

Prelude

“Are you sure? That’s going to be so cool!” Dr. Maleko Lehman realized it wasn’t the most professional thing to say. However, it seemed one of those moments when cold detachment wasn’t really appropriate.

“The numbers are solid. There’s virtually no chance we won’t pass through the tail” his colleague, Dr. Sarah Brady was nodding and grinning almost drunkenly. “They’ve been checked repeatedly. The Earth will pass through the tail of 2011 M3 in the middle of February next year.”

The number 2011 M3 referred to the yet unnamed comet which was at this moment falling towards the sun and under observation by every major observatory known to man. The feeling among those willing to voice an opinion was that the comet was “new” in the sense that it hadn’t made a pass into the inner solar system in recorded history, and that it was massive as comets go. This was leading to natural speculation about the size of the tail and the “light show” that would result. Every astronomer realized that when word got out that it would pass close enough that the tail would engulf the Earth for several days, it would be the biggest space story since the moon landing. Naturally, of course, it would also drive the kooks into a frenzy. As he picked up his copy of the report to head back to his office he turned and looked back at Sarah.

“So what do you think they will call it then? It’s coming on Valentine’s Day so maybe ‘Comet Love’?” he drew out the word “love” in the most exaggerated parody of lechery he could come up with.

“Oh my god don’t give them ideas!!!” she stage whispered. Both of them knew that whatever the astronomers called it, that, or something equally cheesy, would certainly be the nick-name in the popular media.

The President stared very directly at his chief of staff. “It’s certain? No one is ‘hoping for the best’ here? It will defiantly miss?”

“Yes sir,” the man across the desk replied, “everyone I’ve consulted agrees that the head will pass earth orbit with sufficient time to not get caught in our gravity well. But in astronomical terms, it will be very close all the same.”

Rueters was the first to report it but it wasn’t until the tabloids got hold of it the next day that the story really took off. They seem to have collectively dismissed “Comet Love” as too cheesy even for them but there wasn’t any consensus on a catchy headline-friendly nickname either. But the timing was noted in every story and many formerly anonymous scientist discovered their inner camera addiction as they were invited to appear on every forum from the morning news to the late show. Hosts, of course looked for new and attention getting angles, inevitably ask the exact same questions – “Will it hit us?” being the most obvious.

February 14, 2012

The evening was surprisingly warm for the middle of February. Normally, even in Georgia you’d need to be bundled up pretty well against the cold but as the sun was setting the temperature was lingering in the low fifties. Still, Mitch Wilson had to admit that it would have taken a near blizzard to have kept them inside tonight. Beside him, his wife Lisa was setting up a field telescope and adjusting the attached camera (she was the local high school science teacher after all, this was her department). In the car the kids were fighting - so common an occurrence that it wasn’t of interest to him why. On the drive up from Dalton, Lisa had explained that the East Coast of the U.S. had won the celestial jackpot in that they would get the first sunset look at the light-show that M3 (the rather drab nickname that had won out over “Comet Love” and the other mediocre attempts at cleverness) was set to provide.

The actual passage into the tail had begun just over an hour ago with the Atlantic leading the way into the milky material which created a vaguely violet tint to the clear sky and was even now creating the most amazing color combinations on the low clouds in the west which seemed to have been pre-arranged to maximize the effects of the unique event.

Mitch suddenly remembered he was supposed to be taking photos himself and rummaged in the car for the camera he had brought for the purpose. Moments later he was clicking away contentedly.

In the White House situation room, the voices were mostly suppressed as a gathering of relevant officials watched satellite feeds from two dozen sources showing the event in ways the average citizen wouldn’t see until long after the fact. The only voices were from a whispered grumbling conversation between a couple of staffers about the tragedy of not having a shuttle up there right now gathering data first hand. Eventually, a cold star from the Chief of Staff cut that conversation short.

“So far the Pentagon and NASA both report no surprises sir” he turned to inform the president, who nodded without comment in return. Three hours ago he’d addressed the nation and assured them that all his advisors were confident there would be no harm to anyone from the event and assured them that, nevertheless the Military would be on high alert and his entire staff would be ready in case of any unexpected eventuality.

“Gonna be some show, eh?”

Across the river in Arlington, one Republican presidential contender had thought to arrange his “Victory Party” at a Hotel that featured a large outdoor patio area adjoining the ball room where the actual party was to be held. He had his three remaining opponents (only one of whom actually still had a chance, in his opinion) had spent all day stumping all over the state, well, other than the several hours his main challenger had spent in Maryland courting votes there. They had all had little time for giving thoughts to the heavens when there was so much to concern themselves with on the ground. While he didn’t have the most delegates yet, he’d won the most elections so far and a solid win here in Virginia, even if his esteemed colleague won Maryland would put him in the lead and push two candidates out of the race. He was feeling really good as he stepped to the balcony to survey both the astounding sunset and the growing crowd on the patio.

