to know what to do. Maybe when he gets back he'll know what to do. We have water, at least..."

"How long will we have to stay in that thing?" asked someone else. People were gathering around, asking all sorts of questions I didn't have answers to. I was glad I had a shovel in my hands. Made me feel better.

"Hey! Look at that!" someone on the outer edge of the group said, pointing down the highway.

It was Albright, on the D-8 dragging a semi rig behind him. I saw the artwork on the side of the lead trailer. It was a McDonalds franchise delivery truck. And there was a second trailer. I assumed they were loaded, or Albright wouldn't have been bringing them back.

Albright pulled right up to the entrance to the shelter and stopped. One of the guys in the group seemed to know what to do and had the cable unhooked from the truck and Albright moved the D-8 out of the way.

When he jumped down and came over to the group, he said, "Anyone have camping gear in their vehicles? We need a way to cook this food when the time comes."

"I do! I'll go get it! But I need some help," said a brown haired woman dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt.

Half a dozen people ran after her as she headed down the Interstate toward her dead vehicle. Several more people set off in the opposite direction. I headed for the Bug to get mine and Albright's. We'd planned on camping out on the trip to save money, so we had our full camping set-ups on the roof rack on the Bug.

"Leave the food in the trucks for now," Albright said. "The reefer units are still running. EMP didn't get them. The food will keep where it is better than if we move it.

"While they're getting the camping gear, we need to do a little shovel work inside to make the place a bit more useable," Albright said. "But we need some light. Can some of you with some tools pull a few batteries and a headlight or two? Some dome lights, too. And as much wire as you can strip out of some of the vehicles."

More people ran off, all men this time. I came back and dropped the camping gear handy. Albright took one of the shovels and handed it to me, taking one for himself. He ducked down and went under the bed of the articulated truck. I followed with another shovel. Three more people picked up the other shovels and came in behind us.

I realized what we had to do. The dump end of the bed was close to the ground. It would be hard to get from it to the much larger cavities of the bigger trucks. So we started digging, forming a wide, shallow trench under the end of the bed. There was barely enough light to see by. But that changed suddenly.

Someone had come up with a couple of flashlights and we continued digging on the other side of the first trench, to make it easier to get under the beds of the other trucks. We also moved some of the dirt that had come through the openings that were left where the trucks weren't touching.

More light flared when someone connected a headlight to a battery that had been brought inside. People began to come inside as more room was made.

"We're going to need everything we can get from all the stalled cars. Water bottles, even if empty. Blankets. Tools. Ice chests. Pretty much anything that isn't a physical part of the vehicle. We'll find some use for it. And someone needs to stay on lookout for the approach of the fallout cloud."

I was amazed at the amount of cooperation Albright was getting. There was just something about him that affected people in a positive manner. Just about everyone ran back outside, headed to their own vehicles to get things they hadn't thought to bring with them. Albright and I kept digging, making pits where the beds of the trucks angled down close to the ground, so there would be more headroom.

I was about to give out when Albright called a break. People were already coming back with their possessions, and began staking out their own private territories in the expedient shelter.

"Ventilation," said Albright as we went outside. "We need to come up with a way to ventilate the shelter." I went to the Bug and got us each a bottle of water.

Hesitatingly, a tiny woman, I thought was a child until I looked closer, raised her hand. "There's the Kearny air pump... But I don't think we have what we need to make one. An alternative is to just use large pieces of cloth as fans to move the air."

"Good idea," Albright said. "But we're going to need another air entry exit point..."

"What about that pipe from that tank trailer thing?" I asked.

"You're a genius, Stan! Come on!" Albright ran off and I followed. I never thought about using an excavator as a pipe saw, but Albright snapped the pipe off that filled the tank on stilts from a well and pump.

I wrapped a chain around the pipe just off center and connected it to hooks welded on the excavator bucket. A couple of guys came running over to help me hold the pipe up vertical when Albright lifted it up. I unhooked the chain and then Albright used the bucket of the excavator like a hammer and drove the eight inch pipe down into the soft ground until he was sure it had penetrated into the opening under the far haul truck.

I went inside, got a shovel and began to bang on the end of the pipe protruding about a foot inside the opening under the truck. I don't know how Albright figured out just where to place it, but he was right on the mark.

The dirt was soft and a few good bangs had the pipe clear from top to bottom. I could feel air flowing into the pipe. We might not need a fan at all, I thought. But we did, later. But it worked like a charm, walking a spread open sheet from the entrance toward the pipe. That drew air in the entrance as the stale air went out the pipe.

I was about to go back outside when I met a rush of people coming in. They all looked scared, I tell you true. One of them whispered "Fallout!"

I waited at the entrance of the makeshift fallout shelter. Albright was the last one in. He, like the last few before him, was carrying a double armload of frozen food from one of the McDonalds trailers.

A few minutes later there was the smell of hamburgers cooking. It took a few hours for everyone to get settled in their own tiny space in the shelter. Quite a bit more shovel work was done to improve the inside of the shelter. It was easy digging, haven been broken up by the excavator during the initial digging phase.

"We got lucky, Stan," Albright told me as he took the bottle of water I handed him. I'd filled it from the water hose that came in from the now buried water tanker. It didn't taste very good, but no one got sick because of it, so it must have been okay.

"Yeah," I replied. "By the way, how'd you know what to do?"

Albright looked surprised in the dim light. "I don't know. Just common sense to me. Everyone knows you need lots of earth between you and fallout."

"Yeah, I said again. "I guess so. But I don't think I'd have thought of this construction site to shelter."

