



Daimones

Massimo Marino

Daimones

Vol.1 of The Daimones Trilogy

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Now available:

[*Once Humans*](#), Vol.2 of The Daimones Trilogy

[*The Rise of the Phoenix*](#), Vol.3 of The Daimones Trilogy

About the Author

Massimo Marino comes from a scientist background: He spent years at CERN, in Switzerland, and at the Lawrence Berkeley Lab, in California, followed by lead positions with Apple, Inc., and the World Economic Forum.

Massimo currently lives in France and crosses the border with Switzerland multiple times daily.

The first volume of the trilogy, "Daimones", is the recipient of the 2012 PRG Award Reviewers' Choice in Science Fiction, and the Seal of Excellence in Quality Writing from the Awesome Indies (awesomeindies.net) and the indiePENdents.org association.

In September 2013 "Daimones" won the Hall of Fame - Best in Science Fiction Award, Quality Reads UK Book Club.

With the release of volume 2, "Once Humans", the books received the 2013 PRG Reviewer's Choice Award Best in Science Fiction Series, and shortlisted an Finalist in Science Fiction at the 2014 Readers' Favorite International Book Awards

The second volume, "Once Humans", starts seven years after the events narrated in "Daimones". The Communities led by the Selected are about to thrive and peace and security reigns on Eridu...not for long.

"The Rise of the Phoenix" narrates the events that resulted in the dystopian galactic society ruled by the new transgenic humans.

He also writes short chilling, twisted, horror stories, oftentimes while having breakfast.

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On the Gods and the World

"These things never happened, but they are always."

Sallustius

"Deorum naturae neque factae sunt; quae enim semper sunt, numquam fiunt:
semper vero sunt.

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Prologue

Warnings

“Large numbers of animals have mysteriously died recently, from the thousands of birds found dead in two southern U.S. states to 100,000 dead fish in Arkansas. TIME takes a look at other mass animal deaths, the mystery of many of which is still unsolved.” Read more:

‘Over the first weekend of the new year 2011, thousands of red-winged blackbirds fell dead from the sky. Two days later, some 500 blackbirds dropped dead in Louisiana.’

‘March 2011: Approx. 1,200 penguins were found dead on a remote beach in southern Chile.’

‘April 2011: Millions of sardines washed ashore nearby. In addition, thousands of the rare Andean flamingo abandoned their nests in the north of Chile, leaving their 2,000 chicks to die in their shells. Even worse, no one could say concretely why these animals had died.’

‘April 2011: According to Francisco Nique, president of the Association of Fishermen of Puerto Eten, in the span of 10 or 12 days, 1,200 dead pelicans along 160 kilometers have been found between Punta Negra, in Piura, and San Jose creek in Lambayeque. *Perú 21 press*.’

‘October 2011: Thousands of dead waterfowl wash ashore at Wasaga Beach, Canada. *The Star*.’

‘January 2012: Dead herring mystery for Norway; locals left scratching their heads after twenty tons of the dead creatures are found on beaches in Nordreisa. *The Guardian*.’

‘May 2012: 60,000—100,000 dead fish found in three creeks in Maryland USA. *Baltimore Sun*.’

‘May 2012: Thousands of Mozambique Tilapia found dead since last week, experts blame pollutants in the river. Ironically, Mozambique Tilapia is considered as one of the most resilient species of fish, known to withstand unfriendly environmental conditions. *Pune Mirror*.’

‘May 2012: At least 2,300 dead birds were found along beaches between Cartagena and Playa de Santo Domingo, Chile. *CNN International*.’

‘May 2012: The Peruvian government reported 5,000 birds, mostly pelicans, and nearly 900 dolphins have died off the country's northern coast, possibly due to rising temperatures in Pacific waters. Scientists scrambled to pin down what caused such a massive toll. *AFP*.’

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Strange deaths had caused alarm among naturalists and environmentalists in all nations. Birds fell dead from the sky, fish washed up on shores and rivers across the whole planet, but people had other things to care and worry about. Mainstream media focused on economic crises, financial scandals, huge losses from banks, sovereign states at risk of defaulting in the Euro zone, the Arab spring, and the global war on terror.

Why the interest in bird and fish deaths: don't they die every day? Such news was almost whispered as unimportant, or used as filler for a column on some inner page. Local TV channels sometimes reported the facts though as a strange and abrupt twist of the normal course of natural events: interesting—for a second—but nothing to see, move on.

Whoever tried to talk seriously about the animal deaths—trying to discover a pattern—was treated as a weirdo, a delusional simpleton seeing conspiracy around every corner. People reacted to the deaths with raised shoulders, regarding the unexplained quirk about the natural world as worth no more. Some even accused naturalists of trying to profit from the quiriness to grab more funds for their research and projects.

Regardless, thousands of dead birds and tons of fishes had been found floating ashore, belly up, without any apparent reason. “The sky is not falling,” people said. Indeed it was not the sky that was falling, only previously live and healthy winged animals. Yet too many fell...well, they were just birds, weren't they?

We had enough reasons to wonder what killed them, clear signs that something was seriously wrong. Initial investigations showed evidence of unnatural events, damage in the breast tissue, blood clots in the body cavities, and much internal bleeding. All major organs though were normal.

In some cases, acute physical trauma led to hemorrhage and death with no sign of any chronic or infectious diseases. Thousands of animals of the same species suffering a traumatic end all together—all of a sudden—around the world with no apparent cause or link. Concerted investigations should have started but nobody pushed for those. Instead, county veterinarians scrambled to provide plausible explanations. Results from preliminary testing had been released to the news by the Livestock and Poultry Commission's Veterinary Diagnostic Lab. They showed birds, which fell by the thousands, dead from internal collapse—whatever that meant. No explanations were given as to what caused the massive traumas and why.

The Internet covered the deaths with genuine interest to look for causes. Threads and blogs were filled with plots calling for plans between the Zionists, Fascists, Falun Gong supporters, and aliens from planet Zark. Conspiracy theories soon killed all discussions and, in a sense, also prevented genuine forensic work to be conducted: What serious scientist craves association with lunatics wearing tin-foil caps?

Some officials started to release the first explanation at hand. They speculated on causes for the bird deaths ranging from fireworks, the weather, noxious fumes, chemtrails sprayed by airliners, or 'sonic booms.' Anything that could be used to put the stories to rest, and quickly. Some believed the birds might have been frightened to death by the blasts or killed by the scores in traffic accidents.

"We received information from local residents last night. Our main theory is that birds got scared because of the fireworks. Thus, they landed on the road, but couldn't fly away due to the stress and were hit by a car," one official explained to 'The Local', Sweden's online news in English. The Sveriges Radio Skaraborg also reported the news and stated the birds had been found dead on the streets in Falköping, southeast of Skövde.

He added the animals likely had difficulty orienting themselves in the dark. That in itself would be news. No one talked much about the fishes, like the two million dead in Chesapeake Bay or the dead drums washed ashore along twenty miles of the Arkansas River.

People had more important issues to deal with; the world faced a period of great uncertainty and huge changes affecting everyone at every level. Global terrorism stopped us from seeing what was happening. In those months people were thinking of other things. Everyone wondered whether

they'd be next in the vicious round of terrorist bombings and retaliations affecting every country in the world.

Who cared if some wild animals were dying when members of your own family might not come home that night? Humanity had missed its only vital clue. The link was there. We were the sapient species on earth, clever enough to connect the dots, no matter how far apart they were. We should have done our job. Connect them. We were too busy, too preoccupied with other facts to ask ourselves: What the hell is happening?

Nature's red flags went unnoticed and animals—scores of them—kept dying. We kept living our own lives...

The Purge

The Last Day

Nothing prepared us for the last day. I arrived at work as usual, after leaving my daughter at school. A too bright Monday morning and sunny for early February. The weather had been mild during the weekend, much warmer than it should for the season.

My wife, Mary, complained about the warmth, worried this would be no good for plants and the garden.

“See all the buds? Everything is waking up. They will burn when it’ll freeze again.”

Indeed, those days felt like early spring. I liked that.

The whole winter had been harsh with average temperatures way below freezing. To leave home and take my little princess to school on my way to work was an exercise of will—even more so when my day started at 6:15 a.m. and it was still dark outside.

“I go to bed and it’s dark. I get up, dark...yet again! You know how it bothers me,” I told Mary every time she asked, “What’s going on, sweet pea? You’re pensive.” She still called me that even though it had been years since we were high school sweethearts and I’d played quarterback for our school team.

Thank the Lord, she never said it in public. No one protects a “sweet pea” quarterback or fights to catch his passes! And let’s not even think about the harassment from teammates.

Mary had just turned sixteen when we first met. Something of young lovers remained between us, even after thirty-two years, a twelve-year-old daughter, and life in three countries. We had an easy way to keep count of the time the two of us had spent together: ten years of dating, ten of marriage and then our first and only child. Total number of years? Twenty, plus our daughter’s age.

When I got to work, I waited as usual for the gate to open. The gate was a solid slab of metal and it stood next to the guard house, a bulky construction

with thick tinted windows and dark concrete walls. Sliding slowly on its rails, the mechanism paused long enough for me to drive through, reminding me this place was not meant for everyone.

I could never tell whether anyone was seated in the guard house or not. The first times I passed that gate I wondered if I needed to wave good morning to some invisible man. Now I simply drove through, conscious of my right to cross the thin threshold separating those inside from the rest of the world.

I had to cross another barrier before entering, had to swipe my badge and be greeted by the welcoming green light. I went down the ramp slowly, giving the gate below time to open, enough to let me pass without having to wait. With the years, my timing had become impeccable. In the underground garage, my place, Number 98, was in the last row so I had enough time to realize something obstructed my place. I slammed on the brakes and raised my hand to hit the steering wheel in exasperation. Two wood crates sat in the middle of my slot.

The parking also served as a reception area for the Publications Department. Slots in the middle section had been eliminated to give room to the storage areas where all deliveries received by the Pub's colleagues were collected and where confidential publications were packaged for shipment. No one thought that arrangement to be efficient and sustainable. At times, I had to wait for small crate lifters to operate. A short wait but frustrating when colleagues waited for me at a meeting. Complaints to Human Resources and Logistics & Operations had so far produced no results. And now this.

I stepped out of the car to check for any of the storage workers but no one was around.

The crates were empty. They weren't particularly heavy. I only had to slide them a short distance, zero risk of injuries or other silly things like tearing my trousers or jacket.

Although I didn't train anymore, my body still enjoyed the results of those past years of football practice—semi-professional level—and the task took only a few seconds: no sweat. I parked. Weird. Things like that were not supposed to happen; the workers had a list of unoccupied places which they could use.

With my badge in hand, I walked toward the third security point to cross. I swiped it and entered the monthly code on the keyboard. Invisible eyes

witnessed and recorded the entry. The transparent bullet-proof glass doors opened and let me in to the buffer zone, a concrete walled box with a painted red little square on the floor.

The procedure required to stand still on the red mark without moving while something or someone evaluated my credentials. I hated this last step. After all the security steps I'd gone through so far, hadn't I proven my identity, my right to be allowed into the premises? I almost questioned the invisible guard about those crates in my parking place but I hesitated. This was something to sort out with the Hospitality Team instead. They look after logistics and other annoying stuff.

Besides, if I moved or wiggled too much while standing on the little red square, the glass door behind would open and I'd have to go through the whole procedure again, suffer a lecture from the guard and waste even more time, *his* time. I stood as still as I could...and waited.

It took a few seconds more than usual and I thought to complain when finally I heard the welcoming beep; the opaque entrance glass doors slid aside and I walked in.

From the parking level entry, one accessed a hallway dotted with settees aligned along its gray walls. In front, a huge glass wall spanned the whole height of the building and showed a magnificent view of Lake Lemano and the mansions of rich Swiss and foreigners wealthy enough to enjoy the scenery from their large estates.

After a last glance at the glorious day unfolding outside, I started down the stairs to reach my desk one level below. The entire organization believed in full visibility so, to foster collaboration and communication among personnel, it had no offices...just open spaces and vast halls filled with large desks.

No cubicles, a la North American style, but shared spaces in between with desks arranged in islands of four separated by panels with a transparent top-third. Though you couldn't look at what your colleagues were doing, you had a clear view to establish eye contact; everyone sat in sight of everyone else. Hard to say whether this architect's dream resulted in any real increase of communications between teams. I still have my doubts.

Entering the hall, I peeked to see whether my highest-ranked collaborator and friend, Rose, had gotten in already. We had an established tradition between us: the morning cappuccino.

"Hi, Rose. How's it going?"

“As usual. The guys from Microsoft say they should be able to finish in time.”

“Good, good start for the day. Cappuccino?”

I led and defined the effort for a major collaboration platform of the highest security. It included all possible technical bells and whistles, video conferencing, and social networking to support all the initiatives running worldwide with our constituents.

Highly confidential matters were discussed on our system, especially on the encrypted video conferences and we enforced an absolute *off the records* policy. Journalists and others, I am sure, would have loved to eavesdrop on what we heard those days, particularly Arab League’s discussions with the Americans.

Everything we did to support and enhance the platform was required *yesterday* and costs or efforts were never a factor. High pressure constantly, criticisms always abundant, congratulations scarce. The kind of demanding task and thankless job any sane person would avoid. How in the world I ended up in that trap is still an open question. Anyway, as the only director who had been able to *herd the cats*, we had released a working platform in spite of everything and within the agreed timeline. Not exactly Big Brother, but Orwell would be proud of us.

A few desks away, I spotted the American consultant. Hired and imposed on the team to speed up the project and *automagically* solve all scenarios. He looked at his emails, showing no interest in our conversation or our whereabouts. The guy only knew one thing well and kept selling that as an IT panacea: A framework—and not among the best ones—to create websites. He advocated the solution as the ultimate silver bullet.

It proved no good for us; rather it had been the source of problems and discussions during many of the past months. Much time and money miserably wasted. Yet, somehow, he had secured the ears of our upper echelon bosses. Despite the lack of promised working prototypes, and even failing all tests and missing deadlines, he’d succeeded in imposing his view. A spin doctor, cum laude. Could not happen at a for-profit organization where pennies were counted.

“To a hammer, every problem is a nail,” we joked on the team but we called him ‘the screwdriver’. We were confronted with stubborn nails and we needed a sledgehammer. Screwdrivers do not understand nails, so he wanted

us to cut a slot on the head of every nail. Makes sense? Of course not. He kept neglecting crucial details about the project, things like ‘nails have no threads’. We judged his solutions and vision as simplistic. There were other forces at play so our judgment didn’t matter at all.

When we came back from our cappuccino, the consultant—even though now formally hired he still acted as such—had left the place for unknown destinations. Surely busy with bending people's opinions and buying support at every occasion. Grinding his way, or ‘screwdriving’ around, and forcing some head rolling in the process: move out of his way or get crushed.

The cell phone beeped: *Time to start working and accomplish something*, I thought. A message from the HR Chief: “Dear Dan, did you receive our meeting invitation?”

Our invitation? Who was he referring to? From the details, I had to be in the Board Room in five minutes...with him and the ‘screwdriver’.

“Rose, I just got summoned to an urgent meeting with Carl and Brad. If I don’t come back,” I said half-jokingly, “gather my stuff into a box, will ya?”

Rose looked at me with a worried expression. We’d had discussion after discussion covering the unsustainable situation we faced. The entire team, a group of twelve, had envisioned every possible scenario involving changing jobs, projects, duty stations, or even resignation. Everyone expected me to prevent all this from happening.

I climbed the stairs to the level of the Board Room, thinking what would be my reaction if I had been shown the door. We’d had meetings with big brass in the organization explaining why we were wasting our time and money, but we’d received orders to halt an evolving project in favor of some already failing chimera, a quick solution requiring very little budget and exceeding functionality: the typical silver bullet that would not work. So annoying.

I hadn’t realized yet how strong was the external support the new hire had.

I entered the Board Room without knocking. It was a large rectangular space with floor-to-ceiling wood panels; a grandiose oval table enthroned in the middle, capable of seating thirty people on leather chairs of the highest quality. Screens on the two long walls allowed for video conferencing. The side facing the lake had the usual glass wall overlooking the gorgeous scenery. The institution spared no expense on showy excess. It dealt with head honchos

used to luxury and, thus, needed to impress as part of doing business with them.

Carl and Brad were already seated and Carl greeted me first. “Thanks for coming, Dan. Please have a seat.”

“Hi, Carl...Brad.” Now I didn’t doubt what the meeting was for that early in the day. I knew the answer but I asked anyway: “Is anyone else going to attend?”

“No, just the three of us,” said Carl, “and allow me to get straight to the point...”

I interrupted him. “Brad is here so I think I can guess why we’re meeting. Brad and I have divergent visions on how to proceed and toward which goals.” I grinned. “I am surprised this comes right after some recent proof of the weakness of his proposed solution.”

I didn’t even look at Brad. I cared only for Carl, with whom I had frankly exchanged opinions about the whole thing.

Carl went on describing how everything in the institution should perform as in a Swiss clock. All parts and wheels contributing and turning in unison so that the mechanism could do its job. I had been a great wheel so far but I didn’t spin with the others anymore.

An overused analogy and strident with reality: the clock ticked before hiring *the help* so Carl threw out the baby with the bathwater. He seemed to recite from a spin doctor’s book. He kept talking, not sounding convincing at all, or even like he was convinced himself. He came to the conclusion of his speech.

“The Board has decided to terminate your work contract with us. Your last day of employment will be on the 31st of May, in accordance with the legal requirement outlined in the staff handbook. So as to provide you with as much time as possible to plan your future steps, we agreed to free you from any obligation to work until your legal termination as of today. We confirm this does not affect your rights to your salary through the 31st of May as well as a prorated 13th salary bonus and holidays not taken during the period. You will find more details in here.”

Carl handed me an envelope which I took without looking at it. I smiled.

In a way, I felt relief. All these months seemed like fighting against windmills. The issue had nothing to do with aiming at a better platform.

Someone wanted to achieve a firm stance in a power struggle which had begun in the previous months. The COO had been forced to leave only weeks before. I acted as his right arm in many initiatives, besides the one I led. I'd become an impediment for someone higher up, refusing to put lipstick on pigs.

Carl raised his eyebrows and caressed his chin. The hint of a smile raised his lips. "You're reacting way better than I guessed. This morning, I tried to imagine how this meeting would unfold and nothing I could think of comes close to this. Are you...happy?"

"Look, Carl..." No one paid attention to Brad, who kept watching Carl and me having this conversation, acting as if he wasn't in the room or had nothing meaningful to say.

"We both know what is going on in here. We've discussed this endless times."

I clenched my jaw and clutched the sides of the chair fighting the urge to stand up. I sighed. "We, nope, *you* guys will waste even more resources. I can't tell you how painful it is to deal with this nonsense we are forced to pursue. It is not going to be my problem anymore and that is a relief, believe me."

The meeting had come to an end. No further discussions needed, a scenario played already. Brad left the room without saying a word while Carl and I remained seated. When alone, Carl was more sympathetic.

"What are you going to do now?"

I snorted. "I'll go home, relax, cure the acid reflux afflicting me these past months. Remember my words, Carl. At the next Global Meeting, there will be no system to show. Ours, de facto, is to be wiped out and retired. The new one will be recycled to do something else, much smaller in scope, less ambitious, and unable to work as intended or reproduce what we did so far. It falls short now, it will fall short then. At most, you get a new website." I laughed bitterly. "The most expensive website ever with a newly hired CTO to act as its webmaster. Congratulations."

Carl grinned and did not argue. "I need you to go through some formalities."

Everything fit now, the parking place occupied with the wood crates; the delays in passing through the gates. Security knew that today I would have only a virtual presence on the premises.

"Your badge is disabled by now."

How predictable. *Poor Rose*, I thought. She had to collect my stuff for me and put everything in a box. The rest of the list was quick: email account, the blackberry, various cards...

“We need those now. I am sure you understand.”

Of course I did. Badge, corporate credit card. I also handed him the lunch card. “I’ve still some 100 Swiss Francs on it. I guess you’ll be able to credit that to my last paycheck?”

“No problem.”

Carl chatted with me all the way to the coat room. Then he walked me straight to the employee entrance at the garage level, making sure I would leave without incident and without talking to anyone. Still early in the morning, the entire meeting lasted no more than ten minutes; employees were arriving and starting their work day. No time for goodbyes. No one noticed.

“Is the Chairman in? I’d like to say goodbye.”

“He’s traveling. I’ll tell him.”

“I see. Well, nothing holds me here now. Have a good one, Carl.”

The sliding doors opened, and I reached my car while texting Rose on my iPhone. “Rose, get that box. I’m fired. Leaving now. Talk to you later.”

“WHAT!!!!” I read her shocked answer.

I repeated, “Talk to you later.”

I had mixed feelings. Had nothing to blame myself for, had done everything right. I refused to oil squeaking wheels or lick boots. I reported all risks and listed the reasons why, too. I never took offense or grew angry over constructive criticisms, always considered the facts, trying to never get personal. And it led me to this end result. We were in a world where facts were being ignored and trains were leaving the stations, speeding up toward... Nothing.

The News

The Old World

I left the site for the first time in years without any of those technology gadgets that made sure ‘leaving’ became a word devoid of its original meaning. We had to be always in touch with the organization, and reachable 24/7. I went through the last moments in an aseptic mental state; the germs of anger, frustration, revenge, and disdain had yet to get hold of my emotions. All considered, was it not for the best? Weren’t anger, frustration and disdain exactly the feelings I’d fought daily for months?