Central Park was as packed as it had ever been with people who turned out for the “comet party” and seemed blissfully unaware that they were not supposed to behave here as they did in Times Square. In the towering buildings that surrounded the park, the wealthy and famous who didn’t condescend to mingle with the “little people” were nonetheless revving up for a New Year’s Eve style gala.

In cities and towns all along the Eastern Seaboard and later, across the continent and the world people gathered in crowds, or found an open space in the wilderness to turn their eyes towards the sky. The media spent as much time filming the people looking skyward as they did the sky itself. It was as if the whole world stopped and held it’s breath to watch a show no human effort could match . By the time all of North America was in darkness, viewers on the East coast who were slowly beginning to turn their interest to their next drink or the question of where the restroom was located gradually began to realize that their was a tiny, almost invisible had it not been slightly reflective, dust in the air. It produced, in the beam of any light source, a faint but noticeable glittery effect which everyone marveled at and no one worried about, except in Washington.

“Initial analysis is being run but we won’t know the results until morning” the Chief of Staff was reporting, “our scientists are hesitant to make a guess right now but they do report that the dust is apparently disappearing fairly rapidly on any organic surface. Teat are being run to determine what’s going on but the upshot is that there’s no practical way to clean it up if in fact it turns out to be harmful.”

The President’s jaw set in a firm line “Then we’d better hope that there’s no harm.”

Wednesday morning, the candidate woke to find the balcony was covered with the finest of powder. An almost imperceptible coating except that in the morning sun the balcony had a very faint reflective sheen. As he stepped out and looked down, the surreal violet sky was matched by the slightest of golden glows from every man-made surface in sight. The bare ground and plants showed no significant change. He considered it a wonderful way to start his first day as the official front runner for the GOP nomination and wondered faintly just what the stuff was. He made a mental note to have his Campaign manager ask the White House for a briefing on the subject just in case he was asked.

Across the country, some people acted quickly to clean away the dust, others thought it was pretty and hoped it would last like a new snow. But the dust kept accumulating for most of two more days. Of course, almost everywhere got a rain or snow within a day or two after the tail had passed and by the time the comet was past on its way back out to the darkness beyond Pluto, so was the dust out of everyone’s memory. The scientist reported that the dust appeared to be harmless and was mostly an inert material they couldn’t quite identify. They conceded that no one could really predict what the effects would be but pointed out that without any predicted effects, there was no logical course of action to prevent whatever that effect might be. In essence, they shrugged.

April 23, 2012

Two days from tonight, one of these two men would pretty much eliminate the other as a contender for the

GOP nomination. As the crowd in Pittsburgh settled into their seats to hear the two debate, the Frontrunner was jovial and friendly while still projecting the air that he was focused on the task at hand. His manager was going over a last minute lists of pointers and debate prep but he wasn't really listening. He could have done this in his sleep.

"One other thing," the manager was concluding, "there was a big story you may have seen in the Inquirer today which gave stats for violent crimes and crime rates in general that seemed to be running abnormally high in the last several weeks and the moderators might just spring that on you - prepare the 'crime and punishment' reactions accordingly."

"Just pull it out of my...ear...right Jim?"

"I have every confidence in you Governor."

Assistant Chief of Police Mitch Wilson was pushing to make the Council meeting on time. Lisa had been forced to stay over for a parent conference that had turned ugly when the Mom in question had shoved his wife against the blackboard and demanded her child be given enough points to raise her grade to the C required to stay on the cheerleader squad. Luckily, Mitch had been the one to respond to the Principal's 911 call but by the time he had restrained the woman and taken her to the jail to be processed for simple assault (on an officer, as it turned out) he was badly late for the meeting.

As he stopped for the traffic light, one block out from the Town Hall, he noticed in the turn lane what could only be the back of a head rising and falling in the lap of an obviously pleased male driver. Before he could decide what to do about this, the driver noticed him and said something to his companion and seconds later, a pretty and quite topless girl popped up and waved wildly to him, with all her young parts moving in much the same way as on a "Girls Gone Wild" commercial. That in itself would not have been so disturbing except that the girl was a student of Lisa's and well known to be the most religious and repressed girl in the entire high school.

The light changed and the couple drove away, apparently continuing with their previous activities, but Mitch decided to let it go and continue on to the meeting. As he walked in, the chief was standing with both hands on the table in front of the mayor, his nose not two inches from the older man's face.

"I'm telling you tom you MUST gives us more funding! This town has gone off it's rocker the last month or so, I've got to be able to work my men overtime!" He was not quite yelling but the effect was the same.

The mayor looked around the Chief gingerly and pleaded with his eyes for Mitch to rescue him from the situation, looking back to the Chief Tom said "I'd love to oblige you Roger, I really would but we just don't..."