"Seemed obvious to me. Look, Stan, I'm beat. I'm going to lie down for a while."

I'd brought our gear into the shelter from the Bug and showed Albright where his things were. He took out his sleeping bag and climbed into it. It was the only time he used it. After he got up, he offered it to one of the families with children. After that he slept on a pallet he made from his dresser clothes. The rest of his camping gear was used communally, too.

I felt bad, so I did the same thing. I just wasn't as gracious about it. That was a good sleeping bag I had. At least the ground was pretty soft. And then, when everyone was reluctant to go back out to the food trailers, I opened my big mouth and said I would go with Albright when he said he was going.

As you can tell, I survived it, but I paid a price over the next few weeks. Albright and I were the only two that ventured out for the three weeks we were in the shelter. We both wound up with radiation poisoning.

We weren't able to do much after we got out of the shelter, when the National Guard showed up and told us the radiation danger was over. Between us, Albright and I were able to get

only a few items of our stuff back that we'd given out during the shelter stay. Mostly we just had the field work clothes we'd held back for the future, at Albright's insistence.

We... well... Albright decided to go with the National Guard to get some medical care for the radiation poisoning symptoms. He'd been out a lot more than me and was much weaker. He'd even lost half of that long brown hair and a couple of teeth.

I decided to go with him and keep an eye out for him, not that he really needed it. Albright was one self-sufficient guy. I disabled the Volkswagen, one of the only vehicles that had been running at the time of the attack. It was old, but it had got us to safety when it really counted. I wanted to recover it if at all possible when we left the FEMA camp.

And that is where we went. Found out there were a bunch of them, spread all over the country. Lot of people were afraid to go to them, but, at least at ours, we were treated well, if rather impersonally. There wasn't a lot of food, but we got a share. Same with medical care.

The FEMA doctors really triaged firmly. Those that needed a little help got it. Those that were likely to die within two months were given only enough to allow them to die naturally from their illnesses or injuries. Those that needed more help got what was available, but that wasn't much after the first month.

Even though he was still weak, Albright insisted on leaving the camp, to make room for others worse off than he was. He didn't ask me to go with him. He just said he was leaving one day. What could I do? I mean, he'd saved my life, for sure. So I went with him.

We drew our two week supply of food and then hooked a ride on a National Guard truck back to the site of the expedient shelter. Thankfully, the Bug was still there. I'd kept the parts hidden away in my gear at the camp, so I had them to put the Volkswagen back into service.

Albright was a bit surprised that the fuel tank hadn't been drained, but it hadn't. I'd filled the tank not long before everything fell apart, so I had most of a full tank. But that wouldn't get us to Washington State.

Though it took a lot out of him, Albright helped me drain several tanks of other stalled vehicles that had not been tapped for their fuel, either. Other than one bag with sturdy clothes, we'd lost all our gear in the shuffle of moving to and the stay in the FEMA camp.

Albright asked me to check the shelter for any of our gear that might have been left behind. All that was still there were a couple of the car batteries and lights that had been used. Even the shovels had been taken.

"We just have to make do," Albright said.

He was a bit too cheerful about the situation for my taste, considering the circumstances. But I'd ride the river with him. Yeah. I know. So I read a lot of Louis L'Amour.

With every container we'd managed to find and fill with gasoline strapped down on the roof rack we headed west again. We checked stranded vehicles one after the other and managed to put together enough things to be able to camp out. Even found a water filter so we could have clean water the entire way.

It took a long time to get to Spokane. I wish we'd never tried it. Spokane had been hit. Our house hadn't been ground zero, but it had been close enough to be completely destroyed. Of course we couldn't get close enough to actually see that. The zone of total destruction was marked off limits. And with what we could see, I had no desire to get any closer.

I checked with the local FEMA refugee center and asked about my sister. She wasn't on the list of survivors that had checked in. She worked at home, tele-commuting with the business office she worked for. She'd have been there when the warhead detonated.

I guess I cried a little, probably for myself as well as Sis. But I didn't dwell on it. With Albright's help, mostly in keeping me busy with one thing or another, I was able to keep going. I didn't realize how much I'd miss my family. Sis was the only family I had left after Mom died.

Triple A-7 – A Vignette - Epilog

But I survived, in more ways than one. Albright and I talked it over and decided to go back to Missouri. Back to Rolla. It was a good town and had survived the war intact. There was an active post war society happening there. It included some of our friends and classmates from the University of Missouri Rolla schools. There would be a need for engineers of all types to rebuild the country. We both wanted to be a part of that.

So we put in a requisition to get enough gasoline to get back. Didn't think we'd get it, but they were more interested in reducing the number of mouths to feed than they were conserving gasoline. There was still one refinery going out in California, so additional gasoline would be available to the authorities to do with as they wished.

We got our gasoline and headed back for Rolla, retracing the safe route we'd taken to get to Spokane. Albright's hair was filling out again, and he was back up to ninety percent of his pre radiation sickness strength, and I was back almost to one hundred percent and hungry all the time.

Albright worked in the FEMA office for a while and I was put on a food recovery crew to gather everything we could find before winter set in.

But after that winter was over, and it was a hard one, I tell you, we both got jobs doing what we'd trained to do. Engineering. No more megamalls and skyscrapers for me. And with more empty houses than survivors, Albright switched to road maintenance and rebuilding.

Albright took me on as foreman for his construction gang trying to maintain the roads that were left. Part of the equipment we used were those old machines that had saved our lives, after digging out and righting the ones we'd buried. They were all cleaned up and put to work at their intended job. Keeping the road infrastructure up and running until a full recovery could be made.

End *****

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