I was used to waking up almost every night—or should I say morning—around 4am, my brain boiling with mixed up thoughts of work, one after the other. I reevisited all details, all discussions, all options over and over again. Worn out and stressed, I might have ended up with a bleeding ulcer before much longer. Now, the cause of all that had disappeared from my immediate future.

With these thoughts still lingering, I searched for an area to safely pull over the car and call my wife. She needed to know, no reason to wait to announce that later today. I repeated to myself that I had nothing to be blamed for. I had accomplished my tasks and carried out my duties with diligence and professionalism. I didn’t need to hide anything. Unfortunately—in today’s business environment—that didn’t enhance your job security.

I signaled a left turn, and entered the parking lot of the nearby golf course. One of the most exclusive and expensive clubs in the region, but I never played on its old, majestic course. ‘*Private. Members Only*’ the sign said. I had been for business lunches a few times at their restaurant. Once, I thought I had a chance of getting close enough to one of the members to be invited to play a round. Now that probability rapidly spiraled down to zero.

Stopping the car, I listened to the radio still providing local items of interest, soon to be replaced by national news. World News Geneva, the only

English-speaking channel in town, broadcast hourly bulletins directly from London. The program listed the crude violence of recent days.

In Libya, word came of an alleged systematic purge of pro-Gaddafi loyalists as entire villages emptied and all inhabitants disappeared. Street fights increasing in Athens between civilians and police and army forces; the government announced tougher measures. Italy, on the brink of economic collapse, became the stage for rough protests with anarchist connotations.

In Syria, the city of Homs was still under bombardment from the loyalist forces committing atrocities against its own people. President Assad denying the allegations; world news and the Arab League supporting them. The Arab Spring seemed on the verge of turning into a rather Hot Summer of violence and death. In the US, the run for the Presidency inflamed hearts and captured all comments and attention. After a moment of hesitation, I pulled out the iPhone from my jacket and dialed home.

“Hello?”

“Mary, it’s me...” I hesitated, unsure how to continue.

“Hi, love. I’m about to leave for school. What’s going on?”

I decided to be blunt. “I’ve been fired. They will pay me three months salary but they don’t want me in the game anymore.”

Silence. I expected a reaction, a gasping sound, a ‘gosh’, anything. Not total silence.

“Are you there?”

“Yes. Catching my breath. What are you going to do? What are *we* going to do?”

Heard that question before, hadn’t I? “I’m coming home. Will I find you?”

“No, I’m going to school for my lesson. I’ll come home when I finish.”

This time, it was my turn to stay silent. Mary is stoic, always has been. Even in this moment, while other women might go ballistic, she stayed resolute, her mind set on urgent things to do. I loved her so much and her strength was also mine.

“It’s going to be all right. In one way or another.”

“I know. Need to go now. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I heard the dial tone.

The radio announcer still reported facts and events of the day. “... all penguins make considerably shorter treks to the sea in December or January

and spend the rest of the southern hemisphere summer feeding in warmer waters until March. Chicks begin molting into juvenile plumage from early November, which takes up to two months. Often, the process is not completed yet by the time they leave the colony and the adults cease feeding them.

“It is believed the entire colony perished during what are normally extremely favorable conditions for each individual: warmer temperatures and an abundance of fish. Experts rule out that thousands of Emperor Penguins may have died of natural causes. Captain Ryan from the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines, which also monitors the Australian Antarctic Territory, had this to say: “This is something totally abnormal and we have no records of similar events in the past, even on a smaller scale. If they succumbed due to some sort of epidemic, we fear we could soon discover other decimated colonies. It is too early to come to any conclusion.”

Wow, I thought.

I turned the engine on, heading home. In my ears, I still heard Carl’s voice telling me the Board had decided to get rid of me and yet I couldn’t avoid thinking about what I just heard on the radio. What might be the cause of all those deaths? Pollution? Poisoning? Heavy metals in water? There had to be something responsible for thousands of sudden casualties. An entire colony? Adults, females, chicks, no survivors. Pollution and poisoning did not fit.

I made my way into the remaining traffic flow of early morning, just past the commuters’ rush hour. Something, I realized, I won’t do anymore. My mind had started to catalogue all the implications of what happened.

The radio anchor again grabbed my attention as I drove along the winding road down the hills toward Geneva.

“... the eminent gorilla specialist, George Schaller, tells us that the population lived in the area north and northwest of Lake Tanganyika. All three gorilla subspecies are listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and by the Convention on International Trade for Endangered Species. Schaller calls this a natural disaster of immense proportions. The gorilla individuals—hundreds of them—have been found dead in various areas by members of the Diane Fossey Gorilla Fund International. Though no signs of gunshots or wounds are reported, all present evidence of physical trauma and distress. A representative of the Fund said it is too early to attempt

providing explanations now and that a full investigation will be conducted, adding, “We are deeply saddened by this tragedy...”

A declaration about Syria just released by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the General Assembly of the UN, interrupted the news. Syria was in a condition of civil war, he said, “We continue to receive information about summary executions, arbitrary arrests and torture,” adding that, on Thursday, “loyalist forces launched a broad assault against the city” and “civilian casualties were heavy. Homs, Hama and elsewhere have seen brutal fighting with civilians trapped in their homes, without food or electricity, and with no possibility of evacuating the wounded or burying the dead.”

I had just been fired but others in the world definitely lived in a more dire situation. The news went on with other reports about Greece’s social upheaval due to the economic crisis and the escalation of violence and unrest in Italy, which faced a huge sovereign debt and unsustainable interest payments to the international community. People were getting into open confrontations with the police and the Carabinieri—a military branch of the Italian Army with civil security duties.

I drove through the town in a trance. My mental autopilot would take me home while I was distracted by all sort of thoughts: the loss of my job and income, civil unrests, deaths of both animals and men. Everything is relative, nothing is important. Crucial only if touching you directly. No hard feelings, no strings attached, just life as it is and always has been.

Soon I reached the outskirts of the city. CERN, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics, stood as the last urban outpost before the national border with France. No agent staffed the customs station since Switzerland had joined the Schengen Area.

From there, a short ride led to our house. I got onto the expressway that saved me from having to go through every village along the way. The expressway became frustratingly congested at rush hour with commuters caught in bumper-to-bumper traffic every morning.

I pulled into the driveway, got out of the car and opened the iron gate. Neither Mary nor I had felt the need to put a automatic mechanism in place. We’d bought the old place when I got my last job. It was something in between a farm and a village home. We had renovated everything while maintaining the ancient character wherever possible, conferring a peculiar charm to the property. Old and new interlaced harmoniously, marrying different styles and

materials with always a subtle contrast that made the house warm and cozy and...homey.

We liked this place, Mary and I. We'd put so much of ourselves into it. The colors, the tiles, the plants in the garden. A nice piece of land with some twelve thousand square feet of grass, bushes, fruit trees, and an olive tree growing in front of the terrace, a tree considered holy in ancient Greece. We'd planted the tree not knowing whether it would survive the frigid winters common in the area. It did. We had taken that as a good omen. Will olive holiness protect us from this, too?

The thought that we could be forced to sell the house struck me with the power of a sledgehammer blow to my chest. The first gut-wrenching reaction to the little speech from Carl, an hour before. *No!* I would prevent that at all costs.

Costs, right; I had to think clearly about the necessary and unavoidable expenses and what could be cut or reduced from now on.

I headed for the front door, pulled out the keys and fumbled a bit with them. I felt like I needed a coffee, or something stronger. I managed to open the door; the alarm welcomed me with its three-tone beep, the first three notes of the US anthem. I reached the keypad and entered the code. The house was submerged again in silence, Mary already at school. My throat was dry. I went to the kitchen, the room my wife liked the most as she had personally designed the large trapezoidal island for all her culinary adventures.

The kitchen was warm, welcoming and full of utensils. Mary had always been a terrific cook. Keeping in shape was a remarkable achievement and a source of astonishment, but I was motivated by a dose of criticism from Mary. She was always telling me I ate too much. To which I invariably replied, "It's not my fault, hon. If you were a worse cook, I would enjoy eating less than I do."

I noticed a small note on the stone counter. "Don't worry. We will make it through. Together. Love you."

Yes, of course we would, though how and when were still two open questions. I took a mug, put a new capsule in the machine and started brewing a coffee.

I went upstairs. Our house had three levels. Mary and I enjoyed the entire upper level as our *quarters*; bedroom, dressing room, bathroom, and home office.

On the middle floor, we had our family room with the TV set, a small storage unit, and our daughter's bedroom with its own bathroom. At twelve, she had started to ask us to respect her privacy; she'd even got herself a sign for her door with '*Keep Out*' on one side and '*Please, Come in*' on the other. She did not use it often, and we took care to always knock if she had the door closed.

I sat on the couch and switched on TV, looking for some news reports. I hopped from one channel to another, the usual cocktail of CNN, BBC News, France 24, Rai International, Al Jazeera. Most were covering the recent election win for Vladimir Putin; with a landslide vote, the old KGB apparatchik had again retained full power and the Kremlin.

Changing the channel once more, France 24 reported the deaths of Mountain gorilla colonies. The causes of death still very much of a mystery, all gorillas presented bruising and blood in their soft tissues. Rangers had started to collect evidence and testimonials. Some local people reported seeing strange lights, or luminescent shapes, not far from where the gorillas had been found dead. Other witnesses heard rumbling sounds like thunder, though no meteorological events of any relevance had been reported in the area.

Officials concurred the deaths of the animals were a malicious act and promised a full investigation would be conducted to find and bring to justice the perpetrators. A veterinarian from the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project confirmed that, in the past days, locals had whispered among themselves about lights in the shape of a sideways capital "T" up in the flanks of the Virunga Volcanoes. They considered them the cause of the gorilla deaths. The veterinarian also specified that some elders said the *watu wa mwanga*—which could be translated from Swahili as *people of light*, or *from light*—were responsible. This information had not been verified independently.

I changed to RAI 24 International: the news focused on another mass bird killing, "... for the last five days, wildlife experts and officers from the forestry commission have picked up more than 1,000 turtle doves as well as other birds, including pigeons. Yesterday alone, 300 corpses were recovered, all of them having a blue tinge to their beaks. Scientists say this could indicate poisoning or hypoxia—a lack of oxygen—which could confuse animals and lead to death.

"The incident in the town of Faenza in northern Italy comes after a series of similar cases and, more recently, in the United States and Sweden. Birds

were not the only species to be affected. Millions of fishes also washed up on river banks and coastlines. The turtle dove case is the largest incident to have hit Europe so far. In Sweden, 50 jackdaws were found dead. Italian officials said they expected results from forensic tests on Monday.”

“Let's hope it is poisoning or an illness, and not a sign that the world is coming to an end,” the announcer said half jokingly. “Tests are being carried out on the bodies by the local forestry commission. Results should be available as of next week, but it is the numbers that make this such a notable event and for the moment it is a mystery.”

Although I had never put much stock in apocalyptic conjectures, many people were deeply affected by fear. According to many—false—prophets, life on Earth would end soon. Something to do with the Mayan calendar, I recalled. December 21, 2012—the Northern Hemisphere's winter solstice—would be the last day. Scenes with religious fanatics carrying posters urging people to repent because “The End is Nigh” had always been common. These animal deaths were adding fuel to such foolishness.

I recognized the streets of Berkeley, California, where a group of individuals distributed leaflets to passersby and a large sign with huge letters filled the TV screen long enough for the announcer to read it through:

“The word of the LORD that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the LORD.”

The news went on with other facts. Every one of them involved violence, fights, clashes and more deaths. This time, causes were identified with no ambiguity: bullets, bombing, and the general hatred human beings seem genetically armed with to inflict the greatest pain and suffering upon one another. I switched off the TV.

“Sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. Sweep away humans and animals.” *Now, that is a grandiose plan*, I thought. The context did not matter to people who died in bloody conflicts, but God had spoken specifically to Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, not to us living in the 21st century. Still, I have to say it was an enthralling conjecture and a very special case of connecting the dots. No doubt, everyone would be astonished by the

inordinate amount of dead wildlife, especially the gorillas, an animal so closely related to humankind. Investigations into the cause wouldn't stop Bible scholars or would-be prophets from making doomsday claims, but in my opinion, we ought to ask ourselves how we were provoking such *natural* disasters.

I decided to Google those animal deaths because I needed to think about something other than the morning chat with Carl and my ensuing loss of employment. What I found startled me. My little online search revealed, and for 2010 only, reports of not less than eleven strange mass deaths of animals. Thousands and thousands of birds and tons of fishes, mostly in the US.

For 2011, the situation was not better. On the contrary, fifteen unexplained culling of birds and fishes now reaching locations in Europe, too. 2012 seemed to have started in high gear with more evolved animals being victims of something killing them in a quite unpleasant way. Whatever the cause, it had escalated.

With a jolt, I noticed the clock: 4pm. Time to go pick up Annah at school. Annah, our twelve year old daughter, attended the International School of Geneva. When she was three, we chose that school because, at the time, we were still planning to go back to the US. Our goal was for Annah to receive an education in English and a good one, too. Our choice turned out to be the perfect one, welcoming children from the youngest ages through diploma years.

Years back, I worked at CERN when I'd been offered a staff position at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. As a physicist interested in computer science, I found my turf: fundamental research with lots of computing. I had the feeling I spent my time playing rather than working.

Life in Berkeley Hills and at the lab had been a memorable experience. The weather was pleasant, colleagues and friends were caring, San Francisco a town I fell in love with.

We had friends in California. Tony Bennett sang "I Left My Heart in San Francisco"—as I learned—for the first time at San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel in the famous Venetian Room. Mary and I had been there a few times and dined in the hall, with its crystal chandeliers and bronze marble columns. Whenever I traveled back to the City by the Bay, I felt like I was going home...much to Mary's dismay, for she judged herself as European as anyone could be.

We were from the old continent, and Europe is far away from California. Even with computers and telephones, the nine-hour time zone difference made you aware of the distance in a profound and acute way. After our daughter's birth, the separation became intolerable. Sending pictures and the frequent phone calls were not able to fill the gap and ease a longing for our families. When the US Lab proposed a rotation of personnel to the CERN labs in Switzerland, I added my name to the list to spend two years in Geneva, allowing for easier contact with our relatives. At least for a while.

The two years became four, then five, and life took precedence with its own plans; other job opportunities came along, then the malicious and evil 9-11 attack. We never went back to live in the US. I always remember John Lennon's words, so true in cases such as this: "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

Science was devoted to building massive apparatuses with such crushing images like modern cathedrals of molten iron and slabs of lead to demonstrate the world rested on infinitesimal entities and twined dimensions of an ephemeral reality. Scientists pursued the poetry of the invisible, the poetry of the infinitesimal unexpected possibilities. And life indeed had other plans...for everyone.



I arrived at the school around 4:30pm when students gathered in front of the main entrance. I only had to wait a couple minutes for Annah to show up. At twelve, she had started to go through a full transformation, the child leaving and making way for the young woman to be. Annah takes a lot after her mother and people say after me as well, though I know better.

She glanced around in search of my car. A smile rose to her lips when she saw me standing near our Volvo. She waved her hand, followed by a mute "hi, Dad", then she started walking toward me. I decided to hide from her what had happened that morning. Mary and I needed to discuss it first, figure out clearly all it implied for our life. Annah would be told at the right moment and this one, with her beautiful smile, was definitely not a good one.

"Hi, Dad. How was your day?"

"Fine, sweetie," I said, and kissed her. "And yours?"

I liked to take our daughter to school and pick her up whenever possible. With our schedules, we were all together only during breakfast and at dinner. Those rides with Annah allowed me to share some time with her every day; our usual conversation took place.

Annah was remarkably open with me about all that went on in her world. Her student life, her friends, the recent discovery of the existence of boys, and the first parties held by the school itself in the large gymnasium. I loved the privilege when Annah asked me how to tell whether a boy was in love with a girl. A hypothetical boy, of course, whose name varied from William, Victor, Robin, Lee... and a hypothetical girl named Annah.

How long would she keep me so much a part of her life? When we reached home, the gate was open and Mary's car was in the driveway. I parked next to hers. Mary appeared on the door step with the most incredible smile ever to greet us. "My loves," she reached us.

She embraced me, then Annah, who drove us back to reality.

"Hi, Mom! I'm hungry."

We walked into our home together.

The Dawn

The First Day

After dinner, we kissed Annah good night at the usual time, a bit before nine. The next morning was a regular school day and we didn't need to break any routines, not just now. When alone, inevitably Mary and I turned to my dismissal.

Mary knew the past months at work had been particularly tense. I had trouble masking my anger and frustrations. Moreover, Mary has always been a true life companion; I shared everything with her and she always did her best to help me manage my emotions. She understood the mixed disappointment and relief too. She was scared, though, and did not hide her feelings.

But it wasn't the end of the world. My career had been irreproachable, with a strong curriculum and diversified expertise. I had developed a solid scientific and IT background, and significant experience in multinational environments. I would find something else in the next few months.

I started to plan my next steps: contact a professional development agency; head hunters; update my LinkedIn account; use relationships and work-related contacts to create even further connections. More for myself than for Mary. The planning gave me the feeling I had control, and was still able to think clearly.

We went to bed early. Mary hugged me for a long time until she fell asleep. I could sense from her body and her breathing she was tense. I rested there, in the dark, cuddling my woman and comforting her, hoping the sky would not fall.

'Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans.'

During the night, we woke up to the noise of a strong windstorm. Powerful gusts of wind shook the trees, interrupted by brief moments of calm. Then again, mighty blows blasted against the roof and a roared with the strength of multiple airplanes landing all together, in one go, on a nearby

tarmac. I peeked out the window; the sky was dark, maybe a full hour still to dawn.

Mother Nature showed off her might that night. Mary went downstairs to check on Annah. When she came back, she reassured me that our daughter was sound asleep. Her room on the middle floor was protected from the wind blowing strongly outside. We had a bit more than an hour before the alarm clock summoned us to our daily activities. Mary curled up close to me and we waited, without a word, listening to the roaring sounds around the house. The wind subsided all of a sudden, as if a gigantic fan had been switched off. Silence, a deep one, replaced the ravaging noises of an angry nature—the calm after the storm—penetrating and intense.

Dawn came with its twilight before sunrise, the brief moments the Roman deity Aurora ruled over, while the world awaited the rising sun, holding its breath. The buzz of the alarm broke off the magical silence. Mary stopped the noise with a searching hand, still half-asleep.

“Hummm. Take a shower, I’ll prepare breakfast. Will you pick Annah up at school?”

“Sure.” For some time, I would be the only master of my schedule. I grinned in the dark and still-sleepy atmosphere of our bedroom. Mary squeezed my hand. She felt more sympathy for me than I did myself.

I took a long shower, soothing some lingering internal, invisible bruises. During the day, I needed to get organized and launch the job hunt on many fronts. I had never been laid off before. While common wisdom says in such cases a few days of rest are a must, I wanted to get back into action. Why wait and for what? I needed to revise my resume, visit some head hunters, send emails and, hopefully, arrange for interviews soon.

I dressed casually—unusual for me during weekdays—but I didn’t think Annah would notice or raise questions which were as yet too hard to answer. My girls were waiting for me in the kitchen and Annah had just filled up three glasses with juice. Orange for Mary and me, apple for herself.

“Good morning, Dad.”

“Morning, sweetie.”

I hugged her and kissed my wife even more tenderly than usual. I set up to prepare coffee for the two of us and got a bottle of milk out of the fridge. Slices of bread were already in the toaster. I loved that smell coupled with the one of freshly-brewed coffee. The dawn sky was beautiful; the morning air,

clean and crisp. From the kitchen window, we could catch a glimpse of the Alps and their perfect silhouette.

We were all seated, with jam and marmalade and Nutella ready for the crunchy slices of white bread. Annah started to tell us about the last hilarious video she saw on YouTube and how everyone in her class mentioned it to each other. Ah, and she would love to invite Jessie, her BFF—best friend forever—to stay overnight that weekend.

I shared a confirming glance with Mary. “Sure. Tell her later today at school.”

Mary was not talkative in the mornings so her silence was not a deviation from the norm, though a hint of a worried frown stamped her lovely face. For Annah’s benefit, I repeated what her mother and I had already agreed upon.

“I’ll pick up Annah.”

“Yes, please. I won’t be back home before five today. We have a PTA meeting after school hours.”

“All right. Annah, c’mon, get up and get ready. You know what happens if we’re stuck in traffic.”

“Yeah, Dad, I know. But don’t start reading emails or *I* will be the one waiting.” Annah gave me a gentle push to my shoulder and went to her room.

“We have to tell her soon. She will notice you’ve changed your schedule... and that you’re not wearing a suit.” Mary looked at me, and winked.

I gave her a crooked smile. If I had believed the sweater would go unnoticed, she proved me wrong. Women, you can never hide anything from them.

“Fine, we’ll find a moment tonight. Right now I’d better get going. Will you still be home when I get back? It shouldn’t take me more than forty minutes total.”

“I don’t know...” She shook her head. “I need to leave by 8:00. I won’t close the gate.”

As I passed Annah’s room she reminded me in her spritely voice, “Don’t be late, Dad.”

“No worries. I’ll wait for you downstairs in five.”

“Yeah, yeah...No emails, remember?”

I smiled and went upstairs.

In less than five minutes, I was ready to go; Mary was still in her nightgown. Annah rushed so she could be waiting at the door with a

mischievous smile.

Mary loved to have our upstairs quarters all to herself in the morning. She said not having a man underfoot while she got ready in the morning cut out at least fifteen minutes in her routine. She was right, of course.

Annah and I both kissed and hugged Mary in turn. I opened the front door to the fresh and invigorating morning air. Outside, the first sun beams traced a placid sky after the night's windstorm. The garden wasn't badly damaged, though some plants had suffered a few broken branches and had lost leaves. A vase had been knocked down, luckily without breaking into pieces. All was silent and serene.