"Bullshit!" the Chief roared cutting him off, "That's total bullshit, Tom! You guys voted just 15 minutes ago to buy a new garbage truck! A fucking *garbage truck* fer Christ's sake! If someone gets killed by one of those thugs in Westside, is that going to be worth it?!"

At this the alderman who represented the Westside area stood and glared at him, her lips in a virtual snarl, "You racist bastard! You don't patrol Westside when you do have men on duty! You don't give a damn about Westside and you know it!"

"The hell I don't!"

"You just said it yourself, you called them 'thugs' - that's what you bigots think, every young black man is a thug!"

"Look, you mouthy bitch, I call them thugs because they act like thugs. You would too if you were not more interested in whining about supposed racism instead of cleaning up your own neighborhood!"

"I'll have you know I don't live in Westside." She replied coldly.

"Yeah, I know." Roger let the words hang there as he held her stare, then smirked and added "Rekon why?"

The mayor watched all this in stunned silence, petrified of offending either participant. Mitch too, was frozen for a moment by the astounding scene before him. The Alderman had a reputation as a lose cannon but Roger had always been one of the most placid people he'd ever met. It wasn't until she started climbing over the table to come after him that Mitch snapped out of it and got between them. Roger Warren then stunned everyone when he drew his sidearm and took aim on the approaching alderman, informing her he had every intention of using it. When Mitch put himself between the pistol and the woman, he saw a look in his bosses eyes that gave him little comfort the man wouldn't fire anyway, but after a few seconds he relented.

In the West Wing of the White House, the president's Chief of Staff was having an off the record conversation with the White House correspondent from CNN, a man he trusted implicitly. As he regaled the reporter with tales of what had happened behind the scenes during the previous winter's budget battle, he didn't seem to realize he was revealing the sort of information that got presidents impeached. The reporter realized, of course, and was already calculating whether it would be more profitable to report the story, or get paid off not to.

In a high school in Oklahoma, Mrs. Winters, the principal was investigating reports of strange noises from the gym. When she entered to find the school's girls team basketball coach lying on a bench in the locker room nude, and surrounded by 7 similarly undressed members of the boys track team, she was understandably shocked. For 10 full seconds no one moved. Then one of the young men walked up and began unbuttoning her blouse and she saw nothing at all wrong with kissing him passionately in return.

At a Baptist church in Florida Bro. Kline was leading spring revival when a man in the congregation suddenly stood in the middle of the sermon and confessed he'd been embezzling from his employer for two years. Just as he finished speaking another man rose and confessed to having cheated on his wife, then his wife rose and said she had been doing likewise, then another rose, and another.

An attendee at a charity fund-raiser in Los Angeles began pocketing the expensive jewelry that was to be auctioned off, not stopping even when spotted.

On a non-stop flight from Boston to Chicago, a man forced the door on the toilet and pulled the man inside, pantless, out of the compartment because he was tired of waiting.

At the Twins game in Minneapolis, when the batter was hit with a pitch he stormed the mound with the bat and took a full swing at the pitchers head, striking a glancing blow, before the catcher tackled him. The brawl wasn't stopped until stadium security had half the players and both managers in cuffs.

At the debate in Pittsburgh, the candidates were, like most people, generally unaware of these isolated random events. They were focused on each other. Party officials looking on couldn't be more pleased. It was a near perfect match-up. The plain-spoken but savvy Southern governor opposing the suave and articulate Northern Governor. One favored by one powerful wing of the party and the other favored just as strongly by the other wing. Either one, they were convinced, would be a most formidable candidate in the fall. As the evening progressed, it seemed there would be no major surprises that would create a definitive shift in the race. Then it happened.

The correspondent from the Wall Street Journal asked the Southerner what he intended to do about regulating carbon emissions. His answer was startling, to put it mildly.

"Frankly, Ron, I'm not going to do a damned thing more than what's already being done and that itself is too much."

"Ex...excuse me governor?" the stunned journalist replied.

"You heard me. I, and I suspect a great many others in public office, have been dancing around this issue and trying to say the supposed right thing for too many years now while the mythology of 'global warming' has controlled the discussion. I simply decided, right here tonight as you asked that question, to tell you what I think instead of what was politically correct."

"So you don't think global climate change is real?"

"Of course it's real, do I look like such a moron I don't know that? The question is not and never has been whether it was real, but to what extent man's activities caused it. Here's a headline for your paper tomorrow - we didn't. Not in any significant way. And I'll be damned if I'll be party to further screwing up an already crippled economy in order to pander to the liars who try to guilt us into hanging ourselves for their own questionable reasons."

The other candidate, who was apparently speechless for several moment while the Southerner dominated the stage suddenly found his tongue "I just have to say that I do believe we have to cut carbon emissions and Ill be working together with Congress to...."

"Oh hell of course you'll say that, you've been saying any damn thing you had to to get elected for six months now - do you have an original thought in your head or are you just going to do what you are told to by the pressure groups and these guys?" He indicated the Party Leadership sitting with mouths agape a few feet away.

"Governor that's outrageous! I'm personally insulted by your charges and demand an apology!"

"You can demand in one hand and...no, I won't go there. Nevertheless, I will not apologize and I'll be happy to list all the ways you, and I for that matter, have been pandering throughout this election but enough of that. I think the voters are tired of being pandered to and from now on, I'm going to say what I think - and I invite you to join me so that the voters really know what they are getting."

Before the Northerner could respond the audience erupted in thunderous applause and order was never completely restored before time was called.

The next day the papers were filled with headlines about the “Pittsburgh Smackdown and the potential effects on the primary vote going on that day in Pennsylvania. Scattered within the pages of those same papers were many reports of criminal incidents, strange occupancies, odd behavior, and statistical anomalies. Hardly anyone seemed to think these things were connected in any way. In Atlanta, Georgia, the Police Chief of Dalton, now suspended from his duties, was undergoing an MRI and a battery of other tests to determine why Roger Warren had lost all control. Meanwhile, the Republican voters of the state of Pennsylvania delivered a solid victory to the man who had chosen to speak his mind. After three days of reviewing the results, a team of specialists informed Chief Warren that tests had shown there was an accumulation of an unidentified substance in his brain. More tests would be necessary, and possibly exploratory surgery..

July 16, 2012

“So let’s bottom line this Ron, what do we know for certain?” the president was addressing his Chief of Staff who was delivering a brief of reports coming in from the CDC and other government agencies.

“In the simplest terms sir, we simply don’t know. We do know that the substance that covered the planet on February 14 is now being detected in the bodies of people all over the world, most notably in the brain. It doesn’t appear, according to all our best tests, to have any adverse effects or, indeed, any effect at all. However, there seems to be a direct correlation between higher levels of the substance and . . . impulsiveness.”

“You are saying that these people are basically losing their self control, their . . . inhibitions?”

“Yes sir. But again, the scientists can’t prove that the substance — they call it M3C — is causing it and if so, how the effect is taking place. Without knowing that, they can’t treat it. Removing it manually isn’t an option because the areas of the brain effected are inaccessible to surgery.”

“Anything else?”

“One other thing. The method of transport for the substance seems to be water and food supplies. Our typical filtration systems don’t catch it, and since ground water eventually ends up in plants, it appears that those whose diet is heavily vegetarian are accumulating the buildup at a faster rate than those who don’t. The assumption is that the process of the metabolism of the substance in animals is providing a natural filter which dilutes the effect. Which is to say, a large part of what the animal takes in ends up in the animal’s brain as well.”

“And does this affect their behavior?”

“It’s not as certain what an animal does ‘on impulse’ that he would have been otherwise inhibited to but yes, the effect does seem to occur across species.”

“Damn.”

“Yes sir.”

“So, what can we do?”

“Homeland Security has been tasked to come up with ways we can try to control behavior but in terms of actually treating the condition, we have no answers. My recommendation is that we keep this highly classified until we have some answers. There’s no telling how the public will react to the news. It’s already getting pretty crazy out there.”

Across the country, and the world, “odd” occupancies were no longer so odd. During a discussion of Breast Cancer in the View, all the women on the panel spontaneously decided to have the discussion topless.

On a combative talk show on another channel, one of the guest had to be pulled off his ideological opponent in the midst of throttling for his displeasing views.

A popular pop princess preformed oral sex on one of her backup dancers on stage in front of 15,000 fans. Then continued with the song.

A convicted murderer attempted to attack the judge passing sentence on him. The next day, the same judge came down off the bench to attack an accused child molester who was appearing for arraignment.

The mayor of a medium sized city tried to fire the entire city council and when they told him he couldn’t he ordered them from the building at gunpoint.

School officials had reported an unprecedented number of “incidents” s the school year was winding down,

now reports were coming in of an astonishing level of teen violence, substance abuse, and sexual activity. The pregnancy rate for women of all ages was setting new records. The jails were overflowing. Both firings and spontaneous resignations on the job site were at all time highs, crime was up across the board by a massive rate. All these things and more were going on around the world. India and Pakistan were on the verge of war, the Chinese navy was blockading Taiwan, and the Middle East was embroiled in Open War after Israel had nuked three sites in Iran.

On the internet, hundreds of different theories were being published on thousands of sites. Most of them crackpot nonsense (it was 2012 after all) but a few had solid sources that this had to do with “comet dust” — the crackpots got more attention. But a couple of high profile radio and TV personalities were beginning to pick up on the dust theory.

September 12, 2012

Acting Chief of Police Wilson was staring across the desk at his highest ranking officer “You aren’t serious?”

“Dead serious, sir” Officer Mark Wells replied, “If you will pardon the unfortunate choice of words.”

“Not one officer will go after this dirtbag?”