I went to open the gate while Annah waited for me in the car. When I got in, she had already tuned the radio to her favorite station and music filled the air.

We started to drive down toward the plain then turned right onto the straight road through the crop fields to reach the expressway. From that point, it was still a few miles to the Swiss border across which the CERN lab spanned. We encountered no other cars, not uncommon though somewhat rare.

After a rail crossing, the road climbed over a small hill then descended to a roundabout where a countryside Holiday Inn greeted businessmen from everywhere in the world. They claimed "*Outstanding Service at the Doorsteps of Geneva*" with an expressway directly linked to the airport.

In February, farmers started to fertilize the soil by spreading manure, as we could tell by its acrid smell. On the field to the right, just before the Holiday Inn, a green trailer towed behind a tractor featured a rotating mechanism to distribute the cows' byproduct.

I noticed the tractor had its front wheels bogged down into an irrigation ditch, the manure accumulating from being spread over the same place for quite some time as I judged from the height of the dung. I slowed down. The farmer in the cabin was bent on the steering wheel.

My God, I thought.

Annah noticed my alarmed expression and followed my gaze.

"Dad...what happened?"

"I don't know; maybe a stroke. Let me call your mom."

I kept driving, using the hands-free phone kit to dial home. The radio was silenced automatically and, after a few rings, Mary answered.

“Hello?”

“Mary, it’s me. A man in the tractor near the hotel...call an ambulance. There is no one around and I believe I am the first one to...Jeez!”

As I drove into the roundabout and through the underpass toward the expressway, I nearly collided with a car. Its lights on, it half-blocked the way. I swerved. The driver had his head thrown back as if he was sleeping.

My heartbeat skyrocketed. “Mary! I almost slammed into a car on the shoulder.”

Annah turned around to look back at the scene.

“Dad, stop!”

“Hold on a sec, Annah. Mary, are you there!?”

“What’s going on?”

I reached the the expressway; the scene shocked me and I couldn't talk anymore. A couple of cars had crashed into each other, another slammed against the guardrail. Further down, a pickup had overturned and come to rest on the shoulder. Nothing moved. A truck had smashed through the barrier and plowed into the field below, smoke billowing from the wrecked engine.

The sudden silence on the line worried Mary. “Annah, Dan!”

Annah stared at the scene, her lower lip trembled and tears streamed down her face.

“Mary,” I hesitated. “Here...it is...it is full of cars...accidents. I’ll get through to the next exit and be home right away. Call the police. I’ll try, too.”

“Oh my god. Is the police there?”

Was she listening to me? I snapped. “*I just told you to call them!*”

I took a deep breath. Mary wasn’t at fault. Meaningless to pick on her. “Sorry. No one’s here, no one is alive! Stay home, *wait for us!*”

Mary’s voice raised to a piercing cry. “*Wait! Don’t leave me!*”

“Not going anywhere. Calm down. We’re fine.”

I turned my attention back to Annah “Look at me Annah. *Look at me!*” She was pale. “Honey, everything’s fine, we’re going home now. Get down, just in case.” I did not want her to keep staring at the horrific scene.

At one specific moment in the commute morning traffic, everyone at the same time had lost control of their vehicles and crashed...wherever. People were dead, or badly hurt in the crashes.

I maneuvered in a sort of gymkhana to get through, around, or by wrecked cars. I managed not to indulge in rubbernecking either. In the

distance, toward Geneva, a plume of black smoke I hadn't noticed before filled the sky. I reached the exit. Shortly after, I stopped the car on the overpass and got out.

"Dad, don't go! I'm scared!"

I jolted, bumped my knee against the car door, looked angrily at Annah and shouted "Jeez, Annah!"

I managed to regain composure after a few seconds. Annah trembled like a puppy on a cold night. Raising my voice had frightened her even more, of course. Suddenly a small and scared child took over the happy, budding young woman she was moments before. She sobbed and was shaking.

"I'm not leaving, sweetie."

"Dan! Annah!" Mary shouted again on the phone.

From the bridge, a frightful and grisly scene spread out; cars and trucks crushed with everyone trapped inside. Maimed corpses, no one alive in sight. I counted not less than fifteen vehicles, maybe more. And the silence...the humming of the car engine sounded blasphemous while I grasped the full magnitude of what I was witnessing.

I got back in the car and reached to hug Annah, covering her with my body to comfort and protect her. "Let's go home. And stay down, honey." She felt so small and vulnerable in my arms. "Mary, don't worry; try to reach someone now, please! I love you. Be there in a few."

I interrupted the call and music filled the air again. No commentaries, no live anchor voice. We listened to the recorded program that usually goes on at night. I switched it off. Music sounded awfully out of place now. I forgot to call the police myself.

What started as a peaceful morning turned into a nightmare of unknown proportions. We passed other car accidents and the corpses of pedestrians, too, lying on the pavement at the bus stop. Some early commuters waiting for a bus that did not come and would not be coming either.

Annah moaned softly and I kept talking to her until we got back to the straight road through the crop fields.

"We're almost there."

Annah did not reply. She looked at me intensely as if she tried to absorb strength and composure from me. We met no one on the last miles before reaching our place.

Mary rushed out of the front door crying. “Where’s Annah? *Where’s Annah!*?”

“*In the car!* She’s in the car!”

Mary almost threw herself inside the vehicle. She grabbed and encircled Annah with her arms. They both burst out crying.

Getting to the passenger side, I opened the door and put my arms around both my women. “Let’s go inside now, don’t stay here. Let’s go.”

In the distance, the black smoke was now visible from the garden and expanded slowly. While taking them indoors, I became aware of the absence of planes coming into the Geneva airport...maybe all air traffic had been diverted?

Surrounding houses showed no sign of activity either. For the time being, I did not mention any of that to Mary. Once inside, I locked the door. Mary went to the kitchen with Annah and gave her a glass of water. Why do we all drink after some shock? I could not swallow anything after what I had seen and heard. Everything was so silent.

“Mary, did you call the police?”

“Yes, and I tried them all...15, 17, 18, and 112.” She peered out the window.

She had done well; those were the numbers for the ambulance, police, fire department and the European-wide emergency operator.

“What did they say?”

Mary hesitated. “No one’s answering.” She turned to look at me. “What’s with that smoke?”

Unreal. That wasn’t possible.

“No idea. Are you sure the line’s working properly? An operator must be answering calls. They’re on 24/7.”

Mary stared at me and did not reply. I picked up the phone and the familiar tone greeted me. I dialed 112. *Pick it up...pick it up.* The phone kept ringing on the other side. I tried another emergency number even though by then I did not expect a different result: no answer. Mary watched the whole scene, and had to sit. Annah was recovering slowly. An impossible scenario unfolded before us.

“Stay here. I’ll try the computer.”

Mary and Annah didn’t react. I rushed upstairs, climbing the stairs two at a time and almost falling at the last one. “*Shit!*” We had a reliable and fast

Internet connection; I would have all the answers in a matter of seconds. I sat in front of the iMac and launched the browser on the local news website.

The familiar page fired up almost immediately. “Greece unrest continues unabated”, “Pakistan charges Bin Laden widows”, “Strong solar storm hitting Earth”, “‘Fresh massacre’ in Syria’s Homs”, “Powers urge serious Iran talks”, and other news. Nothing strikingly unusual, no mention of any massive incidents anywhere. All seemed normal; the usual killing, fighting, massacres, riots.

Then I noticed the date...it was yesterday’s. Since last night at 3:32, nothing—or rather, no one—had updated the page. Now it was past 8:30 in the morning and journalists are early birds. It wasn’t plausible that no reporter had cared to add anything to the pages yet.

I tried other sites. British, Italian, French news, and various newspapers online. The time seemed to have stopped sometime in the early hours of the day. Not one mentioned major catastrophic events, or any new recent event!

Email! I checked my account. Some automatic deliveries, the usual commercial crap, the latest ones. Twitter! I logged on. It worked! Last tweets, worldwide trends, not a tweet from the people I followed nor the organizations. Even news channels were silent. Nothing recent. I tweeted, “PLEASE SOMEONE REPLY TO THIS IMMEDIATELY. THERE ARE CORPSES ON THE STREETS. I AM IN GENEVA AREA. PLEASE ANSWER BACK.” I had fourteen more characters to use, but I hit send anyway.

My heart dropped a beat as I stared at the message on the screen: “Sorry! We did something wrong. Try sending your Tweet again in a minute.”

I tried again, and again.

“Daaann!”

In my chest, my heart pounded; my ears buzzed. I went quickly downstairs expecting the worst. Mary was standing in front of the kitchen door leading to the yard, staring out, and Annah tapped at the glass panes.

“What?”

Mary pointed at something in the garden.

“The neighbor’s cat.”

The neighbors! Right! The neighbors.

“What’s their number?”

“It's in the phone's memory.” Mary played with the commands for a few seconds. “There.”

She dialed. We waited. Mary's expression grew more tense by the second. Her lips twisted tightly, then she started to bite them in anguish. I didn't like that so I took the phone from her and put it down.

“Mary! Look at me!”

I turned her toward me, my hands on her shoulders.

“We are all together. We are safe.”

I pressed her body against mine, and gently pushed her head on my shoulder, caressing her hair, and held her tight. She began to cry.

Annah reached to hug us both. I opened one arm to embrace her, too. The enormity of what we were going to face started to emerge in our minds.

“Stay here. I don't see any immediate danger. I'll go see the neighbors.”

Mary straightened up. Her eyes implored me. “No! Please don't go.”

“Dad! Stay!”

They complained, but I needed to search for one thing which had just popped into my mind. “I'll be back soon, don't panic.”

I pointed at the beautiful morning out there. The sun was warm and everything calm outside, though eerily so. I managed to convince them it made sense to cover the short distance to our closest neighbor's house and...check on them? I gave no other details. I kissed them. “Go upstairs so you can watch me going, make sure everything is okay.”

I led them toward the stairs. They were frightened and I could not blame them.

“Be careful.”

“Don't worry.”

Without Mary and Annah knowing, I wanted to grab the sturdy butcher knife we had in the kitchen as a precaution. Maybe paranoid, but was I really? *Yet only the paranoid survive*, I thought.

Checking on the neighbors was not the only thing I planned to do. Joe had been in the army in the sixties, and he once showed me his gun and bullets with pride. He kept everything in pristine condition. If I found him and his wife dead, as I feared, his pistol would be better off in my hands now.

Joe was proud of that pistol. “Dan, let me show you something,” he once said. We shared a beer on his patio one warm weekend, the year before, while the wives were away shopping. He went inside and came back with a bulky

object wrapped in a cloth. He unfolded the rag and put a wooden box on the table. He held his hand on the cover for a moment, then opened the lock with a small key.

“This is my MAC-50. Did I tell you I served as petty officer?” Yeah, he’d told me a few times.

He took out a black pistol—automatic, I thought—and turned the gun over in his hands as you would do with a piece of art. His eyes widened with some untold memories.

“The Manufacturer d’Armes de Châtellerault originally made this baby. Then they changed the name to MAS when the operations moved to St. Etienne. This gun works perfectly, you know?” He paused.

“9-rounds detachable bullet magazine with 19mm Parabellum. Look here, I still have plenty.” He showed me several boxes.

He nodded. “I probably did wrong but, when I left the army, I managed to keep everything. The box is safe and locked in the cabinet with all my documents. But be careful, Dan.” He grabbed my hand. “Beth doesn't know about me shooting with it so... don't tell Mary.”

I did not tell Mary.

I don't know why, but I was sure Joe and his wife were dead, so why weren't we? That question did not need any immediate answer, of course. The answer would come to us, whether we wanted it or not, and it might not be one we would like either. I took the butcher knife in the kitchen, hid it under my sweater, and headed for the door.

I walked out onto the front terrace, took a few steps, then turned around. Mary and Annah were at the first floor window, in our family room, anxiously watching. I waved, and Mary threw me a silent kiss; I nodded and resumed walking.

I intended to reach our neighbors place by crossing properties, climbing over the low garden wall, and entering their house from the backyard, unseen by anyone in the neighborhood. Not that I expected to have any witnesses.

Their property showed signs of the previous night's strong winds, too. A couple lawn chairs were overturned as well as some of the vases Beth cared so much about. Plants had broken twigs and the enriched soil she prepared meticulously for all her flowers was now spread on the patio floor in a kind of sad, dark bleeding.

The back door showed no signs of break-in. Apart from the shattered vases everything seemed normal. Without much hope, I called out. “Joe! Beth?!”

I waited a few seconds before knocking hard on the door, and called out to Joe again. No replies, nor any sound came from inside the house. A rustling noise startled me. Cats! Could they ever provide some warnings about their presence? What was her name again? *Peluche*, I recalled. Our neighbors’ cat welcomed me into her fiefdom, graciously reassuring me I had been accepted.

I tried the door handle, locked from the inside. We lived in a safe neighborhood so no houses had reinforced doors or anything more than a standard lock. I’m a fairly big guy, and I was sure I could break through that door. As a precaution, I gave a solid kick first before throwing my shoulder into it. The wood around the lock cracked and *Peluche* ran away hissing. I guessed I would be a less-welcomed guest next time.

Encouraged by the first one, I kicked a second time and, with a loud crack, the door slammed open. No alarmed voices, no hurried steps or Joe yelling “What the *fuck!*”

I walked inside and took out my knife. Dan the Butcher! I had the feeling I’d stepped into some horror movie and I played the bad guy. “Joe!?”

Nothing.

I reached the dining room, then peeked into the kitchen and noticed the breakfast set on the table, ready and unused. Beth must have prepared everything the night before as we were used to doing ourselves. But no one had any breakfast that morning. Without further hesitation, I went upstairs toward their bedroom.

Daylight flooded the room as they slept without pulling the window shades, or using any blinds.

Joe and Beth lay in bed; no visible commotion, as if death had occurred within a few seconds. I expected that, but my hands started to shake and I had to lean against the door frame, covered in a sudden cold sweat. My hand rose to wipe tears of anger and sorrow. I took a deep breath and put the knife away. These were not anonymous corpses; there was Beth, and Joe, and I could hear their voices in my mind.

They both had bloodshot eyes and some blood seeping from the ears. Joe’s mouth was open and he looked as if he had been gasping before dying. Beth was more self-composed than Joe as she had been in life. She seemed to

have passed away quietly even though she too showed sign of a rather stressful death. I guessed she'd died faster than her husband.

Joe had been a character. Always ready to share a beer and always busy with gardening chores. He loved gardening but he never missed the chance to tell me how it was Beth who made him dig that area, plant a new young tree, kill weeds, or do laps with his small lawn mower. No task was so urgent, though, that he wouldn't stop for a beer each time he saw me in our garden. "Dan, time for a beer? You see, I'm not allowed to stop. I have Beth breathing down my neck, but she can't stop me from sharing a beer with friends." Of course, Beth never pushed him to do anything; she simply pointed at stuff and Joe would jump at the chance to get himself occupied.

Beth never failed to make a remark on our Italian origins when she served coffee on their patio. "It has nothing to do with your strong Italian coffee but, oh my, I couldn't drink that. My heart would jump out of my chest."

They were always smiling and sometimes it was really funny to eavesdrop on their joyful quarrel about where to plant this or that flower in their garden. Joe, especially, mastered the art of bringing to the table the most absurd reasons to support his views. I sighed, fighting to chase away the horde of memories that assailed me. I closed their eyes, and covered them with the bed sheets. What else could I do?

My mind went back to the main reason for this visit: the pistol. Joe said he safely tucked away his gun together with his documents. So it had to be in his home office. The cabinet, he'd said. In the office, there were a couple wooden cabinets, all locked, and a desk.

The desk drawers were open. Inside the right drawer, I found the usual stationery, and unpaid bills. In the left one, more documents and papers, a bible, and keys! I tried all of them on both cabinets. None worked, some did not even fit.

Well, the door hadn't provided much resistance, so neither would a couple cabinets. I was sure I wouldn't have a police officer in front of my door the next morning. In any case, I had a pretty good story.

I used the knife as a lever to force the middle doors open. I did not go for the additional drawers of the cabinets as I remembered the size of the box where Joe kept the gun. The pistol case wouldn't have fit in those.

The doors opened with a cracking sound, though much quieter than the patio door before. Inside, some folders labeled "Taxes", other loose

documents and there, what I was looking for!

Poor Joe, he had no reason to hide his gun any better, especially as he liked to clean and regularly use his ‘baby’, as he used to say. Moreover, both being retired, their kids had their own lives and no youngsters lived with them anymore. A nice old couple, good people they were.

I took the case and examined the small lock. The keys...

As a first guess, I tried the smallest one which fit and worked. Inside, wrapped with an immaculate white cloth, I found the MAC-50—or MAS-50, whatever the brand now—two full magazines and plenty of additional 19mm bullet boxes... parabellum. I put everything back in place and closed the cabinet. I had no reason to do that, except maybe out of respect for Joe. I headed toward the patio.

With the door cracked open, soon the house would become shelter to all sort of pests. Seeing Peluche alive and well made me think that other animals must be okay, too. However, Peluche was nowhere to be seen. Yet I believed she would survive. I closed the entry door as best I could and went home.

Mary and Annah were still looking through the window, waiting for my return. They got excited as they saw me climbing over the garden wall. They frantically waved at me but Mary frowned when she noticed what I carried with me. I raised my free hand to signal everything was alright.

With Joe and Beth lying dead in bed, I still actually signaled all was fine.

As I approached the house, Mary and Annah came down the stairs, and opened the door. “*Dad!*” said Annah as she ran toward me. She was getting stronger, her hug squeezed me. Mary waited at the doorway.

Alone?

We're Alive

Back in the kitchen, Mary and Annah wanted to know about Joe and Beth. I did not go into any gruesome details. Not in front of Annah, anyway. Maybe later, if Mary and I had a brief moment of privacy during the day. I told them they passed away in their sleep and I covered them as best I could. “I don’t think they suffered or realized anything.”

Nothing more to do for our neighbors but bury them. Mary couldn’t hold her tears. Then Annah asked the question dangling from the tip of Mary’s tongue. She nodded at the box. “Is it Joe’s?”

“Yes. He once showed it to me. I’m glad he did.”

From Mary’s expression, I believed she had guessed the content. She wiped her tears, and sounded tense and nervous when she asked, “What’s in there, Dan?”

“A gun,” I replied bluntly. No reason to lie.

“I don’t want a gun in my house!” Mary crossed her arms.

With a calm voice, I managed to explain why I took Joe’s pistol. “We probably have no reason to use firearms right now, or in the future, but I could not exclude the possibility.” In case—just in case, I repeated—the need should arise, better to have a serious means of protection and dissuasion rather than trusting in our ability to reason with troublemakers.

“Think of estranged dogs,” I added after a moment. “It will not take long before they turn wild and dangerous if they need to fend for themselves. And wild dogs do hunt in packs.”

Mary didn’t seem convinced so I rapidly changed the subject.

“Anyway, we should try to get in contact with someone, anyone. Did you call the emergency numbers again?”

Mary sighed. “I did. How’s it possible no one is picking up?”

“I don’t know. I can’t be sure but what happened to Joe and Beth might be the same with the commuters on the expressway. Besides, I haven’t seen

anyone around, not a single person. I mean, alive. I can't... ”

Annah stared at the window, and Mary shook her head. They seemed confused. I was confused, too.

“Mary, give me the phone, please.” I thought about my parents who lived in Italy. “And try calling people on your cell. You, too, Annah. Call your friends.”

I hoped all those deaths were somehow local, confined to a relatively small area even if wide by several miles. I still hadn't noticed or heard any incoming planes and, by then, quite a few should have reached the airport for landing in the morning. That, and the black smoke rising to the sky from that direction, played against my hope.

I dialed my parents' number. After what seemed to be the longest moment ever, I got a connection. The phone rang but no one answered. I glanced at Annah and Mary and I saw they too were not having any success with their own calls.

We tried all the numbers we had stored on our phones, both the fixed-lines and the mobiles. I even called professional acquaintances, anywhere, with no consideration of time zones. I would have loved it if I woke up someone and verified that, somewhere, the world was running as usual.

Nothing.

“Dan...” Mary was pale. Annah didn't say a word but her lower lip trembled as it had earlier in the morning.

I was not prepared to provide any explanation. *We* were not prepared for this. How is anyone supposed to face the possibility of being...left alone? The eventuality defied all beliefs.

Armageddon and conspiracy theories never pictured such extreme scenarios. This was the real world, though, not a theory. Our reality, not some science fiction horror movie. How could people die en masse everywhere and at the same time?

Granted, not getting any answer on the phones did not mean we were truly alone. The number of people we contacted had to be infinitesimal considering the billions on the planet. Rational thoughts clashed with everything we were experiencing.

“Dad...why don't we try the TV?”

Damn, what an idiot. Another obvious thing to do which I didn't think of, yet my 12-year-old daughter came up with it.

“Of course! Come here.” I hugged her. In that moment, I needed that contact more than anything else in the world.

The TV set was on the first floor, in the family room. We all went. Finally, we would learn what had happened. We would be reassured, receive explanations, and discover people busy taking action. Things would return to normal soon.

I switched on the TV and started to jump from one channel to the next. We received blank screens, black screens, a couple non-stop infomercials, and one or two music only programs. In most cases, the screen showed a message stating *Technical Fault, No signal*, and the like. A few times, some logos, numbers and codes, or an emphatic *End of Broadcasts*.

The channels were dead in all the countries we had access to. The impact on us was like a hammer blow to the head. We looked at each other, speechless, mute, and I saw despair in both Mary’s and Annah’s eyes. Had the planet reset on us? Had something or someone called off human beings and their civilization?