“Not one, and not all of them together. No one on the force, including me, is willing to go into Westside anymore. If somehow you did manage to get Hardball out of there and live through it, you’d start a full scale race war in this town.”

“I don’t doubt it but damned if I know why, you’d think they would want him out of there.”

“It’s bigger than one man now sir. I mean yes, they are afraid of him . . . but they have themselves convinced they are ‘taking a stand’ against white people. It’s basically an armed camp. They come out and prey on other neighborhoods and go back in and dare us to come after them.”

Mitch already knew it was true. Two thirds of the man hours on his force now were spent patrolling the areas close to Westside and he had one officer in the CCU already to show for it. All the public schools in the area had been shut down for the last week after an incident at last Friday’s football game in the next county when players from a mostly black team and those from a mostly white team brawled on field and no one had been able to determine what set it off. That didn’t stop some local rednecks from attempting to hang one of the black ballplayers the following day.

The Republican nominee was being interviewed on MSNBC. Though he had been advised not to come, the candidate confessed he’d almost rather have this chance than actually win the election and insisted on it. The host, likewise, defied the advice of those around him in extending the invitation. He was about to single handedly, he believed, so ruin the Republican that he’d have no chance of being elected.

They smiled formally at each other as the Candidate joined the Host on set and was “miked up” during the break. Both were well aware how much the other man despised him and both considered the other to intellectually inferior to ever hope to think differently.

“And we’re back. As promised, Republican governor and Presidential nominee James Barton is with us. Governor, thank you for joining us.”

“Oh, Kent, I wouldn’t have missed this for anything.” the smile was defiantly well within the range of expressions that could only be called “shit eating grin” back in his home state.

“Likewise I’m sure,” Kent returned the gaze but his smile was now gone. “Let’s get right to it then. In the last five months you have run perhaps the most unconventional campaign in the history of American politics. You have given the appearance of purposefully saying the unexpected and unpopular thing even to the point of disavowing many of your own previous views . . .”

“I presume you’ll eventually ask a question?”

“Yes.”

“Glad to hear it. I don’t have time to waste on your posturing. You’re not the one running for office.”

“More’s the pity. I’ll not take your famous bait just yet though - my question is this: what’s to keep the American people from wondering if you are not using the cover of the so-called Dust Effect in order to justify what is essentially nothing but stunt politics?”

“The voters can think whatever they want and vote accordingly. It will sure as hell be better than listening to what morons like you tell them to think.” He feigned as if he was ignoring the anger which appeared on Kent’s face but he made a mental note to enjoy that image repeatedly later at his leisure, and pressed on, “In point of fact,

call it the Dust or whatever - it probably is - but this is the one golden opportunity for the people to actually know exactly who and what they are voting for. That has, in my opinion, tremendous value.”

“Well Governor, I think that’s bullshit. No one ever said the Dust was ‘Honesty Dust’ and if it were, why would we not also assume the president is also being totally honest under its influence?”

“Because it’s not honesty dust just as you said. We’ve been told, to the extent that this administration condescends to tell us anything, that the dust has an effect on inhibitions. Other sources less interested in politics have said that it severely reduces or eliminates them depending on the amount of the dust in your brain. The upshot of that is that you are more likely to do that which you have an impulse to do - like when I called you a moron,” he paused to wink at the camera, “now in my case, my inclination is to say whatever the hell I want. I’ve spent my whole political career fighting it. Saying the politically smart thing, or at least what I thought at the time was smart, even if it wasn’t true. The president, on the other hand, doesn’t have that same inclination. His instincts, perhaps not always totally inhibited but now much less so, is to attain power at all costs and glorify his own ego. It’s why he won’t debate me. His ego can’t stand sharing the stage.”

“That’s an absurd charge!”

“Is it? Then why are we hearing that he’s considering martial law?”

Kent realized the governor was sounding far too attractive and he hadn’t even got to his bombshell yet “Because we need it! Surely you have seen the rate of murder and assault and rape we are subjected to right now?”

“I have, and I admit that in a vacuum, Martial Law would make sense. But you mark my words. Within a month, the President will move to indefinitely postpone the election. Government officials will be empowered not just to prevent violence but virtually any activity under the guise of this emergency. I wouldn’t be shocked if he moved against Congress if they opposed him.”

“I’m totally stunned that you would make such a laughable prediction” Kent’s supposed bombshell was useless now, this would be the bigger story, “no, on the other hand I’m not. You have always been a dangerous politician and now you have stepped over into complete insanity. I can only hope that both the party and your state demand your resignation.”

“I’m sure your lord and master would love that wouldn’t he you pathetic lapdog? I’m not going anywhere. And you can go ahead and tell the folks about that dirt you wanted to spring on me if you want to. Don’t think I don’t know Ron fed it to you two hours before your secretary called me. At least you know you’ll enjoy the King’s favor when people like me are rounded up, eh?”

“Can’t happen soon enough . . .” it was out before Kent even realized what he was saying.

Dr Lehman found it hard to get any work done. Since Dr. Brady had shown up for work one day last month totally nude — and every day since — he’d been spending as much time gawking at her as at his instruments. The first guy who had lost restraint enough to fondle her had gotten fired (no one explained why she hadn’t gotten fired for coming in that way) but when the second person was the 26 year old receptionist at the front desk it became open season. Turns out that she liked the attention though, so no harm done. Well, other than the hourly sight of some intern or junior assistant masturbating at his desk. Of course, theirs was hardly the only workplace with issues. The stories abounded. Whether it was the spike in roof jumpers, or the number of bosses physically attacked or even killed (many positions now went unfilled because to be promoted was the kiss of death in some places) or whether it was office sex and debauchery or the stores and offices which were stolen blind by employees in a position to get away with something, the world was going to hell.

His own daughter had, for no obvious reason, shaved her head. His wife hadn’t gotten out of bed for a month except to eat and visit the bathroom. Which was lucky he supposed, his brother-in-law had a sister who hadn’t gotten out of bed in a month because she was entertaining one man after another every waking hour. His son was in jail after he’d gone home with the cash bag from the fast food restaurant where he was the late shift manager.

Across the country and the world the stories were different and they were the same. The jails were full, with space only opening up when one inmate killed another (which happened at a rate triple the massive murder rate on the outside). Rape happened in every town big or small every hour but seldom was it reported because the victim either ended up enjoying it, or took her own revenge on her attacker. The number of men who were now missing certain key body parts was at an all time high, those who didn’t bleed out before getting treatment.

Theft was a way of life, no one was immune. Any sort of stimulating activity, whether it be sex or alcohol or drugs or “extreme sports” was exponentially higher. You were fortunate, in fact, if your particular indulgence was simply sex, it was less likely to leave you dead than an overdose or alcohol poisoning or a wild impulse to sky-dive without a parachute while hoping for a water landing.

Out of some 315 million Americans, estimates were that “Dust Fever” had now led to the deaths

of as many as 40 million of those. And that was not even a significant minority of the worldwide death. After the invasion of Israel they had warned the invading Syrian Army that if they didn't back off that more nukes would fly and they did. The biggest one fell on the first day of September on Mecca. Now it was a war between a small highly trained and armed people against massive numbers of common people armed with improvised weapons. And though the Jews had held out far longer than anyone had expected, they were not going to be able to hold out alone. At least nine other wars had broken out across the world, including the Russians attempting to reclaim all their former areas of influence in the face of no significant opposition from impotent and frightened Europeans and distracted Americans.

Wherever there had been tensions before, there was hostility and open violence now.

It's not that every single human being had an ignoble impulse that was now unleashed, but rather it's that those who didn't either became victims, or they acquired a more aggressive instinct in the face of the plague of crime around them. The ones who made out best were those who were isolated from the crowds, or who had an endearing "impulse" — such as a lovely scientist going naked or a young bride enjoying a weeks long gang bang.

In the White House situation room, there were very few staffers still in place. Those who's instincts were most inclined to sacrifice all to stay close to the leavers of power, or who were loyal above all else, remained. The President dared not leave the White House compound for any reason. Marine Two had already been taken out, with the VP on board, by a shoulder fired missile and the president hadn't bother to try to find a replacement.

"How long will this last, Ron?"

"Mr president, frankly, almost no one is still working on the answer to that question. The most senior guy still working at the CDC tells me that in test subjects we've been studying, prisoners they are, it does appear the body is naturally eliminating the buildup over time. And those who's intake has been controlled by being restricted to IV nutrition, in order to accelerate the process, have indeed seemed to regain some level of self control."

"But will any of us be left alive when it passes? How long Ron?"

"His best guess is that most of the population will need three to six months to regain any sort of control physically."

"Physically?"

"Yes, the Surgeon General, who as you know is an eminent psychiatrist, speculates that having had their inhibitions depressed for as much as a year, many people will never mentally return to their former state. If they have embraced violence, or theft or self abuse or whatever — good impulse or bad — they will likely continue in that behavior, though possibly to a less self destructive extent.

"I think I understand. Now, about that other matter we were discussing this morning . . ."

"I'm working on some key people now sir, I think the plans will be in place by the end of the month."

November 22, 2012

The President had abandoned all attempts to leave the bunker. Even many White House personnel couldn't be trusted any more. The day he had announced he was suspending the election a new York Times reporter — a TIMES reporter! — had attacked him during what was supposed to have been a private interview. Three Secret Service guards had been relieved of their duty for not intervening. He knew people accused him of being power mad. Of being no more immune to the effects of the dust than anyone else (Was he? Did it matter? He was still the god damned president!)