“Dad...my friends. Are they dead? Even those on Facebook?” Annah cried softly.

Facebook! Annah and Mary had accounts on Facebook to stay in touch with co-workers, school mates, and close friends. Others used the site for everything, even as a dating service! How many hundreds of millions were on Facebook and how many connected with each other daily?

If someone was still alive and had—as we did—Internet access and a Facebook account, chances are he could be using it right now. Searching for others.

“Honey, I love you,” I told Annah, and rushed upstairs.

Facebook, Facebook, Facebook...there was something I had read about it recently.

“Mary! Your password, quick!” I shouted.

Mary and Annah joined me and, excited, I described the theory I came up with. Surely we would find someone alive on Facebook.

“Dan, I am not friend with the entire Facebook community. How can you reach—?”

I stopped Mary short, and explained what I read the week before and just remembered: Facebook ads! “You see, if you have an account and you pay online with a credit card, PayPal, whatever, you can run your own ad campaign

and Facebook does the rest! In principle, we can reach everyone on Facebook.”

My idea was to turn Facebook into the digital version of a message in a bottle. From our virtual island—Mary’s account—we would send thousands, millions of messages to any Facebook page in the world...that is, if the servers were still working.

In the worst-case scenario, at least for as long as they worked until the next malfunction, when nobody would be around to fix it.

Time was of the essence now. The plan might work for a few days, hopefully weeks before the digital entropy stopped everything everywhere.

I got to the Facebook ads management page and clicked *Create an Ad*. Oh, God. It worked, and the process was rather simple. I had to create a message and choose the country where to activate the ad campaign.

I started with the US, Canada, and the EU countries. A panel on the right gave me the estimated reach...306 million people and counting. I eliminated all restrictions to select focused groups. My interest group was the entire planet!

I proceeded alphabetically and eliminated countries contributing less than a couple millions accounts. Next ads will cover those. I was going to send my “Calling for Survivors” message in the *Facebook bottle* to a comforting reach of four hundred sixty-two million and change!

I put a picture of us taken live with the built-in camera on the Mac and this message in all capitals. “WE ARE ALIVE. PLEASE CALL OR GET IN TOUCH WITH US AT...” then the date and time. I added our phone numbers and the email addresses we had access to.

I hit the *Review Ad* button. A popup message stopped me short. Because I had targeted users without any age restriction, minors were reached, too. My ad had to go through an approval process before going live.

I could not rely on Facebook employees still working to approve ads. Frighteningly enough, that seemed no longer to be wild hypothesis and conjecture. CNN was dead and it meant only one thing. I adjusted the target age and placed the order.

After a few seconds, the greatest thing on Earth happened: the Mac *Glass* alert sound, signaling incoming messages, cheered us with the most beautiful sound ever. We received an automatic message from the Facebook Ads Team! I wondered if anyone from that team had survived, God bless them.

The email thanked us for creating a Facebook Ad and showed a copy of my beautiful help message, exactly as people would see our message on their pages. I created a few more ads to reach more countries and managed to target an additional hundred million Facebook users. Soon, depending on how the system actually worked, those ads would be seen by someone sometime. God, please!

The email from Facebook also provided an embedded button: *Manage Ads*. Clicking on it, I was sent to a dashboard. There I could see my intended audience, my personal interest group of hundreds of millions of people, the reach and the number of Facebook pages where my ad was going to be shown, with number of clicks and cost, plus additional information pertaining to the management of multiple ads.

I did not care about the payment, I cared about someone clicking on our message and getting in touch with us. A signal of hope, a signal of life. I guess we had nothing more to do now than wait for the miracle to happen. For the time being, the dashboard showed a frustrating *Pending* status for my planet-wide distress call.

Annah brought us back to reality with a practical matter, providing a welcome interruption from the spiral of scary end-of-the-world doomsday scenarios we had been abruptly plunged into that day. “Mom, I’m hungry.” It was beyond lunchtime.

“I can make some toasted panini for everyone,” Mary said while giving me an intense look as she nodded Annah out of the room. I understood. Mary’s main preoccupation now was to save Annah from all I had exposed her to.

I nodded back at Mary, meaning I understood what she meant. We needed to think about practical issues, divert the mind from focusing on what we faced now. That was crucial. We had enough to drive anyone crazy, or worse, suicidal and I had to be glad my family seemed to be holding up amazingly well under the circumstances.

Before she left, I told Mary we needed to know how much food and provisions we had, and the kind of autonomy we hoped for. Annah would help her mom to take note of everything and evaluate our situation and what to do later to improve it. “I’ll do some more research online and join you right after.”

While working on the Facebook ads, some internal thoughts brought to mind that I actually had eyes out there in the world: Webcams!

I googled “live webcams”. I got pages of static webcams with 12-hour picture intervals, with non-working links, and question marks where images were supposed to be. Frustration mounted rapidly. Then I found “LIVE Webcam Network” in all its HD glory. The main page showed live pictures from Times Square, New York! My heart jumped.

It was sunny in New York. The scene showed a crossing I did not at first recognize; it seemed familiar though. The site did not specify the exact address. Next to the curb, a USA Today vending box, two phone booths, one having on the side an ad for “AWAKE, The Movie”.

No live traffic. Quite a few cars at a stop, either in the center of the road, or against the curb and on sidewalks. They had crashed buildings and other obstacles. A car in the distance seemed to have hit a streetlight pole of some sort. “*Wait!*” I figured out where the webcam pointed. In the top corner, I recognized a statue I knew—George M. Cohan.

He was a famous figure in the New York City theater scene just after the turn of the twentieth century. The memorial had been erected in recognition of his contributions to the American musical theatre. I had to be at Broadway and 46th Street in Manhattan.

Something lay on the floor partially behind the pedestal. I could not tell the nature of the object and there was no option to zoom the picture either. Legs? Wooden planks?

A yellow cab was stopped on the sidewalk at the far right of 46th Street as if the driver had awkwardly parked the car. I couldn’t see anything inside any vehicles. Some smoke or vapor came out from something, maybe a light pole. White condensation flew outward, not at street level, a bit higher up, and I couldn’t figure out the cause.

On Broadway, there was a construction area with large scaffolding going from the top of the building down to the ground. No movement or people walking around; the area was deserted.

Further down on 46th Street, other stuff obstructed the visible part of the sidewalk. No way to distinguish what it was. Bodies? I felt a cold sensation in the lower parts of my spine and shivered.

I tried with another link. This one labeled “LIVE from SXSW in Austin, Texas.” I had never been in Austin so had no idea what the webcam showed. The live picture covered a downtown block with old two-floor buildings

flanking the street. One had a red vertical sign “RITZ” on the corner. Traffic lights worked. Cars, parked on the right side. A static picture, if not for the flashing red, yellow, and green lights.

While I watched, the site switched by itself to a different webcam. This time, the “WRIGLEY FIELD: Home of the Chicago Cubs” main entrance came to view. No one around.

I waited a bit more and the next scene jumped to downtown New Orleans, a little street crossing with its characteristic French district flavor. Deserted.

The next one pointed at the bronze bull on Wall Street. The statue almost filled the screen. Back to New York. My heart sank. A police car with lights still on and flashing red and blue had crashed against it. There as well, not one person visible in the scene. No activity, just an empty eerie view.

I tried with Moscow. I could not get much information from there either. The scene was beautiful, a panoramic of the Novodevichy Convent and Cemetery, as reported by the site. It came from a webcam installed too high above and offered little to no street view. Some white smoke slowly rose up from in between distant buildings. No visible movements, even around the few stopped cars; too far away to tell if they had crashed or if they were simply parked.

The connection from the site was slow and, at times, I got a spinning wheel or no reply from webcam links. The Amsterdam cam presented only a white empty page. Other links reported a nasty error: “Run script void(0);” on the browser status bar.

I wanted to get some certain and definite answers from those views, but I got only hints, nothing conclusive. I expected a mass of corpses on the streets. More catastrophic scenes. Those hints were bad nonetheless, even more troublesome, probably.

I saw nothing like busy and active street views. Where were all the people? If deaths had been so sudden, shouldn't the streets be full of dead bodies? I would have tried later on other sites and webcams, in the meantime, Mary called from the kitchen downstairs.

Annah had almost finished eating her sandwich and had a glass of milk in front of her, too. Mary had waited for me. “We have enough food to be fine for a week.”

“Water?” I asked.

“For as long as it runs from the tap...”

We could not count on municipal utilities to run indefinitely. We should get provisions of non-perishable food, rations, water, medicines.

I had already started to think in survival mode. In spite of Mary’s abhorrence for everything resembling a gun or any other form of offensive weapon, I thought I would soon become a gun store shopper, too.

I told Mary all that but didn’t say the idea was to find a gun shop in town and turn into an apocalyptic version of Rambo. I had no idea whether we would be facing real danger soon. I did not want to find myself in any dire situation and having to think, *If only I had that*. Whatever *that* was going to be.

If around us the world had stopped being served by humans, I would serve myself instead. Everything waited to be taken. The world did not suffer from a global nuclear blast. No “Day After” scenario, thank God. We ate in silence.

“I’m going to the mall,” I said abruptly.

“No, you’re not!” Mary then continued with a more conciliatory tone. “We don’t need anything right now.”

I stared at her and raised my eyebrows. My head bent to the right as I did unconsciously whenever I believed someone had no idea what I was talking about and why.

Mary looked at me and lowered her gaze for a brief moment. She sighed. “Okay then. We’ll come with you.”

“No, that is out of the question. I won’t be long.”

I pulled out my iPhone and dialed her number.

“What are you doing?”

“Just seeing if it works.”

Mary’s phone rang.

“Don’t answer it now. I’ll call you again from the mall. If it’s safe, I’ll wait for you and Annah at the entrance. We might need both cars.”

“Why the sudden urge? What do you want to do?”

“Because we need stuff and because it’s much safer today. Trust me.”

I took the pistol with me. Mary noticed, but said nothing. Annah did not react at all, and that worried me. She had been apathetic the last few hours. She was lost in some inner world of her own. She stared blankly at us.

I signaled Mary to follow me and, outside, I told her to keep an eye on Annah. “Stay with her.” I muted her words with a kiss and left. I closed the

gate behind me and hit the road again.

*
**

The mall was only a ten-minute drive from our house. The road took me through the closest village, and then traversed more crop fields before reaching the large shopping center, the hardware store and a gas station, all on one site. "The Valley Shopping Center: Over 80 businesses at your service!" the billboards told customers in both English and French.

If computers still worked and managed general operations, I wouldn't have the need to break in as the automatic doors would work and lights would still be on. Everything ready and waiting for customers that would never come.

I drove slowly, the gun tucked between my legs. I felt safe in the car, but I did not want to take any risk.

Houses along the road looked empty. Joe and Beth were not the only ones who had found death in bed during a February windstorm. A number of cars were parked in driveways. Others must have been among the early commuters on the expressway. People lost to an impossible fate.

I traversed the village, eager to catch any possible sign of life, smoke from chimneys, a boy on a bike crossing the road, customers at the local grocery market greeted, anyone and anything.

My eyes searched for scenes common for the time and place: people, shoppers, and moms pushing baby strollers. Nothing of the sort. As if everyone had vanished.

What if those believing in "The Rapture" were right: "We who are alive and remain" will be caught up in heaven to meet "the Lord." After all, a good vision, to be chosen to meet our Lord. Hopefully alive in the physical sense of the term. But no, every house, every apartment was now a tomb. I wasn't driving through a village; I was driving through a cemetery.

I got to the mall without seeing anyone apart from cars off the road with their drivers dead inside. One, in the middle of the field, had left behind grooves like scars from his unwelcomed passage. Another one had overturned after having smashed the bus stop. At the mall, very few vehicles occupied the parking lot. I drove through, stopped the car right in front of the entrance, and stepped out.

Crows, calling each other!

I hadn't seen any birds so far! Up in the sky, a couple flew in circles, and a few more in the distance. Indeed, I didn't see *any* dead animals. Peluche had been fine, and birds must have flown away the night before and might now be slowly returning.

I looked around. I was alone. I reached to switch off the car engine and stood there in silence for a little while. No noises, no sounds but the crows. No voices. Nothing. I closed the door. With the gun in my hand, I headed toward the automatic doors. They opened.

I stopped. The music from the loudspeakers surprised me. Music had always been part of mall operations and, with the shopping crowd, it had become an almost unnoticed presence. Now the music struck me with violence: loud, arrogant, profane.

I moved forward a few steps. The shops' shutters were all down for as far as I could see. No employees had opened them that day.

I walked cautiously along the hallway. My steps resonated and were the only noise I could hear apart from the musical entertainment. I stopped, checked the bars on the phone and called Mary.

"Dan! Are you okay?" Mary's voice was anxious.

"I'm fine. I'm fine. Everything's fine. Don't worry. I'll check around here a bit more and I'll call you again."

"Dan, please... be careful. I love you."

"I love you, too."

I took a deep breath. Amazing how a gun can give you a sense of security and control. Was weird to handle one there.

I reached the central plaza where the coffee bar was ready for customers with its many little tables, Parisian brasserie style. Next to those, across a barrier, "Paul's" vending place resembled an old, last-century truck. The pastry and French bakery offered fine food, croissants, beignets, tarts, and their signature double-sized *macarons*. Annah loved those. I glanced. *They'd be good for a few more days*, I thought.

From there, taking the hallway to the left, the Migros supermarket welcomed its patrons with its tons of fresh produce and exotic foods. I was interested more in canned and packaged goods and household merchandise. An advertisement showed me how to profit from this week's sales; products marked with a red dot enjoyed a fabulous 50% discount on the original price

at the cashier. How convenient. The place was flooded with light, and painfully deserted.

A vision of the multitude of shoppers, overloaded carts, children running, the always-smiling cashiers rushed in front of my eyes. All gone now, vanished. Raptured. I grinned at myself. I walked back to the central plaza. On the far left, stairs led to the office levels, maintenance and services. I headed that way first.

I climbed with caution, still expecting...what? After all I had experienced that day, I would never consider anything impossible anymore. From the top, I looked down for a broader view of the mall and its hallways. How could this be possible?

I didn't know the location of the security guard's quarters, but I soon found them at the end of a corridor. I put my back against the wall, pistol ready, and knocked hard on the door. We could not truly be the only ones alive, could we? Maybe a panicked guard trembled inside, with a loaded gun in his hand, about to shoot. My heart was beating fast and I learned then what cold sweat truly meant. Nothing, no reaction.

"I am opening the door!" I called out. Extending my arm, I turned the knob. The door opened, squeaking on its hinges.

I peeked through and didn't notice anything abnormal at first, no signs of commotion, and no one inside. I went in. Then I saw him, or at least his feet. A guard was on the floor; must have been about to start his shift. He was lying in a fetal position, behind a desk.

I get closer. Young, in his mid-twenties. His back curved, the head bowed, his legs bent and drawn up to the torso. The face, as Joe's, with the same gasping expression, and blood from his nose. Eyes wide open, blood seeping from them, too. Same kind of violent death.

At the back of the room, a door stood ajar. I advanced slowly, glanced briefly at the dead guard, and then tried to peek through into what seemed to be a sort of office or changing area. I caught glimpses of lockers along the wall.

I moved to the other side and pushed the door open with my foot. Another guard; his legs crooked over a bench in the middle of the floor. He must have fallen backward when he died. Another desk and a chair were the only other pieces of furniture in the room. I had seen enough.

I checked briefly around for the presence of more guns, but there were none. These guards were only armed with bludgeons. I didn't care to take them from their bodies. Not what I needed anyway. I left and went to the central plaza on the ground level. Still looking around me, I called Mary.

"Mary. There's no one here." I didn't mention the dead guards. Yet, suddenly, I was uncomfortable with the idea of having Mary and Annah driving alone to join me at the mall, even if only ten minutes away. A pinch of paranoia could do no harm.

"Stay home. No need to come over here now. I'll load the car, and I'll be back soon."

"Okay." She sounded relieved. "Dan... Be careful."

"You know I will."

I headed for the supermarket area and took a cart. I knew more or less where to go as sometimes I helped Mary with our grocery shopping. I walked each aisle and collected canned food, anything with a long shelf-life, pre-cooked food, but also fruits and vegetable. For a few days, I thought, then they'll rot soon.

I left the cart at the exit and went back with another. I loaded it with gallon water containers, and then took one more. I went for flashlights and batteries, dozens of matchboxes, candles, and canned heat by the carton. Handfuls of gauze and bandages of assorted shapes and sizes as well as scissors, safety pins and tweezers. I grabbed anything that seemed prudent to have at hand.

Over the counter, I found antibiotic ointments for treating scrapes, scratches and cuts; bottles of vitamins; acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and aspirin for pain relief. Leaving the area, I noticed hand sanitizers and disinfectant wipes; added those too. In the aisle with detergents, I collected soap bars, sanitizer bleach and was able to find nose and mouth protection masks.

I judged I had done a good job on that ride. One day, I would also need to visit the outdoor store for travel and first-aid kits. I knew they had water filtration and portable purification systems among other things. Had to sit with Mary and compile a comprehensive list for the next visits.

I loaded the car to the roof, and I had flattened down the back seats, even. I was happy to be able to leave the mall without incident.

Now was the time to test my theory on automatic services. I drove to the gas station, and pulled in to the pump right next to the credit card payment

column. The system was up and running; its computer voice welcomed me and asked me to select the grade, put in the payment card, and enter the code. I was euphoric. For my next visit, I had to come back with jerrycans.

As I got behind the wheel, I heard a dog barking furiously, and getting closer. I closed the door as I saw a rather large animal ran toward the car. The beast threw its paws against the window and barked loudly, foaming at the mouth. I started the engine and slammed the pedal. The Volvo jumped forward. The dog chased me, roaring with rage. I left it behind in the distance.

What the hell?! The event shocked me. Dogs can become dangerous in a short time. Nothing was safe anymore. I shivered, I seemed to be surrounded by hostility.

While driving, I could not fail to notice the empty blue sky. Condensation jet trails developed during the day, and spread in the morning hours with the start of jet traffic. The resulting ice-crystal plume lasted for several hours as testimony of the passage of an airliner across the sky. That morning, nothing!

At times, contrails criss-crossed the sky as air traffic peaked, but there were only a few clouds that day, no jet trails. It all meant but one thing: what had happened here must have happened everywhere on the planet.

The enormity of the tragedy overwhelmed me. I stopped the car. The world population was estimated to be about seven billion people. I had no idea how many survivors were alive today, thanks to whatever glitch had saved us. For all I knew, there could be only a few million left. Possible? I doubted then we would have any chance to meet survivors, ever. I caught my breath at the thought. Better not to share these considerations with Mary and Annah. After all, I could be dead wrong. Note to self: Bad choice of words. Don't use with the girls.

The dog was nowhere to be seen now; I scanned around for more dogs or any other animals. Everywhere in sight was deserted. I drove through the village again. Nothing had changed since my passage shortly before. The same desolation, the same sensation of an immense void, and no one alive.

When I got to our front gate, I sounded the horn to warn of my arrival and immediately regretted it. In spite of all evidence, I still expected to see people show up, maybe wounded, sick, or worse. I guess my imagination had started to recollect past images from horror and catastrophic genre movies, massive contagions, and zombies alike. With those in mind, I made sure all around the car was clear before getting out, the gun still tucked in my

waistband. I heard Mary and Annah running on our graveled driveway and calling for me.

What kind of world had we inherited and what kind of life could I promise them now? What kind of dangers lurked? I couldn't show my distress in front of wife and daughter though. Annah always looked up to me.

I put on my best smile and concentrated on the good things. Provisions? Not a problem! Food and any medicine or anything else? Not a problem either, provided we were not against breaking the windows of the various shops at the mall in the future. We were safe and sound. I hoped to have the internal resources to keep going for them.

"No worries, I'm back. We have access to plenty of stuff at the mall." I forced myself to smile.

The gate opened enough for Mary to rush out and hug me while Annah fully opened the panels to let the Volvo in.

"I was so worried. I was afraid to call myself...I imagined things. What happened?"

"It's all fine, check the trunk. But let's get in now, let's not stay right here." I used a little lie to give reasons to my request and urgency. "There was an unfriendly dog not far from here, and I think I spotted a few others. Mary, drive the car all the way to the house to unload. I'll close the gate."

I guess I was under the influence of too many Hollywood doomsday renderings. I told Annah to go to her mother while I closed and locked the gate. In the meanwhile, Mary had parked the car and opened the trunk. "Oh my!"

"Dad! How much did you pay for all that?"

I smiled at Annah. "I guess for a while we're going to borrow things rather than buying them."

She looked at me, eyes wide open. "Really? You mean you just grabbed stuff and left?"

I smiled. "Yeah, more or less."

Annah suddenly changed expression and frowned. "Because nobody was there..."

Hers was an observation, not a question. I believe she had reached her watershed moment where everything changes; events collated in her mind. Interesting that—with Annah—the trigger for all the pieces to fall into place

had been shopping without paying. Nothing will be the same as before. *My kid is gone*, I thought.

“I need you to be brave, Annah. We need each other more than ever now.”

Annah nodded.

Mary examined the load I had brought home. With certain items, she agreed; for others, she wondered why we needed them at all.

I admitted that some might have been an excessive precaution, but knowing we had that stuff readily available at home made me feel safer. Besides, the basement had plenty of space. Actually, I wanted help from both of them to make a list of what could be useful or needed for weeks to come.