But after the Republican opponent had threatened to lead an armed uprising if he canceled the election, he felt like he was trapped. And the man had certainly given him the ammunition to claim he was an unfit candidate. Hell, if there was ever a time when we didn't need an election it was now, with the entire population essentially insane. Estimates suggested over 100 million Americans of all ages had been killed in the last six months, either through violence or recklessness or by their own hands. The number worldwide had surpassed a billion and showed no signs of stopping. Wars were getting to be almost continuous from place to place one couldn't discern where one conflict stopped and the next began.

The number of dead bodies was overwhelming the system in many places and disease was following on in the wake of the violence. And then there was starvation. With the coming of the Dust madness, the normal means of distribution had broken down. The strong hoarded freely and the weak starved. To this point, the U.S. had stayed out of declared warfare but in the Southwest, American militias and even AWOL Army units were fighting openly against invading Mexican gangs and by extension with the Mexicans already living within U.S. borders. From LA to Houston it was as real as any other war. Meanwhile, there were solid reports about his former opponent making

good on his threats. The president had been unable to find anyone willing to confront and arrest the traitor.

In the Blue Ridge Mountains, armed camps had been forming for two weeks. The governor was encamped in the largest of these. He harbored no illusions about being a military leader. But he did enjoy the allegiance of some very skilled and right thinking men who were. His highest ranking general had been forced to evacuate as many troops as he could from posting in the Middle East in the wake of the outbreak of full scale war in that region. They had spent almost two months basically cooling their heels while the president wavered, then when the word came that the election was suspended, he had met with the Naval commander who'd served as his host. They agreed that the President had forfeited his authority.

With the VP dead and the Speaker having been jailed and then committed after attacking the minority leader with a letter opener on the House floor, the chain of secession was in shambles and no one had risen within the government to challenge the President in any case. When word came that the Governor was forming a "government in exile" they made their choice. What had shocked him was that when he had arrived, he'd found there were already more men under arms, private citizens, standing waiting than he had in uniform under his command. The General was on his way now to report to the governor what his inelegance had turned up - which was that most of the men assigned to defend Washington would not take up arms in defense of the President. The question remained in his mind, what would the governor do with the office when he had it?

In Dalton, Georgia, there was a very tense cease fire between the armed blacks in Westside and the white community. They had the Westside gang contained, and essentially under siege. It wasn't true, of course, that every black person had been part of the Westside uprising. Many of the middle class black citizens had initially been just as angry when the skirmishes broke out. But tensions were so high now that those people were feeling without a country. Too many of their neighbors showed open mistrust. One black man who was married to a white woman, a couple who had lived unmolested in Dalton for almost 20 years, had stood up to some aggressive rednecks and had to shoot in self defense. Mitch had had no doubt he was in the right. But he'd been spread too thin to stop him from being lynched. He got there just in time to stop the wife from being raped.

Across the south, and in inner cities across the country, racial tensions had turned into turf wars. Almost always the group with superior numbers carried the day. It wasn't that everyone was racist, far from it. There was just enough resentment there to provide fuel for the fire of dust-crazed mobs. Everyone was completely out of control and impulse killing (or rapes or robberies or assaults) only lent fuel to the fire. Mitch knew, of course, that he wasn't immune to the effects. He had been judge and executioner to at least half a dozen offenders in the last two months. He'd also locked his two kids in separate bedrooms to keep them from attacking each other and backhanded his wife when he caught her trying to let them out. He didn't even want to think about what else she had done.

Everything in the world seemed to have come down to sex, possessions, and violence. Even those people with noble impulses had to fight to survive and protect what they had, or die at the hands of those not so honorable. Every man, and most women, were potential killers at this point. Every woman, and many men, were driven by sexual desire above all else. Some were still rational enough to understand what the breakdown in society would mean in terms of food and supplies. It was said that there were compounds up in the mountains where hijacked truckloads of everything from apples to toilet tissue were hoarded. He believe it. As he pulled into his drive, his eyes followed their usual habit now of checking every possible line of fire he could see. His house was set well off the road and he'd done what he could to fortify it but few homes were really secure.

When he entered the house, Lisa was wearing a thin white t-shirt from his drawer, damp with sweat and clinging to her skin enough to reveal that it was her only garment. On the table were two plates with a meat patty of some sort, it looked like beef, and potatoes (instant?). In his mind the wheels turned and came to the only logical conclusion.

"How many?"

"What?" she said automatically, though it was obvious Lisa understood the question.

"How many guys you have to fuck to put that meat on the table?"

"Ummm...three...today"

"Today?!"

"Oh hell Mitch grow up! You haven't eaten a bite of food in this house in six weeks I didn't whore for! You should be damned glad that's possible, that that it's the only thing I've had to put out to get!"

"I can't believe you turned into such a whore..."

"What am I supposed to do, Mitch? Watch you and the kids starve? Help isn't coming! It's a different world now. When it started, I hated myself for doing it, and for wanting to do it. But I don't hate myself anymore, it's what I have to do anyway so why not?"