While we got the provisions sorted out, I told them—adding more details—about the encounter with the dog at the gas station, and again touched the subject of firearms. It was crucial for them not to leave home without some means of self-defense, and never wander alone. I believed it best to carry guns, even on our own property until I made sure the fence could not be easily trespassed by wild animals.

Mary looked at me as if I were a complete stranger. “Annah is only twelve! You are not giving a gun to our daughter!”

“Not long ago in the States, boys and girls knew well how to use rifles and pistols, ride horses, and tend to cattle on ranches. They kept mountain lions, wild dogs, and coyotes at bay. Mary, I don’t know what’s out there.”

She paused, not ready for my reaction, and turned away from me. She glanced at Annah, and stepped into the garden. Mary looked at her plants, her arms crossed tightly at her chest. She approached our old stones wall, and caressed the sturdy leaves of the olive tree. Then, she turned around to gaze at our house, Annah, and me.

She walked over and got right in front of me. Her eyes were swollen with tears. She raised one hand and traced my profile with her fingertips, looking straight at me.

“I don’t know, Dan. What’s happening to us?” She walked back to the car trunk.

Mary did not reject the idea as strongly as I expected. She proved to be more adaptable and flexible than I hoped for. I didn’t know then how much it had cost her. In the space of one day, Mary had changed, as Annah had, and as I had. But that were good things; we needed to be able to change and adapt to any possible situation.

Annah had wrote down all we had gathered, and completed the list she and Mary had already started. I glanced at the result. "We have things for over a month, now," I smiled at her. "Probably even more."

Once inside, Mary told me she and Annah kept trying to call people and sent emails around. Still no answers. Annah cried a lot because of all her friends who must have died, and she asked why we hadn't died, too. Mary managed to calm her but she was worried for Annah as well. The day had been hard for us, and we were adults; I couldn't imagine what went on in Annah's mind, and how tough it had to be for her.

Annah's only island of normality, where she could rest and feel safe, would be Mary and me. For as long as we acted normally, stayed calm and resolute, not showing weaknesses and fear, I was sure Annah would handle anything. We only needed to take care that we, the adults, did not fall apart. For the day, we'd had our share already.

What Mary had told me about emails and phone calls reminded me of our virtual message in the bottle. She hadn't checked Facebook, yet. I went upstairs, anxious to see whether the campaigns had been activated. They were still pending. Man, I hoped Facebook would work.

Mary joined me. "Annah's in her room, now. She's tired, exhausted even. This has been too much for her."

"You're right. How are you feeling?"

Mary looked through the window. "So calm out there, and peaceful. Did you notice? The black smoke... it's almost gone."

"I need to check on that, too, one of these days." I paused. "And go back to town as well."

She turned and looked at me with darting eyes. "Why? What for? People will come. Relief will come. We only have to stay here and wait. Right?" Her voice had veered to a high pitch, almost begging me to reply 'Yes, of course', but I couldn't.

I grabbed her shoulders. "I don't know." I sighed. "I don't think any relief will reach us any time soon...if ever. We need to be prepared for anything."

She stepped back away from me. Her arms folded tightly around her. She didn't say anything, and stared at the floor.

"Mary, listen to me. I will never give up. Remind yourself of this, we can survive and we will survive. I'll do all I can to ensure that, no matter how frightening the situation. Should death ever come, I will not blink."

She burst into tears. I held her tight in my arms. She trembled and sobbed, unable to stop. “Dan, what are we going to do? What are we going to do?”

I sighed. “*God,*” I thought, “*if You are there...what’s happening? And how did You ever plan for this?*”

I took Mary to our bedroom and cuddled her. I kissed her and dried her tears with my lips. And kissed her even more. Our kisses became passionate. I started to unbutton her shirt. Mary responded gently to my touch and helped me undress her. We made love fiercely and passionately, impatiently, as it happened with our very first time.

Dusk came upon us, and we left our bubble. We had shut out the world, briefly but intensely. Mary caressed me. “I love you, Mister.”

I pressed her against me “We have each other, Mary. It’s all I need. I need you, and Annah. Then I can face anything.”

We kissed again.

In the evening, Mary and Annah prepared a light dinner. I recovered a forgotten set of binoculars, lost in the glove compartment of the car. What I saw confirmed what the silence kept telling us all along... *there is no one alive, you are alone.* Households were plunged in darkness; garden lights were off, window shades closed or open into dark interiors. The neighborhood, apart from the few streetlights, was somber. The silence was unbelievable.

For the first time ever, I closed the shutters on windows and secured them closed. I didn’t want to have only a thin layer of glass between us and whatever was out there. Mary watched me without saying a word. Annah gestured to Mary, then pointed at me; out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Mary signaling her not to pay attention to what I was doing.

Dinner had been brief and, for how crazy it sounds, I decided—more for Annah than for us—to spend an evening no different from any other before. So I announced I felt like watching a movie, that I had too much on my mind, and needed to stop thinking about our next steps. Mary and Annah did not have their heart into the plan, but I insisted, and we selected a James Bond movie with Pierce Brosnan.

I activated the burglar alarm. We could not rely anymore on a non-existent police force. For as long as we had electricity, the siren would warn us of any intrusion. We sat close to each other on the sofa, without saying a word. I kept the volume of the TV too loud, and the movie was full of gunfights and blasts with improbable action scenes. In the end, we managed to relax. At least I did.

Bond prevented me from thinking too much about our own incredible scenario. I tried to keep an ear to any sound coming from outside but, after a while, I let go. I enjoyed those moments of normality.

The movie ended and, when the credits started, we heard a fearful howling. Some neighbors had dogs; we had seen them walking with their animals sometimes during the weekends. We had exchanged brief conversations in the past, and the dogs had been friendly to us. Well, at least with their masters by their side.

We liked pets and had cats before. But dogs, we felt, were a lot of work. I never pictured myself in the dog-walking routine every day. No matter the weather or how tired I happened to be, dogs would never be understanding and say, “No worries, master, tonight we can do without.”

“Poor dog,” Annah said.

Mary nodded. “He must have started while we were watching the movie.” With a glance, she reproached me for keeping the volume too high.

“It would be good if we had a dog now...” I thought aloud.

Annah got excited immediately. “Really!? Dad! Are we going to have one? Please!”

Indeed, having one or two dogs, our dogs, on the property would not be bad at all. I had a problem though. Getting puppies made little sense and grown up animals...how to trust they would become ‘part of the family’ and consider us their masters? Dogs thrive on routines. Routine was missing now. Maybe, if we created a new one...that was something to seriously think about.

We got ready to spend our first night in the new world order. Annah didn’t want to be alone in her room, especially because hers was not on the same floor as ours. She begged to sleep with us, in our bed.

She was five or six years old the last time, and never with the two of us together. Always in exceptional cases, if one of us were absent.

The floor landing separated our room from the home office and we kept a sofa bed there. Mary interceded. “Annah could start using that from now on.” I didn’t have the courage to resist and say no.

I had one more reason to agree I didn’t share with Mary. I too wanted to have Annah with us that night. In my heart, I hoped we weren’t going to experience another windstorm and we actually would awake the next morning.

I hoped nothing or no one would ‘discover’ they had ‘forgotten’ us alive. If it had to happen, so be it. Life must be lived at the right time. Death is not

scary when one dies after having lived fully. One must choose to live though and face all adversities.

With a sunken heart, I kissed Mary and Annah good night. They were both soon asleep, while I couldn't find rest. The dog still howled, and his was a gloomy sound.

My brain couldn't stop sending and processing images of dead people, deaths, the animals, something killing penguins, and birds, and gorillas. And now us. Why was I still alive? And Mary, and Annah? What if something worse was going to happen? How would I protect them? We were resting on a thin crust, below us the unknown. And I was scared.

I soon found myself fighting to stay awake. It was peaceful outside. After what seemed a very long time, I collapsed and fell asleep.

Routines

Paranoids Survive

I jumped at every noise, even the familiar ones like the cracking of wood-frames on the roof, or a gentle breeze rustling tree branches. Almost each time, a dog howled.

The dog. Was there more than one? In the complete eerie silence, I believed I detected two different barks, lamenting their desperation to the night. I would have looked for those dogs in the morning.

At times, Mary and I whispered a few words to each other. She'd had an agitated night herself, and we both checked on Annah often. She whined at times, or had some jerky leg movements that kept us awake. Apart from that, Annah had a full night of sleep, thank God. The resilience of children...

We all needed to become resilient now. Dawn came; I heard birds sing as they used to do every morning since the temperature had risen again. I was tired, but happy we were still alive.

Life! The world wasn't dead. Nature assimilated the apparent extermination of the human race with a shrug of her shoulders. In a few decades, if humans disappeared as the dominant species on Earth, Mother Nature, no longer pushed back by countless human opponents, would absorb many of our artifacts. Vegetation would take its place and plant new roots. It would be weird to watch this transformation happen.

I got up slowly, trying not to wake Annah... or Mary, who appeared to have at last found some peace in her sleep. I went to our home office and, with trepidation, opened the Facebook ads management page.

"Yes!" I pumped my fists. The ad campaign status had finally turned active! Our message in a bottle had already reached some fourteen thousand home pages. Fourteen thousand... Didn't seem such a good start when I needed to reach hundred of millions. This would take years!

Maybe ads began slowly; maybe their rate would pick up soon. Dear God! The Internet will not last that long.

I prayed for those across the world who were in our same situation; those whose lives had turned into the equivalent of a tiny island of pseudo-normality in an infinite ocean of human vacuum and deaths. I prayed they had access to their Facebook pages, too.

I took the binoculars, and scanned outside through the two windows. Empty roads in the distance and, further away, a couple of villages perched on low hilltops. Nothing moved, and the same truck that ended its run on a field. Like yesterday. Too distant to distinguish any details, but I was sure a body rested in that truck's cab.

I could see nearby houses. No vital signs from roofs, no white smoke from chimneys, no one preparing breakfast. And only the sounds of nature.

It must have been that way thousands of years ago, when human colonization of the planet was still confined to small groups of huts. A bunch of frail humans helping each other, fending off daily dangers and surviving. Year after year.

I sighed; we had no human companions. Maybe we were more isolated than anyone had been in history. Maybe. I doubted the first humans ever experienced this kind of solitude. My mind faltered and my heart sank. Alone!

I couldn't allow such thoughts to weaken my resolve and determination. Resilience! I had to be resilient and think positively... For Mary, for Annah.

What would I've done if they were dead too. Probably I would've committed suicide. Resilience! Stop thinking about this stuff!

Mary suddenly appeared in the office. "What are you doing?"

I jolted. "Oh, you're awake..."

"Well, I guess, since here I am. Sorry if I startled you."

I didn't reply. I put the binoculars down, and turned to hug my wife.

"Good morning, love. I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to tell you that, today."

She nodded and looked gravely at me. "We cannot leave Joe and Beth on their bed." Mary raised her chin a notch. She put a hand to my chest, over my heart. "We just can't."

She was right. I couldn't bury the entire village, or those other friends who lived in town, but I would take care of Joe and Beth.

"Okay, first thing this morning. But I'm hungry now, aren't you?"

Resilience. Act normally, don't divert too much from usual routines; normality will help us survive and find new paths to walk and live without

going insane.

I deactivated the alarm. Annah was still sleeping. We left a note on the pillow saying we were in the kitchen, and then went downstairs to fix breakfast.

I opened the shutters, one by one, and the morning light flooded all the rooms. Another sunny day, with fresh air, like yesterday, before we learned of all the deaths.

Spring peeked out, winning over the last weak remnants of winter. The smell of freshly brewed coffee invited me to start the day.

Breakfast with my wife. Such a normal thing, just like any other day, and yet it felt so weird. Apparently, skin deep, the world had not changed. The billowing black smoke, toward the airport, had disappeared during the night. No visible signs of disruption around. At least from our place, everything was peaceful and quiet. Birds sang in the warming sun of that early spring weather. No ominous signs, apart from the blank TV screens and the white noise from most radio channels; nothing screaming everything had gone terribly wrong. And the silence, of course. Yet from our kitchen, the world was beautiful, and yesterday only a very bad dream.

I had a Mephistophelian experience. The demon of the Faust legend, Mephistopheles, has its name derived from the Hebrew mephitz, meaning *destroyer*, and tophel, meaning *liar*. Indeed, I had witnessed destruction, and from what we had seen on the Internet, it was happening all over the world. Still, looking through the windows, the scene screamed at me ‘it’s a lie; everything is as it has always been.’

I shivered, knowing that was the true lie.

Mephistopheles did not search for Faust, did not search for men to corrupt. His ultimate task was to collect the souls of those who were already damned. Who condemned us humans, and who collected all those souls?

“I have to go back to the mall. There are lots of things we still need.”

“What things? You said we were fine for a month.”

“Yes, if everything stays as it is now. But I can't guarantee things will keep working. Electricity, for example. What if a branch fell and cut a power cable? We would be in the dark, and I can't repair that.”

“We come with you.”

“Then...you need to learn how to use a gun. And Annah, too.”

Mary backed off, putting distance between us. “No.”

So I told her the full details of the dog attack that I averted only by luck. “Soon there would be more than one, and other animals might become aggressive, too.”

We lived in a rural area and woods extended not far from our place where wild beasts had been spotted a few times before. Foxes, badgers, and wolves were known to thrive in the region. Not in large numbers, but they would soon realize the major contender for their habitat was no more, and nothing would block their path. They would start to venture further down to the plain and extend their hunting range.

I couldn't protect my wife and daughter from a pack of wolves or wild dogs by myself. They needed to be able to defend themselves; they needed to become self-sufficient.

“Besides, we might not be alone after all. Whoever could be out there, near or far, how could we be sure they'd be jolly good fellows coming to help us?”

Mary shook her head. I had instilled fresh fears in Mary's mind and I hated myself for that. I didn't want to frighten her, but we needed to start shedding a bit of our own civilized crust. Find some primeval instincts and skills for survival, and the sooner the better. “Think about it.” I left to get ready for Joe and Beth's burial.

Joe had a small vegetable garden, so I went straight to his tool shed. I found his shovel and started digging the grave, and then another. Following Mary's advice, I chose an area of the garden under a cherry tree, and decided to place Beth next to one of her flowerbeds. The ground became harder to excavate as I dug about a foot deep, and the task took me all morning to finish.

Annah made two crosses, using small wood planks, and inscribed their names. We weren't sure of birth dates so she put the current day, along with their approximate ages.

Before going into our neighbor's house, Mary and I donned the protective masks I'd found at the mall the previous day. I had no experience with dead bodies and didn't know when the decaying process would cause them to smell heavily. It was emotionally difficult enough without having to factor in physical repulsion.

Annah waited downstairs, while Mary and I went to Joe and Beth's bedroom. Mary cried softly when we reached their room and saw them on the

bed. “Oh Beth, Beth...”

She did not stop helping me, though. Dealing with the bodies proved hard on our fragile emotions, especially when we had to force their limbs into a better position to carry them.

Beth, a petite woman, wasn't heavy at all and we took her out first, into the trench nearest to the flowerbed, as Mary suggested. Annah followed us to the garden without saying a word. Joe was heavier, of course. Mary had to stop three times to rest. Finally, we completed the gruesome task and laid our friends to eternal rest beside each other.

I did not feel religious, but Mary insisted we needed to say something. “Beth goes to church every Sunday.”

Therefore, I spoke. “Beth, Joe. I don't know what fate has snatched you so brutally from life. I hope you can rest in peace. The Lord, if you meet with Him, will perhaps explain His plan and why all this has happened.” I sighed. “Please, pray for us. Amen.”

“Amen,” repeated Annah and Mary.

I started to fill the graves. Shovel after shovel. When I finished, Annah helped me put the crosses in place, and she arranged some flowers she had picked. We stood in silence for a moment. It felt so absurd and so monstrously abnormal. Yet, abnormality was the new normality, and we had to get used to that.

After a shower and a light lunch, I checked the Facebook campaign again. Thirty-two thousand impressions. No clicks. No wonder. What did I expect?

The dogs howled again. I planned to go find them that afternoon. Of course, Annah wanted to come along, but Mary helped me convince her that really wasn't a good idea.

“We'll stay in touch with the cell phones.” To our surprise, the connections still worked fine.

Although the dogs could not be too far away, I took the car and put Joe's pistol on the passenger seat. If the howling dogs were the ones I'd met in the neighborhood, they should recognize me. Still, I didn't count on much of a welcoming party. I had brought some food with me and made a mental note to get dog treats at the mall in case all went well and looked promising. If not...

I wanted to win their trust with the food, and then visit them every day. They only had one chance and I hoped they took it. If I decided it was worth

the effort, fine; otherwise, I was resolved to kill them both. First, to keep them from suffering or starving to death; second, for our own protection in case they turned out to be aggressive. In that case, it would be out of the question to set them free.

Following their barking, I soon found the house. There were indeed two dogs in the fenced yard, and I remembered seeing them before. They looked like German Shepherds but they both had a curly white coat. I had once asked their owner about their breed, but I couldn't remember what he said. I stopped the car on the left side of the road, in front of their house.

This street, too, was desolate with no signs of people. No corpses either as if everyone had been caught in their sleep. In a sense, I felt lucky. If what struck us had happened hours later, bodies would be everywhere, many more than the few early commuters dead on the streets and in their cars. Thinking of this last point, why hadn't I seen corpses from the webcams? Another question with no answer.

I stepped out of the car, the gun in my hand. Both dogs barked at me from the other side of the fence. They sensed death. I know little about animal behavior and psychology but I understood they were not raging dogs. They were nervous and scared.

I tucked Joe's pistol into my back waistband, and got the food. I showed my hands, slowly opening the wrapping. They still barked but had smelled the meat and their eyes went from me to my hands. I started to talk, almost whispering, in what I hoped was a reassuring manner. I stepped forward a bit more.

They got excited, jumping, running toward the house and back. I reached the fence and put down two large handfuls of food on the low brick base that supported the fence.

Mary had prepared a delicacy of minced meat and rice. I thought in was a waste but she said the first impression had to be stellar, "Works with humans, will work with dogs, too." I didn't complain much; with an entire mall at our service, I had no reason to worry yet about food supplies.

I knew the dogs had to be hungry in addition to being scared. I kept talking and chanced getting close enough to allow them to sniff at me; they showed no aggressive behavior.

Then they started eating. *Weird*, I thought, as if they decided it was okay to take food from me only after they had sniffed and assessed me. *These are not*

stupid dogs. Good. They took their chance and scored a point. I gave them the rest of the meat and rice and stepped away.

“Okay, guys. I'll be back tomorrow. Stay dry.”

*

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By the end of the week, Mary and Annah had started practicing shooting with the pistol at plastic bottles filled with dirt. I put them on the stonewall we shared with the local cemetery so, if they missed, no one would complain. The wall was high enough to hide tombs and crosses from our sight, and the little church with the tall cypress tree had become a familiar presence. The church received a visit from the priest once a month, on the first Sunday, and the streets filled with vehicles. We liked the sound of the bells calling for mass. Bells, I missed them.

Every Halloween, Annah liked us to organize a sleepover with her friends and the wall was an integral part of the celebration. The kids would sit on it, their backs to the tombs, and squirm at every little sound. I loved to read scary stories to those little girls, excited almost to paroxysm at the idea of having tombs only a few yards away from them. Even better if it was a bit windy; waving and swaying trees at night can be quite frightful, especially with me making gruff voices when reading the most scary passages of the story.

All those moments rushed through my memory, stinging my eyes like a sudden strong gust of wind, startling, and making you wonder where it came from. They exploded like mortar shells in my mind when the first bullet hit the stonewall and chipped a sharp edge away. The first straight hit came days after that, and Annah scored it, bursting into cheers. She pounded fists with me in laughter. It had taken only a few hundred bullets.

The dogs now waited for my visits, cheerful when I showed up. I started to do regular trips to the mall and got replenishments of dog food and treats. I also visited the hardware shop a few times, and the ‘Earth Adventures’ store.

In a week's time, I collected jerrycans of gasoline and filled Joe's tool shed with them—I did not want the equivalent of a bomb at home. Each jerrycan contained twenty liters of fuel and I collected forty of those. I equipped us with two portable electric generators with standard gasoline engines. They both rated for five thousand watts and gave me the peace of mind I wanted in

case our power went out. The nicest part was that I did not need to put a price tag on them.

At Earth Adventures, I had to break in and silence the screaming alarm bell. There, I found hunting knives, two wind-up radios and flashlights, portable water purifiers and solar cell chargers. All of this could be of help, too. The best find had been the wind-up walkie-talkies with a nominal range of two miles. Better not to be relying on mobile phones to work indefinitely. Also, our property fence was now secured with barbed wire to keep animals away, just one more precaution. And I got real binoculars too. Paranoids survive.

We listened to the radio daily, scanning channels, and we kept sending emails and browsing the Internet. Time seemed to have stopped digitally as no site received any updates. I even tried to join online forums to post messages but most of them required an authorization to do that. I received plenty of automatic emails and, within hours, I would receive the approval, or not, by the moderator. Of course, no moderator ever sent me anything. The Facebook campaign had reached almost a million people. Great results, but no clicks.

I guessed it was time for me to head to Geneva and have a look around town. I knew of a gun shop, and having only one pistol in the family was not enough.

Ghost Town

...To The Teeth

From the border with Switzerland, the road turned into a long straight line until it reached the Cornavin rail station in downtown Geneva. The new tramway lines had been inaugurated only the previous summer, and streetcars now connected passengers from the CERN laboratory to the city; traffic had improved considerably. The Swiss road authority had also built a tunnel going under the satellite city of Meyrin. This alone cut the trip time to the center by not less than fifteen minutes, and everything had been completed on time and on budget. Didn't matter now.

I did not want to risk going through the tunnel that might have been blocked by car wreckage. Instead, I chose to drive in the middle section devoted to streetcars to cross Meyrin without troubles.

To reach the border I avoided the expressway and opted to drive through the village. It had been two weeks since that gruesome February morning and degradation had started to be visible. Nothing spectacular, just weeds surfacing wherever they could. Quickly, efficiently, and spreading undisturbed.

Vegetation was not trimmed, of course, and leaves and debris accumulated in various spots as well as loose pieces of paper and garbage. I suspected animals were responsible for that, probably escaped domestic ones which had searched through trash bins, contributing to the general feeling of a place that had been forsaken.

I kept radio contact with Mary but I almost lost the signal when I approached the border. A car had smashed right against the custom booth. The impact brought it down and part of the large canopy had collapsed, but it left a narrow passage free. I slowed down and went through. Right after, I realized I could have simply crossed the border in the other lane, unobstructed. What was I afraid of, a fine?

“Mary, I can't hear you anymore. I'll call you in a sec.”

I stopped the car in the middle of the road and in front of the main entrance to the CERN laboratory. I felt a sense of utter desolation. Sickening, but I was getting used to it. “Mary, I’ll stay in touch about every twenty minutes or so. I’ll keep you posted.” In any case, she should not be worried as I didn’t expect to find company in Geneva and I would be on my toes regardless.

A streetcar was at rest at the CERN stop, the first one of the line, or the last if you were coming from the city center. I drove by slowly. No corpses I could see. I accelerated and proceeded toward downtown and my ultimate destination.

I wanted to go to the gun store first thing. Joe’s pistol would have been enough for self-protection in normal situations, but we were not living in normal situations. Both Mary and Annah needed to have their own gun.

Everything was still confused in my mind. I admit I was being guided by catastrophic movies and the survivors’ behavior in Hollywood blockbusters. Yet, I was now the one living in my own blockbuster, and a very real one, too.

I reached Meyrin. A few cars had crashed against walls or other obstacles, and I saw a few rotten fellows at the tram stop. People used to drive slowly on those inner roads so there were no spectacular accidents. Whatever happened to us in this part of the world had happened early, in the wee hours of the morning. I couldn’t imagine how it must be in other cities if everyone had been caught on a busy weekday.

After Meyrin, the road overpassed the highway to Lausanne. I stopped on impulse and got out. I never heard birds or crows before during the day in town because the everlasting hum of traffic drowned out their calls. Now there was none of that; no artificial noises, no human buzz. I reached the railing and a disturbing scene greeted me. It was similar to what I had seen on the expressway but this time crows and other scavengers were feasting.

Some of the crashed cars had broken windows, opened and contorted doors, the bodies within exposed to the elements. Nature is very efficient at breaking down human remains. Luckily, I was not so close to see the maggots, beetles, ants and wasps that were surely participating in the feeding frenzy, in and out of every orifice, but I imagined them. Still, I shouldn’t get too upset as it was a natural process bound to happen in a similar way everywhere, at that very moment. Soon there would be nothing left for animals to feast on.

I went back to the car and kept driving until I reached downtown. Geneva was a city of ghosts, an even larger cemetery than the village near home. Hard to believe that almost two hundred thousand people were dead there.

The thought overwhelmed me. At the first large intersection in town, I stopped the car. Lowering the window, I blew the horn loud and often. The screaming sound bounced off the buildings. I stepped out but kept blowing the car's horn hoping for someone to show up, to see a face at a window, some sign of life.

Nothing. No one. I was alone, and I screamed. "*Is anyone there? Where is everyone?*" Geneva did not answer me.

Slowly, I got into the driver's seat again and resumed my journey. I continued down the street and turned left at the Notre Dame church onto rue de Lausanne. Traffic lights worked though I didn't bother to stop and the cameras flashed each time I ran a red light. After the first one, which triggered my reflexes to brake, I thought that actually could have been a way to leave a signature. From then on, I did it on purpose. Who knows, if anyone was alive and still checked those cameras, I was leaving proof that not everyone in Geneva was dead.

I looked for signs of recent human presence; anything suggesting someone was still alive in town. I didn't know really what to look for. In any case, whatever those signs could be, I had seen none. For the most part, the streets were empty, though crows and other birds were now more present. Encouraged by the lack of any human presence, they were slowly taking possession of the place. I saw a few dogs, alone or in a pack, but they kept away, never approaching the car. I did not try to get closer to them either.

The gun shop was not far now and I called Mary to reassure her everything was fine. Right after that, I arrived at "Armurerie du Lac".

The windows were intact and displayed a multitude of blades, a ninja costume, knives of various kinds, a range of Japanese samurai swords, curved katanas, and a nice group of Glock pistols. I was not a gun expert but I had found the right place.

I parked the car on the sidewalk in front of the shop, took the pistol and got out. I glanced around and listened for any possible noise. Nothing, all quiet. An empty town can be quite oppressive. Geneva weighed heavily on my senses and seemed almost quizzical. Buildings' windows looked straight at me,

as if they were hundreds of accusing eyes asking “Who are you, why are you here? Why are you alive?!”

I tried to push open the glass doors to no avail. What would happen if I were to break in? The alarm would protest and scream against the intrusion and I would find it difficult to *shop* with a siren blaring at me. I have never done anything like that, but I didn’t have many options.

At first, I thought about shooting at the doors but then decided it was better to ram them. I backed the car up to the entrance then pushed the pedal down and rammed it. The entrance shattered and the doors went off their hinges with a slam. I ended up half inside the shop. The alarm went off. Loudly.

My heart was pumping heavily. Definitely, I was not a burglar and had to breathe deeply for a while before I was able to get out of the car. My boots crackled on the broken glass and the alarm scream pierced my ears. I located the siren close to the ceiling, on the right corner. I took the pistol, aimed carefully, and fired a couple of shots.

Silence again, even though my ears buzzed. I examined the place. The shop seemed to have everything I needed, at least at first glance. Hunting rifles were aligned vertically behind the counter but were of no use to me now. Perhaps later, if I needed to hunt for game. Various locked glass cabinets contained handguns of various types, including pistols and revolvers. This is what I was looking for.

On a pedestal, the famous .44 Magnum. Behind it, a few pictures of Inspector Callahan from the “Dirty Harry” movies. An inscription stated it was “The Most Powerful Handgun in the World” and a paraphrased Harry quote – “Go ahead. Make YOUR day,” – was followed by the inflated price. A moot point now.

That Magnum tempted me, would have been like having a cannon in my hand. *But first things first*, I thought. I needed pistols light enough for Mary and Annah yet with considerable impact power nonetheless. Unfortunately, there was no clerk to ask for help or to guide me. I had to read all those terse descriptions if I wanted any information about the various models. My eyes fell on a “Glock 36 Cal. 45 AUTO. Compact and powerful.” Two terms that fit perfectly.

Reading further, the description said: “Slim and powerluf”. Yes, the note wrongly spelled it...“powerluf!” How many typos were left trailing behind?

How many wrongs will not have a chance anymore to be made right? How many cries of “I am sorry!” burned on lips in the last moments, forever untold, forever burning.

I kept reading. “Fits to the hand of any user. The new GLOCK SLIMLINE presents grip ergonomics of the next dimension.” I got four of those and, with excitement, I collected thousands of rounds. Boxes after boxes.

I also found two Berettas. Smaller than the Glocks, might they be better for Annah? Had no idea. We would have to see which one she handled best. She had done well with Joe’s pistol, and seemed to learn fast. She could decide for herself.

Next I found two Skorpion VZ61s. I had seen those in movies. I guessed they would be a nice addition to the family arsenal. The sign said it could use either a short 10-round magazine or a 20-round capacity magazine. I grabbed a large number of the latter.

After storing all those boxes in the car, I took the time to inspect the Skorpions. They felt so light, like lethal feathers. Why were we so skillful in creating perfection for killing other human beings? I found the fire mode selector, a lever installed on the left side above the pistol grip. It had three settings: “0”, “1” and “20”. Obviously standing for weapon safe, semi-automatic and full automatic mode. I set them both on “0”. I would prove my assumption later at home.

Home. It was close to an hour since the last time I had spoken to Mary. I took the phone and dialed her number. Mary answered immediately. “Dan! Where are you? Oh my God, I was worried. Are you okay? Why didn’t you call before? You said twenty minutes!”

I had acted like a shopper under the influence of a Harrods’s sale virus. A tidal wave of guilt rose, engulfing my thoughts like debris tossed around by conflicting flows. Finally, I uttered an apology. “I’m sorry. It will never happen again.”

I told her where I was and how I had found the town completely deserted. There was no evidence that others were alive but that couldn’t be conclusive. Others... I had only driven on the main roads, then straight to the gun shop. Surely there had to be folks like us, somewhere. Why not? But I didn’t sound convincing even to myself, and Mary did not comment.

“Anyway, I think I’ve found what I was looking for. How are you both doing?”

“We’re fine. Just come home.”

“I won’t be long.”

I sat on the bumper of the car for a moment, and memory brought Mary’s voice asking, “What’s going on, sweet pea?” Sweet indeed, like the fragrance of jasmine in our garden, carried by the evening breeze.

Days had passed by uneventfully since that terrible February night, and new routines had set themselves in place. Mary and Annah checked the Internet, and browsed the countryside with binoculars while I had been busy with visits to the mall and bringing food to the dogs, trying to win their trust. The girls also took notes on what they saw in various places in order to distinguish if anything changed in the scenery from one day to the next. Accountants for signs of life. Their checkbook remained miserably empty. Nothing was ever different. Ever.

The world was changing of course; spring had sprung and nature gave the impression of not caring a bit about the fate of humans. To tell the truth, it was gorgeous, better than any previous seasons we remembered.

Visibility was amazing. Even taking into account that Geneva was not famous for being a city invaded by smog, two weeks of no human presence had had a significant effect. The air was perfumed with the first blossoming flowers. It was painful to notice how better off nature was without us, and cheerful she seemed to have gotten rid of the planet’s major destructive force.

I crushed those thoughts as if they were ants making a run for the last piece of cake at a picnic, ruining the day. I resumed searching the shop for whatever could be of help to us.

I grabbed some vests with multiple pockets, about the right sizes for the three of us, and some kind of military boots and rucksacks. I handled some machetes and decided to get them too, just because. I also found proper ear protection for shooting practice. They would replace the earplugs we had been using so far in our gun exercises. Especially now, with the new guns, practice was bound to increase in frequency.

In a second adjacent room, I found a real arsenal, a large choice of military stuff and I couldn’t decide at first. Honestly, I had very little clue what to go for. I searched for what I knew from blockbusters memories; I found a

couple of Kalashnikov AK-103 with 30-round magazines. I loaded the trunk with enough to supply an army.

I thought about Mary's reaction; she would think I'd gone crazy. Maybe I had, maybe we were all, each of us, mad in our own distinct way. Unable to see it ourselves, nor did we have anyone to tell us.

Just before leaving the room, I saw out of the corner of my eye a name I knew from my childhood: Benelli.

It was a brand for motorcycles and hunting rifles, too. My uncle was a hunter and he had a couple Benelli's. He loved them. Beautiful guns but I knew they could be deadly.

On a hunting trip, he killed my mom's Golden Retriever with one single shot, point blank. He got furious the dog did not obey him on the spot; at least this is what he told everyone when he got back home with game but no dog.

He destroyed the poor animal with one shot, and my mom's heart too. She always remembered how pain crippled her when she knew, and how she felt the pain physically, squirming through her like earthworms on the ground after a heavy rain. I think this is why I never went hunting with my uncle when I reached the 'right age', as he used to say. When is the right age to start killing?

The Benelli in front of me, though, was not a hunting rifle; I had never seen this model before. Not surprising, it being a military rifle. The card was labeled "Benelli M4 Super 90—CHF 2419" and continued: "Benelli SpA of Urbino, Italy, designed and built the M4 Super 90 Combat shotgun for the United States Marine Corps in 1999."

1999 was the year Annah was born in Berkeley, during our life in California, and my mother was from Urbino. An avalanche of memories flooded my brain and my heart. It overwhelmed me, and my eyes filled with tears. I'd probably never see those places again. They were now secluded in a dreamland of memories, sheltered and private. Never to be seen again. As if someone had erected a tall barrier around me and I had no chance to break free. I could go everywhere and had no constraints of any sort, yet I felt trapped and chained to a boulder.

Forcing my thoughts under control, I focused again on that Benelli. If it was good for a Marine, I reasoned, it was good for us. Well, for me at least. I thought I would never leave home without that shotgun ever. It looked light, like a piece of art, a nice killing machine, if one can use nice with 'killing' and

'machine' in the same sentence. For good measure, I got two of them and plenty of rounds. I had to admit it was a lovely piece of work, too: Italian taste showing off, all matte black, and looking extremely powerful.

I do not know whether I could have made a better choice at the armory. It seemed perfect to me and I was sure no target, dead or alive, would ever complain that I could have shot them more efficiently with other kinds of bullets and guns. I felt our chances of survival were much higher now.

I looked at my wristwatch. I had been away from my women long enough. Next time, heading to other destinations, we would ride together. After they were prepared, that is.

I replaced Joe's pistol with the Glock 36; I had one loaded and ready to fire. In the street, I aimed at a stop sign. The recoil was lighter than Joe's MAS-50. At thirty yards, the impact was right where the aim was. Very accurate. It had six rounds and I made six holes in the target. The sound, too, was more contained. I mentally relegated Joe's pistol to a lesser category, to scare dogs and other animals.

The Glock's gentle recoil amazed me. Or maybe that was normal; I didn't have much experience with guns. Sure, some shooting during military service, but that was years and years ago. The Glock was so thin and compact in comparison to the MAS-50 that I could hide or carry it without any difficulty. I loaded another full magazine, got back to the car and hit the road, leaving a shattered shop. I went back home through the international organizations district.

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In front of the United Nation's Plaza, a 40-foot tall memorial made of wood stood defiantly; a monumental sculpture, a chair with a broken leg, in commemoration of all land mine victims. The broken leg represented the wounds and lost limbs of the victims. The plaza was empty. I didn't stop, and continued on the Route de Ferney, toward the airport. It was a lonely drive, and I smelled the new guns with a pinch of satisfaction for a job well done.

At one point, the road crossed the A1 motorway to Lausanne on an overpass. From there, I could see the single landing strip of the airport. I wanted to discover what caused the black smoke we saw the first day, smoke that had lasted almost forty-eight hours. Something big must have been

burning. Along the road, the wreckage of a trash truck had almost knocked down an old stonewall and debris littered the road. As I slowed down, I noticed the driver was still in the cabin. I could not see where the other members of its crew were.

I stopped at the overpass and there it was, a partially burned plane; one of those private corporate jets among the first to reach Geneva early in the morning for some top executive's business trip.

It must have landed by itself on the ILS to end its run onto the fields beyond the strip, smashing through the airport perimeter. Its nose had dived into the ground and the strip was scorched where the landing gears had collapsed. The fuselage had broken where the engines were attached to that section, toward the rear. It had caught fire and burned after getting separated. That saved—in a manner of speaking—the rest of the plane from complete destruction.

I couldn't read any aircraft registration or the nationality. Must have been located in the rear, darkened by the fire. There were no other planes but those parked in front of the air terminal. Apparently, no flights besides the burned plane had reached Geneva that fatal morning.

The timing matched that of the windstorm, that unnatural wind. It had probably hit us between five and six a.m. Commercial flights never arrived in Geneva before 6:30 a.m. I knew that because I was usually awake every morning at 6:20, and used to hear and see the first arrivals some fifteen, twenty minutes after I woke up. Airplanes had not made it on time into the airport.

What on Earth could be so pervasive and powerful to not only kill people in their beds within a few seconds—and across vast areas—but pilots and passengers on airborne planes, too, all at the same time? If my conjectures were right, the implications were...what were the implications?

I had nowhere to turn for an answer. What sort of power could erase or suck out human lives like that? This was the stuff of science fiction and my mind refused to believe it.

Airplanes must have continued their flights under the control of onboard computers, going through all waypoints until reaching the last one. At that point, the plane would fly on the same course and at the same altitude until it burned up all its fuel. Then the crash would occur when the engines shut down.

I knew that because I'd played X-Plane on my computer for a couple of years. I had some knowledge of airliner characteristics and their FMS, the flight management system. One day, when everything is standardized, it will be possible to touch the landing strip at all airports with no pilot intervention.

I corrected myself. That was in another world. It was not going to be possible anymore, at least in my lifetime and the lifetime of who knows how many generations after mine. The world had changed. There were no pilots left.

In that moment, I realized the planet had to be covered with airplane crashes. Some around major airports if caught while already on the descending slope, especially for the 24-hour facilities. Burned-out wreckage wherever the last waypoint had sent them to a doomed destination. Mind-boggling.

These were pieces of a gigantic cosmic puzzle and I had no idea how to connect them. In anguish, I had visions of 9/11 on a planetary scale. The culling of animals...weird. Escalation in number of deaths and locations. Weird again. Escalation in more evolved life forms such as Emperor Penguins and Mountain Gorillas, and those were the ones we had the time to discover. Who knows what else and where? Then us.

Humans, the dominant species. This time, precisely and massively culled. What on Earth? This led to an external force, a deliberate plan put into action. By who or what?

I got back in the car, dizzy by the enormity of the catastrophe. Were we supposed to survive at all? I gasped for air. The mind is really a funny thing and, as I started the engine, my memory pulled out from nowhere a passage from "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" by Douglas Adams:

"If you hold a lungful of air you can survive in the total vacuum of space for about thirty seconds. However, the chances of getting picked up by another ship within those thirty seconds are two to the power of two hundred and seventy-six thousand, seven hundred and nine to one against."

Why had I thought of "The Guide"? Anyway, that was not correct either, I told myself. I don't think we could hold our breath for thirty seconds in those conditions. At home, relaxed and prepared maybe, if one is fit. Following a rapid decompression? Unprepared and caught by surprise? Not a chance! We would lose all air in our lungs in a blink; we would lose consciousness after a few seconds and die of hypoxia within minutes.

Payne Stewart! The name popped out of nowhere. My subconscious was trying to tell me something. Payne died in his plane together with the pilots and other passengers, apparently from a sudden loss of air pressure in the cabin. Hypoxia. The crash and deaths had been an unsolved mystery, impossible to determine the cause of the cabin decompression. Did someone test something there? That was hyperbolic and the conjecture didn't last as everything returned to the part of the mind we do not have access to when fully awake.

I called Mary to tell her I was coming home and all was fine. The smoke? A private jet had an uncontrolled landing, ended its run on the fields and partially burned. I would say there were no survivors either. In any case, no emergency vehicles or crew had intervened. Everyone must have been dead already before it happened, both in the airplane and at the air terminal.

"I'll be home in twenty minutes. I love you."

"I love you too. Be careful," said Mary.

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When I got home, I showed Mary and Annah the arsenal I brought back. Annah was excited and wanted to try the pistols right away. Mary, not excited at all. She looked at me, worried, with an exploring gaze trying to read my mind. I pretended not to notice and addressed Annah. "Slow down, little girl. One thing at a time."

I wanted to unload everything and do that properly and methodically. "Guns call for respect and need to be treated seriously, Annah."

Before starting to shoot, I had to familiarize myself with the new gear. Then I would be able to help Annah and Mary learn. But first, I wanted to go visit my dogs. Hadn't had the chance yet that day. I called them *my dogs* now, even though I never entered the yard where they were confined, nor tried to get them out either. Sometimes Mary and Annah had come with me so the dogs were getting to know them, too. This was the big day for all of us.

For some time, I had been bringing two leashes with me and showed them to the dogs. I let them sniff the leashes, bite them, get used to them. I had rubbed the leashes against my body so that my odor would stick and be identified by them. I usually put the leashes down together with the food so

that their presence had become, or at least I hoped so, natural and non-threatening.

At the hardware store, I had retrieved two large kennels. I also stayed there for half an hour, every day, reading a book aloud to Annah. She made fun of me as I had her stay in the kennels too. It was good to laugh, pretending we were kennel neighbors. I loved to see Annah smile again. Mary kept looking at me, worried about my sanity.

After finding a safe place to store the guns and bullets, and enjoying a light lunch, it was time to go full monty with the dog affair. "Today is the day," I told Mary and Annah. "I am bringing the dogs home."

I was happy to see Annah was more excited with the idea of having the dogs home with us than with the gun business. She had already chosen the names for both: Taxi and Tarantula. The dogs seemed to love those names and had started to respond to them.

Annah's choice made me smile when she first told me about the names. "We'll call them Taxi and Tarantula."

T and T. TNT, the world express delivery corporation. Their motto "Sure We Can" was a brilliant motto for our family now, too. I told Annah and we adopted it at every occasion. She often repeated it to me, "Because sure we can, Dad."

I had placed one of my used tee-shirts in each kennel so the dogs would recognize my scent, hoping it would be a comforting message for them. I had put myself out for those dogs and I wanted them to become part of the family, plus add to our protection and chances of survival. They would be an important factor in the whole equation. For all of us.

I gave Joe's pistol to Mary and put the Glock I'd used that morning in my waistband. This time, I walked to meet the dogs. "I believe I won't be long."

Mary smiled at me and nodded without replying.

I put their food, the leashes and a large pair of pruning shears in a backpack and left home.

A chain link fence, very common with some in the village, surrounded the property. For some reason, its owners thought it was a much cleaner or *lighter* solution than stonewalls and old looking wood fences. Quite the opposite of the approach Mary and I had taken for our house. *What did the Romans say?* "De gustibus non disputandum est." It's worthless to discuss personal taste: it is called 'personal' for a reason.