“Fine, fuck it. I’m past caring. How are the kids?”

“Joby’s fever isn’t breaking and there’s no one in town to ask except an EMT and he’s in Westside. Becky was worried about him so I let her speak to him from the doorway, he’s too weak for them to fight. Mitch looked at her in disbelief, “What the hell? What if it’s contagious?!”

“If it is I have it, whatever it is, or at least carry it. She could as easy get it from me.”

Mitch said nothing, and ignored the food, and went back to his car. Five minutes later he was at the home of his former receptionist.

Lisa had gotten the meal cheaply, in fact. Across the country, and indeed the world, the normal supply chains of civilization had broken down. Men were killed for little more than a bottle of good, or even decent, whisky. Money was useless. Everything that changed hands did so by barter or force. Large areas had no utility service because those who maintained the power grid had either been killed, or were afraid to come to work, or simply didn’t care about work any more. Untold numbers of women were in the last months of pregnancy and medical services were more and more erratic.

The turf war in Dalton was a tiny example of larger conflicts across the world. Rival neighborhoods, in armed stand-off, racial and religious wars, armies of the poor marching on the homes in the wealthy suburbs and attacking the homeowners and picking the estate clean — the famed Kennedy Compound now was home to over 700 squatters, none of them Kennedys. On the other hand, some of the more fortified Rural estates had become feudal castles, able to repl all but the strongest attacks. The armed forces had disintegrated as individual solders or whole brigades or something in between chose their allegiances. The largest single faction was with the Governor but the next largest was in the Southwest opposing the flood of Mexicans crossing the borders looking for whatever they could find to survive.

Wherever there had been a tentative peace in the world, people were fighting tooth and nail. If anyone were still counting they would have found that over half the world’s population had died in the last six months and the pandemics were just getting started. Large areas of India, Pakistan, and the Middle East were radioactive zones and hundreds of thousands would eventually die of the poisonings from those battles. Starvation was immeasurable. Those whose basic primal instincts were violent were indulging now without any restraint. For those who’s impulse was something else, they were either victims of the violent or they learned quickly how to fight for their survival. No woman still alive was unfamiliar with what it was to be raped and they either went mad, died while resisting, or learned to accept their role in this new violent world. .

December 24, 2012

The Governor looked across the river through the field glasses the general had provided. “How does it look, General?”

“Better than I’d hoped. I thought the militias that turned out on our side were undisciplined — and not all of them are, by the way — but the guys he’s got over there, a lot of them are little more than gang bangers. If he didn’t have control of some much hardware we’d be finished already.”

“That’s good General. I want to be able to announce plans for elections before the new Year, if anyone is still listening.”

Across the river, the President was pacing in his bunker. “So you’re telling me we can’t stop them?”

“No sir,” the officer he’d promoted to General of the “army” defending the capital replied, “Our men are fierce but they simply don’t have the training. We have the equipment but not enough of them know how to use them.”

“Planes? Bombs?!!”

“Sir, we do have enough pilots to do that but we can’t avoid civilian casualties. The mob is too mixed up with the locals.”

“I don’t care! I’ll be damned if that asshole is going to ever set foot in this building. Bomb the fuck out of them if you have to!”

“Gladly sir, but I can’t promise you it will work.”

“Just do it!!”

Lisa Wilson walked steadily down the road. She had no idea what was going to happen but it was her last option. One week ago Joby had died in his father’s arms. Two hours later he’d ate a bullet from his service revolver. Now Becky was ill with the same condition, whatever it was. All the known prescription drugs left in town, and the

one man with medical training, were in the hands of the Westside gang. One of the first things they had raided before the stand-off had contained their expansion had been every drug store in town. The man in charge was, as it turns out, a high school teacher who had been a co-worker of hers at Dalton High who'd given more than a little thought to survivalism. When the raiding parties came out they had hit high value targets.

It didn't matter so much to Lisa now how all this had happened. Her daughter was dying. She had only one card to play.

As she approached the street that marked the unofficial cease-fire line, two men stepped out in front of her, about 20 yards away. They showed no sign that they feared her.

"What you want white girl?"

"I have a message for Jones."

"Yeah? What makes you think he cares what you have to say?"

"I have my reasons. I'm pretty sure you don't want him to find out you didn't deliver it."

"Well bitch, let's hear it."

"Tell him Lisa Wilson wants in, and she'll do whatever he wants if he agrees."

Thousands of miles away, Chinese missiles were airborne, headed north. What organization the Russians had left were focused on moving south. Someone had decided to put a final stop to that invasion. In Russia, panicked officers ordered the firing of all missiles in retaliation. As it turns out, not all of them had been redirected to Chinese targets. Millions more of the dwindling population would die this evening. No one really knows how many times man has started civilization on Earth over again, but it was time to do so again.