I planned to cut the fence while the dogs were busy eating, and then call them to the opening and decide what to do based on their reaction. If all went well, Taxi and Tarantula would sleep that night in their new kennels. Everybody happy. If not... I didn't want to repeat my uncle's brutal exploit.

The dogs were waiting for me, as I had successfully created a routine. Taxi and Tarantula barked joyfully when they saw me and wagged their tails. "Hi, Taxi. Hi, Tarantula... Good boy, good girl... Yeah, yeah, I'm here, c'mon, c'mon."

They were medium-sized dogs, well balanced and muscular, their fur dense and curly. Tarantula, the female, had a light-cream tan to her coat; Taxi was a pure white male. They greeted me standing tall on their hind feet, front paws on the fence.

I put down the backpack, and caressed and, in turn, held their big heads with both hands, standing on the perimeter base of the fence; roughly like a large single step marking the property limits. I had never crossed that threshold. I hoped everything would be fine as the two canines happily licked my fingers. Time to give them their food now and then proceed with the plan.

"Here, here, look at what Mary prepared for you." I unwrapped the two large balls of rice and meat and cereals.

I had taught them to wait for me to signal when they could start eating. They were both clever and easily trainable. They watched me attentively without looking at the food. Well, they did but discreetly. I did not make them wait too long; they plunged into the food.

I stepped back and walked further down the property line. I took out my shears from the backpack. Slowly, and without making too many movements, I started to cut the fence's metal grid. Both Taxi and Tarantula paused for a second to watch me at first, then decided whatever I was doing was okay and kept eating. After a few cuts, I was able to open the fence enough for the dogs to come out or for me to get in.

In that moment, I took an unknown risk and changed plan. I sneaked through the opening, into the yard. Now, in principle, I was indeed an intruder.

They saw me come in, hesitated, then ran toward me panting and breathing heavily. My hand went to the Glock at my back waistline. I didn't show fear, just determination in case they turned against me. They encircled me, barking, and pushing, and touching, and jumping like puppies. They were greeting their master! I released my grip on the Glock.

I hugged them, pushing back and wrestling with both. I laughed and it was marvelous! “Yes! Yes! Here Taxi, here Tarantula.” It was so natural and rewarding, as if nothing horrible had ever happened to us, Taxi and Tarantula included. I played with those dogs like a child.

I took them back and let them finish their food then went for the leashes. I had the dogs sit down, side by side and in front of me. It was a serious moment. I kept talking to both in reassuring terms and explained all that was going to happen as if they could understand me. They sure gave me the impression they did. In their eyes, I could see only trust. I secured the leashes one by one.

We strolled around the yard for a little while, starting and stopping. Then I led them to the opening in the fence. I stopped and commanded, “Sit,” gestured with a downward motion of my hand, and pushed on their backs. They obeyed. I mentally thanked their previous owner for having made things easier for me. “Wherever you are, buddy, you did a good job.”

I opened the grid wider so we could go through easily. Me first, then both dogs followed. I had them sit again, this time on the other side of the fence. Also to make them realize where they were and what had just happened. The street, no fence... they could have run away at that moment. They didn't. I called Mary at home.

“So?” she asked without giving me time to say a word.

“We did it. I'm coming home with Taxi and Tarantula.”

I heard Annah scream excited. Mary held the phone so she could hear my words. They had been anxious too.

“Come home quickly, you three. Don't waste time on the way.”

Mary's voice, if possible, was smiling and happy. The dogs and I walked home.

Scouting

Geneva

With the addition of the two dogs, our survival unit grew to five elements. The two German shepherds amazed us. They had a distinct personality, marked by self-confidence. Taxi and Tarantula were poised and, when the situation demanded it, they were eager, alert and ready to serve in any capacity. They proved to be exceptionally loyal and tended to be especially protective toward Annah. I believe they understood she was the youngster of our pack and paid extra attention to her.

Days passed by and I started to venture around with Taxi and Tarantula. If anything, it increased our mutual understanding and trust. Annah came on patrol with us a few times, even more so whenever the intended route hit the countryside to visit farms. Sometimes we found the farmer had died while attending the cattle. I was careful not to expose Annah to too many scenes of death, though it was inevitable.

We freed farm animals whenever we saw them confined. Carefully, as the animals were frightened and they literally jumped out onto the pasture grounds. What else could have been done? I fantasized about having a horse for when cars disappeared forever and horses once more became the principal means of transportation. I dreamed about getting milk from cows and producing our own cheese. The reality was we had little knowledge about those things.

We checked from time to time that everything was fine at the farms we visited. Animals had grass to eat at their leisure all year long in our regions and, with help from both Mary and Annah, we opened barns and gave them access to the hay supplies. In the future, they would have to fend for themselves as they, too, had to learn new habits and new routines if they wanted to survive. One thing was certain, we could not visit every farm in the surrounding area, but even that limited activity gave us things to do and reasons to plan for the

days ahead. It made our presence in the world meaningful; we still served a purpose.

I really didn't believe I would have to resort to riding horses in my life time. I thought if my car broke, I only had to find another one, even a brand new one. Gasoline wasn't a problem. With the portable generators, I could operate the pumps at gas stations even when the electricity went out. In the worst of cases, I could use the manual pumps I found at the hardware store and access the station reservoirs directly.

With the company of our dogs, I grew more confident scouting the area with Mary and Annah. I relied on the dogs to increase our overall awareness. At times, I had the impression they were scouting on their own, then coming back to reassure everyone all was fine. Sometimes Mary stayed home, waiting for us, especially when the surveillance raids we planned weren't going to last for too long.

My wife and daughter learned their way with the guns, though Annah was more natural and achieved higher accuracy than her mother. In the end, after trying both the Glock and the Beretta, and for hundreds of rounds, Annah preferred to use the Italian pistol. Moreover, she started to try shooting with both hands using the Berettas, and with decent success.

With all the free time, I had arranged our own shooting range in a nearby field. We used old frying pans of different sizes for targets, hanging them from poles and supports obtained with materials from the hardware store. We placed them at various distances with the intention of providing increased difficulty.

For myself, I loved the Glock pistols. Once, I fired 200 rounds in succession without the gun ever getting jammed. To me, that was incredible as the barrel was hot, but not unbearably so. They were reliable guns, and I don't think it was due to my skills in keeping them clean.

The other star of our arsenal was the Benelli shotgun. I destroyed a few pans with them. Taxi and Tarantula got quite nervous the first few times and barked a lot, but I needed them to get used to the shots, the noise, and the smell. Once they showed they trusted us and stayed calm in all situations, I would know we had become a tough bite for anything or anyone who might one day cross our path with less than honorable intentions.

The Skorpions had little recoil. Mary and Annah could use them easily in both single-shot mode and rapid fire. A bit different for them, and more

difficult to handle, was the full auto-mode. They sprayed bullets all around. Not efficient against an isolated target but they would improve with practice. They fared much better with the stock extended than without. They gained in accuracy that way. Mary accepted, willingly or unwillingly, the presence of guns in our life. There were good reasons to have them and she stopped arguing about it.

Although I didn't make a point to visit and verify every house, those nearby and the village were deserted, the owners obviously dead. After a while, we took those deaths for granted. A few times we had to scare away estranged dogs. In the meantime, the animals had started to hunt in packs, and I suspected some must have fed on human corpses. Usually, they never tried to approach us, and only as a matter of precaution did we fire a few shots in their direction without attempting a kill. We had seen no wolves so far, just some foxes, and we could spot deer now crossing the fields or wandering around, suffering no more disturbance from human presence.

We ventured back to the gun shop to replenish our ammunition supplies; practice makes perfect but requires lots of rounds. I thought we were doing pretty well.

March got well under way with a warm spring that made everyone happy but Mary, who always suffered from allergies this time of year. The pharmacy at the mall proved to be useful. Medicines, drops, and pills aplenty, much more than actually needed.

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We lost interest in the Internet and emails. Without any updates, it had become a frustrating and disappointing task. We took for granted that our chances of establishing contact with anyone had to be as in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: "... Two to the power of two hundred and seventy-six thousand, seven hundred and nine to one against." Getting in touch with someone would have felt like winning the lottery.

Mary and I reinstated formal education for Annah. Well, mostly Mary, because she was a real teacher. She was the Head of School, the Dean, and the Minister of Education. I helped with math, physics, science and technology subjects; Mary covered all the rest. Our first goal was to finish the current year's program at the International School that had stopped abruptly that past

February. We had all the textbooks available at home, so we didn't have to start from scratch, nor reinvent procedures or teaching methods.

Exerting ourselves to provide Annah with a proper education had other side effects: it gave us reasons to follow the calendar. We kept count of the days of the week, and respected weekend rests from lessons and teaching. I believe we would have soon lost track of time if not for the school schedules. Schooling provided Annah with continuity, a structure where she could recognize her place in it.

Of course, we had to fight resistance. "What's the use, Dad? Why learn things I'll never use..."

Kids always threw that kind of remarks at parents, and were easier to counter in the old world. I could not talk Annah into future perspectives, better jobs and opportunities, to stand out in the crowd, and all those things.

One day, I gave Annah a sad and honest answer that cut short all further discussion. "Because there is no one else to remember all that. Because we can share what we know with you, and you will remember us better when we will not be here anymore. Annah, we've lost everything.. I do not want to give up on you. When I think about the future all I see is you. The best love I can give you is the one that will awaken your soul. That will make you want to reach for more, plant a fire in your heart, and make you stronger. That's what I hope to give you forever."

Annah rushed into my opened arms. We both cried.

Every day was an inner fight to find the strength to carry on, to not give up. Every day the world simply moved on, ignoring us. Yet, everything was just perfect all around, though humanity was no longer a factor in the grand equation of the planet. If I didn't know quite how to face that, how could a twelve-year-old girl? Still, I had hope. I refused to passively accept the facts, to believe we were the end of everything. I refused it, I refused to give in to desperation.

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With Taxi and Tarantula, Annah and I went to the local golf course every week. Grinning with sadness, I thought I must have been among the best players in the world with my 16 index, and Annah was a close second, even if she didn't have an official one yet. Yet...

She will never get an official index, but I will give her one when she'd score less than 18 shots over par on the 9-holes near the CERN lab. Starting from the high-handicap ladies' tee-off, of course.

Some things never change, and I clung to them to avoid sliding down a mental ravine, tearing me apart... then, I would have found only madness.

Those rounds, with Taxi and Tarantula watching and on alert for us, were moments of true serenity and it felt as if nothing had happened. Those were the moments to cherish, sharing a passion with Annah, seeing her trying hard just to learn how to play golf with me. I knew she did that mainly to be together. I rewarded her with my smiles, laughs, and cheers for every good shot she managed.

Time was the one thing we now had more of than ever before. Maybe we were all a bit crazy, playing golf when the rest of the world as we knew it had died. What were we supposed to do? I guess that craziness is what kept us going.

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By the end of March, we had yet to venture to downtown Geneva. Neither did we ever go to the shopping district. I explored part of Meyrin. I identified shops and businesses that could become additional sources of provisions. There was a large multi-store center in Meyrin and we didn't really need anything from Geneva: food, medicines, clothes and general supplies were available at both malls, the one in France and the one in Meyrin. Thus, it was only out of curiosity that we decided to plan a day in Geneva.

The last weekend of March, Saturday the 31st, we loaded the car with food, water and ammunition to spend a full day scouting the town. How different from visits only a few weeks before: some shopping, a restaurant, just some good times together. Now we prepared for an expedition to enemy territory, planning for danger and the unexpected.

We locked and secured the house, closed the gate. As a last measure, I parked a brown UPS truck in front of the driveway gate; one I'd recovered a week before from its dead driver. The truck obstructed and protected our entrance. Now, nothing could ram into our gate.

I borrowed the idea from memories of the Mel Gibson "Mad Max" movies I had seen in the past. Never would I have imagined that one day

Hollywood would provide me with instructional tips on how to survive. Ours was a much safer world than the one Max experienced in those plots. He had lost his family and avenged their deaths in a killing rampage against the villains, thus the title. I do not think he was mad at all.

He lived in a world where an unknown conflict had destroyed the entire civilization. I believed I wasn't going to share his fate in our new world. There were no villains around, so far, and our civilization infrastructures were still standing. In my world, everyone, including the villains, had perished. I believed we had better prospects for a more peaceful life than the one depicted in those movies.

We started our short journey to town. The last time we'd all gone together, we'd planned some shopping and a dinner at our favorite restaurant for family outings: The "Relais de l'Entrecote". Back then, we were armed with our credit cards, not guns, quite confident about the future and the stability of our lives. I had a job and a very good salary. Honestly, at that time, I had already started to dislike my job and even thought about quitting, but I was in no hurry. It was an entirely different life, the life of a different me in a different world.

We crossed the border, passed in front of the CERN lab main entry, and went straight to downtown, the same way I drove through for my first visit to the gun shop. I'd had more time to grow accustomed to scenes of death, car accidents and overturned vehicles than Mary and Annah. My wife held my hand and squeezed it hard at times. In the backseat, Annah sat between Taxi and Tarantula and I could see in the rearview mirror that she hid her face in their thick coats so as not to see too much of anything. Was it too early for her?

We arrived in town in silence; there were no appropriate words to comment on anything. I didn't notice any change from my first and last ride through town. Human changes, at least... yet how fast nature were to reclaim all open spaces.

Geneva had become an untidy and sloppy town. The streets were deserted, and plants had started to grow wild. Weeds had sprouted in pavement cracks, finding the smallest possible fertile spots where their roots could grip the earth. Like cats bury their claws on a doomed prey, indifferent to the victim's pain and destiny. The previously neat and trimmed green areas, flowerbeds, and urban decorations had grown in a chaotic way, at least to our

civilized eyes. Dead leaves bunched together where wind had collected them along with papers, plastic bags and everything else not securely fixed in place.

We caught glimpses of cats and small dogs that must have escaped from their masters' apartments—now tombs—and we resisted Annah's pleas for us to start an animal shelter. We had two dogs already. We couldn't take in every stray we saw.

A few cars were scattered around helter-skelter, those of early commuters culled that watershed day when human civilization had been cut short. I don't know who the ghosts were now, us or those unlucky drivers locked in their vehicles, their path interrupted by a fatal destiny in the shape of a wall, or a street light post. Some seemed to have parked in impossible locations, left there to rot by an uncaring fate disposing of garbage. Pigeons and seagulls, from Lake Lemano, had left their marks and there was no one around to clean up after them.

We arrived at the Pont du Mont Blanc, a bridge crossing the point where the Rhone River exits the lake to continue a few miles further into France. The bridge was free of cars and intact except for a broken, twisted balustrade on the right side. Something had smashed into it, like slashing open a wound into its metallic flesh. Whatever the vehicle, it had plunged into the lake, taking the already dead driver into his liquid tomb.

Slowly, we crossed the bridge to reach the shopping district. Geneva rivaled London and Paris as a prime shopping destination in Europe. No shopaholics around that day, though.

The window displays looked magnificent as ever, but there was no one to attract anymore: business shut down for lack of customers. I had the impression of walking onto a movie set, all perfectly staged down to the smallest details, yet deserted as the actors and crew had not arrived.

The entire district resembled a fashion runway, perfect and beautiful. The resemblance though was loathsome, as if fashionable jewels and clothing brands had finally admitted they did not care whether customers liked them or not. They reclaimed a reason to exist for themselves, becoming altars and shrines to vanity and vacuity.

My goal, our goal, was not a shopping frenzy. Our goal was to see if anyone could still be alive in town, to find evidence of their presence: any broken shop windows, any sign of people looking to sustain themselves. I had

looted the gun shop and the malls to keep us going. If we saw evidence of looting here, that would be a clear sign of people alive.

I did not want to get out of the car before a good sweep of the area so we kept driving, Mary and Annah ready to intervene at any moment, my paranoid side alert. Taxi and Tarantula sensed our tension, and growled and whimpered.

I drove all the way to the end of Rue du Rhone, than back onto Rue de la Confédération and Rue du Marché. That was the first time ever for me, as that last part of our driving loop had always been closed to private vehicles. Only streetcars traveled up and down it. Once. In another world.

“We should go to the grocery stores,” Mary said.

“I agree. I don’t like it very much, but we need to get out of the car.”

We stopped in front of the Confederation Center. Itself a shopping mall, it was near two other big ones, Globus and Coop. People, if there were any alive, would have looted them. We headed to the Center first. In our world, everything was of the highest priority or of no priority at all. It didn’t matter, we didn’t matter. We had become inconsequential matters to the rest of the world.

We got out, with caution. Taxi and Tarantula sniffed the air, waiting for us to move. I looked at them; they did not seem to have sensed the presence of anyone. I carried one of the Benelli shotguns with me, and my Glocks. Mary and Annah each held one of the Skorpion pistols. We were no longer the ordinary family of two months before. We investigated, seeking for clues—and, hopefully, people—and acted as a platoon in a war zone. We were ready to face danger if danger dared to face us.

Clouds had started to gather earlier in the morning, and now they covered the sky with a dense, thick layer. Spring had arrived too early in the region, and that brought weather instability. It was much colder than during the previous weeks, and dismally, depressingly dark as if the world itself wanted to remind us we lived in a cemetery.

We avoided the street level entrance, as I wanted to get in from the top floor. The Center was at the footsteps of the old town, perched higher than where we had arrived. A set of old stone stairs wound up and crossed through one little old road to the other, arranged in an intricate way. We would've accessed the Center and made our way inside from above.

We were used to the silence by now, hearing just the noises coming from nature: birds, breeze, rustling leaves. It felt less macabre than before. We

climbed the winding stairway to the upper level. The old buildings overlooked our advance and were deaf and mute, as if we were an oddity not worthy of commentary.

The old town had turned into a huge bird's nest; pigeons and doves cooed, heedless of our presence among those old walls. I wondered whether they marveled at us, walking below them, a remnant of a past they surely had already forgotten. High up, the cry of a hawk pierced the air. A new equilibrium had established itself between prey and predators in town.

What were we? Predators or prey? I chased the thought away; I needed no distractions. Taxi and Tarantula climbed together at our heels, not leaving the pack. They would have preceded us and scouted ahead by themselves only if I had ordered them to with a "Check!" and rushed back to us when I whistled.

Finally, we reached the top. It took a long time with the slow, careful pace we had adopted. A little pedestrian paved square opened in front of us where the Brasserie Lipp and the Capocaccia restaurant faced each other. The terrace of the Capocaccia was ready to welcome epicureans from the old town businesses; it was a depressing scene now.

We stopped and stood with our backs to the low wall of the terrace. Everything was silent, and calm. The upper level of the Confederation Center opened to the paved square we had just reached. From our position, I could barely distinguish the interior even though the lights were all on.

I gave the order, "Check!" Taxi and Tarantula jumped ahead and entered the Center, ears pricked up. I signaled Annah and Mary to stay back, glued to the terrace wall, and I slowly moved forward to the entrance. I knelt down and got a glance of both dogs searching inside. Nothing abnormal, apparently.

I let my eyes adjust to the interior lights before taking a step inside. It did not take long. I advanced a couple yards ahead to have a clearer view. I glanced back, Mary and Annah waited for me.

The Lipp entrance stood next to the right. An escalator to the mid-level went down on the opposite side of the hallway. The main entry to the Capocaccia restaurant, a remake of Italian stone steps with its forged iron balustrade, was as inviting as ever.

I whistled to the dogs and signaled both Annah and Mary to rejoin me. Taxi and Tarantula dashed toward me, happy. I gave them a treat. "Good boy, Taxi. Good girl, Tarantula. Nothing to see here, huh?"

Mary knelt next to my side, Annah right behind her.

“All seems clear at this level. As if no one has been here since...” Since that early day in February, when our world had been replaced by this new weird one.

Mary put one hand on my shoulder. “Let’s stay together now.”

I nodded.

Neither Capocaccia nor Lipp showed any sign of a break-in. The Center had two levels above the ground. The building was shaped as a doughnut; each level consisted of shops along the outer perimeter. A large hallway-balcony circled around allowing for a continuous flow of shoppers without intersections. On one end, there was an open-view elevator for patrons to see through the transparent cabin, and catching a glimpse of their next shopping destination.

The ceiling lights and the marble columns gave the whole place a sort of Art-Deco flavor. There weren’t many hiding places there, but we proceeded cautiously down the escalator.

At the first level, Taxi and Tarantula searched the area before us as we kept advancing along the hallway. The dogs kept eye contact with us, and sniffed all over as they scouted the place.

“La Maison du Gateau”, a well-known pastry shop, looked as if it was about to open. When we reached its windows, the cakes looked stale. There was no other visible sign the shop had been abandoned. On the other side of the balcony, I saw a small local Havana Cigars business. I mentally took note of it, a possible stop for my own gratification.

Apart from being dirtier and now the home of a few birds, the Center hadn’t received any visitors since February. No looting or other degradation from fellow humans. There was nothing more to see.

We exited at the street level and returned to the car. A light rain was falling, and the clouds were even darker than before. Maybe we would have a wet weekend. Probably. No shooting training that coming Sunday. Instead, I would light the fireplace, Mary would bake a cake, and we would watch a rental movie on Apple TV. It seemed crazy it was still working along with the Internet and electricity. Almost as if the world and its infrastructures were telling us, “We do not need you. Good riddance.”

Degradation had hit the Internet, but at first it only affected specific sites, not its accessibility as a whole. When the entire service went dead, I planned to

add regular visits to CERN as a new routine. The lab enjoyed higher uptime services and dedicated lines and had its own power grid.

Our next stop was the Coop City Fusterie shopping mall. It was only a short distance down Rue du Commerce, which started almost in front of the Center. We arrived at the mall entrance on the corner, at the end of the block. The automatic doors opened with a squeaking and scratching noise. *These will stop working soon*, I thought.

Suddenly, Taxi and Tarantula growled. We turned slowly. A group of four dogs stared at us, and showed their teeth. They considered the area as theirs and took us for intruders to be challenged.

Annah and Mary froze.

“Stay calm,” I said in a very low voice. “Be ready to shoot but stay calm. Do not stare at them!”

“Dad?” Annah asked in a whisper.

Mary kept silent, her eyes fixed on the group of unwelcoming animals. “Annah, if they attack, you aim and shoot. Don’t panic.”

I aimed the Benelli. “Mary, get inside with Annah. Slowly.” A dog bite could have serious consequences, potentially fatal in our situation. I did not want to risk any of that.

“Dad, no!” Annah protested but Mary put one hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently toward the mall.

Our dogs would have confronted the group if I ordered it, or if those four attacked, but our shooting might have put both Taxi and Tarantula in danger.

T&T split in front of us, almost at the same time as Annah and Mary reached the mall. I was ready to shoot. One of the four dogs was the size of Tarantula; the other three were of smaller breeds.

Taxi and Tarantula growled even louder and made little steps forward. I followed, maintaining a distance of two or three steps behind them. The Coop automatic doors closed behind me as we moved away, as if the curtains fell on our stage, preventing Mary and Annah from getting involved.

The biggest of the pack advanced, and antagonized Taxi and Tarantula: in reaction, they side-stepped and increased the distance between them. Now the large dog could not stare at both at the same time; the new situation must have created an additional problem in its brain.

I took a stance in the middle, the shotgun pointing right at the dog's head. I had a clear and free line of fire. My hands started to ache and I realized I was squeezing the Benelli's grip with too much strength. Drops of perspiration erupted on my forehead and my eyes started to itch as the sweat made its way down my face. My index finger contracting on the trigger, determined to eliminate the danger before it mushroomed.

I could not say exactly what changed, but the pack leader suddenly took a less aggressive posture and barked a couple times at a high pitch. The other three crouched low to the ground and tucked their tails between their legs. Taxi and Tarantula seemed like wolves ready to pounce on their prey.

The stray dogs looked away, everywhere but directly at my shepherds, avoiding their sight as if it hurt them. T&T kept showing their teeth and snarled in a display of dominance. I watched the whole scene in amazement. Certainly, Annah and Mary were watching too from inside the mall, but I didn't dare to turn and check.

The pack leader moved forward but kept its head low and its ears turned backward; the tail wagged in what seemed a stressed pattern, held at mid-height. Taxi and Tarantula stared at the approaching dog.

When it arrived close to Taxi, Tarantula put gripped with her opened mouth the dog's neck and head. She pushed it to the ground with her paw while Taxi stood tall next to them. I had never seen anything like that.

Tarantula moved then toward the other three dogs to complete the show. They exposed their belly to her and let her sniff their genitalia.

I relaxed a bit and turned toward Mary and Annah inside the mall and gestured, "Did you see that?"

Mary shook her head while Annah smiled, relieved and proud of her dogs. I backed toward the sliding doors; they opened with a lament. Standing at the entrance, I whistled. Taxi and Tarantula startled, undecided for a split second, then rushed toward me, faithfully. The other dogs stayed still and did not move.

I entered the mall, followed by our white guardians, and reached my wife and daughter. The automatic doors closed behind us, panting as if they exhaled their last breath. Mary had a cloth in her hand and began to wipe my face. "I'd say we know now who keeps their cool better in this family." She glanced at our furry companions. I was glad she could joke; I took the cloth from her and gave a second pass to my face before I kissed her.

“Eww. Gross, Daddy.” We turned and smiled at our frowning daughter.

We faced the women's department store, and started walking down the aisles. Annah and Mary were distracted by the display of clothes, dresses, jackets, sweaters, shirts and skirts and caressed them while passing through.

Annah turned around and smiled shyly. It was in moments such as this when the reality of what our lives had become hit us. The world was intact, and that made the task to cover our basic needs an easy one. Yet, at the same time, it was a painful reminder of everything and everyone we had lost and that we would never have with us any more.

I smiled back. “Do you need anything?”

Mary stopped, and looked at me with a question in her eyes. I pointed at the rows and rows of fine garments and fashion brands on display. Annah's eyes glittered.

“I think it's okay if we split up. Look around here, stay for a moment and see whether anything is out of place. Keep Tarantula with you while I check out the grocery level below with Taxi.”

Annah opened her mouth in excitement, and a brief look at my wife confirmed she understood now what I had in mind. I nodded.

“C'mon, Taxi. Let the ladies do some shopping.” I took the staircase to the lower level with Taxi by my side.

Taxi was relaxed, leisurely glancing around and at me, breathing calmly. I guessed he didn't sense any presence of animals or humans.

“Heel!” I commanded and walked toward the produce and food area. Taxi got closer, glued to me.

The automatic barrier opened gently. Bright lights flooded the floor as if nothing had ever happened. At first sight, all goods and shelves were untouched. I entered through sweets and candies aisle. Taxi kept my pace. Further down the aisle, to the right, my eyes fell on rows and rows of chocolate bars.

I stopped. I couldn't resist, had never been able to. I got a few dark, bittersweet ones and put them in a pocket of my vest. I never much liked the taste of milk chocolate and, as a child, I felt desperate each time someone brought it thinking they made me happy. I couldn't understand why my parents never told anyone I hated that. I didn't even bother to look at those gifts.

With that in mind, with care, I unwrapped a Cailier Crémant plain bittersweet chocolate bar. I closed my eyes, smelled the fragrance, and enjoyed the rich dark chocolate flavor. I supposed Mary and Annah must have been having a similar tension-free moment amid all the fine clothing up there.

Taxi touched my leg with his nose, looking up to me, imploring with beguiling eyes. He pulled me abruptly from my dreaming. Like Sid in “Ice Age” did with Scrat, the saber-toothed squirrel, saving his life right when he was about to eat a giant acorn in heaven. Scrat got mad at Sid when he returned to his senses. I couldn’t get mad at Taxi.

I shook my head. “Not for you buddy. This delicacy would kill you.” Instead, I gave him a dog treat I always carried with me. “Let’s see what Lady Luck is treating you with...ah, lamb. Your favorite!”

Taxi took the Meaty Bone with obvious pleasure. He licked my hand, too, something I never liked, and had yet to get used to. I glanced at my wet and sticky hand and sighed.

“Let’s move now.” I dried Taxi’s drool on my butt.

I glanced around. I wanted to examine the place quickly but thoroughly, and I did not want to stay away from my girls for too long. The produce area smelled foul; everything was rotten and moldy. Pineapples, peaches, grapes, tomatoes, and cucumbers, all ready for the bin. Potatoes had germinated, but they would still be edible, I guessed. Carrots, on the contrary, were mushy and covered with mold spots.

That area presented no signs of looting. I proceeded to examine other parts of the store and, with a bit of disappointment, I had to conclude that we were the first to visit.

I got a bottle of mineral water from a shelf and drank a sip. Then I poured some in my hand, and let Taxi have a drink, too.

There was nothing left for us to do. I returned to my girls. “Mary?” I called out.

“Here, Dan. We're here.” I followed her voice.

Taxi and Tarantula greeted each other, and Tarantula licked Taxi’s mouth. Before handing the bottle of water to Mary, I had Tarantula drink off my hand too.

Annah was radiant, and so was Mary. They had spent time trying on jackets and trousers, some shirts and accessories as well. It looked like they’d truly had a good time, but I believe Mary was just happy to see our daughter

smiling and carefree as any twelve-year-old should be. I stopped to watch Mary show her things to try on, and how to wear them, combine colors, and styles. Together. Laughing and joking. As before.

“Dad! Look what I found.” She ran to me holding a beautiful leather jacket, a three-quarter sleeve suede jacket, and a luxury cashmere coat. They’d found other things, of course. Many others.

“May I keep them? They are so gorgeous.” I looked at Mary and pretended to think for a moment to decide.

I sighed feigning resignation. “I guess, but then we’d need to go back to the car first. We can’t carry all that around!”

“Please, please, Daddy.”

Why say no? At least, something positive from that day. I went to the cash register to get a couple large plastic bags and handed them to Mary.

Annah's fist pumped. “Yes!”

“Did you find anything down there?” Mary nodded toward the stairs. I answered a mute ‘No’ with a head shake.

“What now?”

“Well, we put all this stuff into the car and try with the Globus mall. Then we go to the Eaux Vives district, and hit the shopping center.”

Mary nodded in agreement and brought Annah the bags. “Annah, sweetie, help me fill these. We have a few more stops to go.”

When we stepped out onto the street, the stray dogs had gone. The rain had subsided, and turned into just a spring shower. The cloud layer appeared to be getting thinner and the day was a bit brighter than before. I walked in front of the group and toward the car. Annah chatted with Mary about her new clothing. Suddenly, she stopped short as if her mood changed abruptly. Mary asked her what was wrong but Annah walked with a brisk pace and kept replying, “Nothing.” Then she turned and burst out, “Mom! I don’t want to talk about this, okay?”

I turned. Mary frowned and caressed her hair but Annah tilted her head away. Mary glanced at me, worried and puzzled. I raised my shoulders. I didn’t want to say anything with Annah there. “Let’s go.”

I resumed walking, reached the car, and put the bags in the back. In silence, everyone got in and I drove further up on Rue du Marché toward Place du Molard.

The Globus mall occupied almost an entire block. We parked in front of the square, near the “Bon Genie” entrance, another department store. Just to give it a try, I went for the main entrance.

This time, the doors remained closed. I examined a secondary entrance, the one opening straight into the cosmetics department. Locked as well. Obviously, no one had visited them in the last two months.

On the other side of the road, stood Globus. We went straight for the entry on the Place du Molard which opened directly into the restaurants' area. That entrance was locked, too, and the tinted windows didn't allow me to have a clear view inside. We tried the main entry back on Rue du Marché: no luck there either. I took a deep breath. “Next time.” No Globus for us that day unless we smashed through, but it wasn't in the plans.

In the shopping district, Place du Molard was one of our favorite stop. A couple of restaurants and a pub occupied the middle area of the square with their tables and chairs when the weather encouraged eating outside. We peeked through the windows of the “Café du Centre”, then the “Pizzeria Molino”, and the “Lord Nelson Pub” where I had shared quite a few tasty beers with friends in the past. They were all deserted, business shut for good. For a while, we were each lost in our own memories.

“Ok,” I looked at both. “Why don't we take a break and eat something?”

We sat at the fountain near the florist, and ate in silence. Taxi and Tarantula did, too. I hadn't forgotten Annah was troubled. Bad thoughts can be dangerous if left to simmer. They weaken the heart slowly and invisibly. Like termites that destroy the beams of a house, secretly, in the dark, until it's too late and everything collapses. Later, Mary and I would have to address that. We needed a place where we could pretend everything was all right and normal around us. A place where we could be us.

“I'm sure the next doors will open,” I thought aloud.

The Eaux Vives 2000 was a shopping center with multiple stores and little artisan shops inside. A completely different style than Globus and Bon Genie. Less upscale, and addressing customers with lower budgets. It had bank, ATMs, a pharmacy, a florist, laundries and a grocery store.

Annah snapped. “Can we go now?”

I exchanged a glance with Mary and signaled her not to press the subject. “Sure.” I replied.

From there, driving in the streetcar lanes, would take only a couple minutes. On our way, I glanced at the Davidoff store with its luxury tobacco goods.

Cigars. I wondered whether the sealed room where they stored them was still working and kept the tobacco just perfect. I indulged in memories while passing by. I smiled at Mary. "I have to stop there someday. I always wanted a humidor."

Mary shook her head.

"A large one, with space for hundred cigars. And full as an egg of course." I winked.

My smoking habits never fully justified the budget it required that dream although a humidor would look fantastic in the living room, full of Corona Esplendidos. Who knows, maybe I would start savoring them more often, now.

Further up, the Apple Store; no long lines in sight. I wondered what happened to people like Tim Cook, Phil Schiller, Jonathan Ive, and others I had seen on stage quite a few times in previous years. I guessed they'd all joined Steve now. *Apple family reunited*, I thought sadly.

Driving or walking in downtown Geneva, in the shopping district always packed with people, was usually mission impossible. Especially on Saturdays. Now it was deserted; no voices, no need to make your way amid a dense pedestrian flow of wealthy people. Before, by this time of day, Latino music bands would have entertained bystanders, and on the corner, maybe, a Conservatoire student would have been playing the cello.

No one played music for us. Not there. Not then.

Not even a living new Mozart would be able to gather onlookers that day. Or the day after. Or ever. Music was dead.

Again looming thoughts, ready to bring me down. I didn't know why they kept coming, unannounced. Like cold, bony fingers trying to pull me toward the abyss of madness.

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My Annah was the most precious girl ever, sunny and happy, always fantasizing about a bright future, first loves, boys who had recently got her

young blossoming-woman's attention. "Hot boys," she said, ready to add right after, "but nice boys, Dad. They are very gentle."

I looked in the rear mirror and saw a veil of sadness in her eyes. I smiled. She noticed, and tried to smile back but it faded away. She was again under the attacks of her own demons.

My God. I closed my eyes for a moment.

What kind of future was she going to have? We—Mary and I—had our own memories. We'd had a happy life. We traveled, tried things, enjoyed what life had to offer. We hadn't miss anything really in the previous years, especially when Annah wasn't born yet. We weren't rich, far from it, but we'd always been able to afford things without worrying much about month ends. But Annah? She was just starting her life.

Once she asked me: "Dad, when do you think I'll have a boyfriend?" I felt a lump in my throat.

Mary pressed her hand on my thigh. She knew.

We were about to arrive at our destination and that broke the circling of my thoughts like vultures hovering over a dying prey below. I slowed down even further and parked at the corner of the building, opposite the mall.

We looked around. All quiet, and all abandoned. I stepped out, and opened the hatch to let Taxi and Tarantula jump down. Mary and Annah got out too. We closed the doors and the noise echoed back, briefly tumbling from building to building.

At our backs, the street climbed toward the Natural History Museum. In front of us, it went down for the entire block length to end at the old City Hall.

The shopping center's entrance we faced led to the middle level of the mall, leading into the produce and grocery store, our main target. On the next block, to the left, there was a little Migros. A similar supermarket chain like the Coop one. We'd search that grocery store, too, later.

We crossed the street, and approached the sliding glass doors. They opened and, when inside, the florist shop offered us a depressing view. A foul odor of rotten things and death. Petals on the floor, plants dead for lack of care.

Taxi and Tarantula sniffed everything, and sneezed occasionally. We turned to our right, and advanced toward the small bakery shop. Once more, the spectral silence left us speechless. On the displays, green mold covered

once good pastries that filled large platters, and beetles rushed to hide as we approached.

The town must have turned into a giant beetle shelter and incubator. These scavengers, together with flies and maggots, arrived within the first day, looking for orifices to deposit eggs, and soon larvae started the feasting. In twenty-four hours, the eggs would hatch into slithering flesh-eating insects and the cleaning process started.

Luckily, we didn't have to witness any human decomposition details live. No corpses in sight.

By now, even the remaining skin on the few cadavers around converted into a leathery or parchment-like sheet which clung desperately to an otherwise clean bone. That was the case with the bodies I had seen over the last few days.

Why was I alive? It didn't matter, now. I was just happy that Mary and Annah were, too. Sure, we were in a crappy world, but we were together, and to me that was all that counted.

We kept moving forward toward the produce market area. We reached the cashier counters at the entrance and, together, walked slowly.

"Shall we split?" I said.

Mary met my eyes. "No, let's stay together this time."

The fresh produce area presented the same scene that had unfolded before me in the other shopping center, including a display of decaying fruits and vegetables. Unfrozen packed meat trembled with maggot infestation.

We proceeded toward the beverages and drinks section. I stopped in front of a couple of shelves dedicated to the higher priced French Bordeaux wines. They were almost empty. I pointed them out to Mary. She had noticed, too. A connoisseur?

Past the wines and liquors, the shelves were full of juices, sodas, and water. Something felt odd, though. Nothing too evident of course, but it looked as if someone had been browsing the items on display.

There was a sense of lack of order. We pointed to each other empty areas where mineral water packaging had been removed. Especially one brand; the remaining ones were scattered, not aligned as were the other brands. Unless on *that* particular day *that* spring water was already in short supply. There was no reason why supplies of all the brands should not be relatively equal, and they should all be neatly arranged, too.

“Daaad!” Annah called out from the aisle next to ours.

I hadn’t notice she wasn’t near us and we rushed over toward her voice. Taxi and Tarantula sat at her side. She stared at something on the floor. The sign above the aisle listed: “Cereals, biscuits, jams, instant coffee, cookies, oatmeal, dietary soluble fibers.” Further down the aisle, the vision of a partially crushed Kellogg’s cornflakes box struck us as a miracle.

Someone had been there! It was unmistakable! On the shelves, as for the water packages, cereal boxes had been messed with. Excited, I looked at Mary.

She looked at me and nodded. Then she pointed to another shelf. Biscuit boxes were in the same untidy state. We had even more evidence. It could only mean one thing: we were not alone. We were not the only ones who’d been spared that night of early February.

“Do you think...?” Mary was about to ask the crucial question.

“No idea, but there’s no doubt. Someone’s been here.”

How many? Just one person, or a large group? Maybe an entire family as in our case. Impossible to tell, but sure as hell, we were not alone.

Other areas on the canned food shelves also showed signs that someone had taken items in a fair quantity. All at one time? In multiple visits? Who knew?

If this were a regular spot for other survivors, then we could get in touch with them easily. It was... phenomenal.

I read in Mary and Annah’s eyes the same excitement.

Annah was beaming. “Dad. I like those cereals too... Maybe there are other kids. Dad, you need to do something!”

“Wait, please. Let me think.”

Mary put an arm around our daughter’s shoulders. “Annah’s right. We need to look for these people.”

“Okay, okay, wait a second...”

I knelt. I took the crushed cereal box and presented it to both Taxi and Tarantula. They smelled it at length. They started to whine and barked. “Search!” I urged them in a rush.

The drills we did repeatedly together with Annah at the shooting range camp were not for nothing and paid off entirely now. The dogs started to sniff on the floor, too, scratching as if they were trying to un-dig more odors.

I noticed some faint thin traces on the floor that had been invisible to us before. How could I have not seen them before? They seemed to be old scuff

marks left by shopping carts but the dogs were very interested in them for whatever reason.

They sniffed over and over, then went back to the cereal box I'd left on the floor. Suddenly, they rushed back toward the produce section. Annah startled, and we all ran after them.

The dogs kept sniffing in mounting excitement trying to capture remnant molecules of some scent. They were after something we nasally challenged humans couldn't perceive.

The place must have been full of past human odors, but our shepherds had detected a scent that had stuck on the crushed box. At least, that is what I hoped for.

I wondered how their instincts guided them. Why were they picking up some spots and not others? To me, they looked all the same and I was blind to the clues Taxi and Tarantula were collecting. We looked around the vegetable area to check whether we had missed some hints when the dogs moved again.

They must have recovered a trace because they led us toward a sort of conveyor belt, a moving sidewalk to take customers to the levels above.

On the floor, I distinguished again faint traces of...what, cart wheels? Maybe I just imagined things. I pointed those out to Mary who looked back at me with a silent question. I had no idea, so I raised my shoulders. The dogs paused over them, then rushed up the conveyor belt, and we ran after them.

On the landing of the upper level, Taxi and Tarantula hesitated for a second as if undecided about which direction to take. We stopped, then they dashed toward the women's clothing section, panting heavily in excitement. It was difficult to keep their pace, but I didn't want to interfere at all with their search. When we finally reached them, our dogs were busy sniffing various stuff on the floor, which at first I could not identify.

Someone had indulged there, as Annah and Mary had in the previous department store. A woman? Different clothing—vests and sweaters, coats, tops, jumpers—had clearly been tried on and flung over the rails or the store counters and on the floor. Some hangers were empty. I was a hundred percent sure we were not alone anymore. The world's known population could soon increase roughly by at least an estimated 33%, maybe even more!

Taxi focused on a piece of garment left on the floor, and he was soon joined by Tarantula. It was a gray fleece hoodie. Not a brand new one but not worn out either.

“Mary!” I rushed toward our dogs, but there was no need to urge her to follow. Mary and Annah had reacted my same way and we all stood watching the hoodie on the floor as if it was a miracle. The previous owner must have found something better and dropped it.

I had never been so careless in my raids to the mall, nor so sloppy when out for food provisioning. I never left traces of my passages. In a sense, those considerations reassured me. From the size of the garment, I guessed the other survivor had to be a young woman, also judging from the kind of clothes that had been tried on. I tried to imagine the kind of person we were going to face.

I found a shopping bag and put away the hoodie for later. It would be an identifiable object for Taxi and Tarantula if I needed to go chasing down anyone.

“What now, Dan?” Mary suddenly asked.

“We need to make contact with her, or them,” I added. “But not right now, and not here.” I nodded toward Annah. “We don’t know who, how many, or what their intentions are. I don’t feel like taking any risks.” Especially with Annah there, but I didn't say that. Actually, in that moment I wanted to take them both home.

“Dad,” she hesitated. “Do you think there are others...of my age?”

I think Annah was trying to let me understand what had troubled her all day. We were not alone, Mary and I; we had each other. But Annah must have felt isolated. She had us, of course, but from her perspective she was alone all the same.

“I don’t know, sweetie. That would be great, but I just don’t know.” I didn’t want to give her too much hope only to be disappointed later.

Mary touched my arm. “Let’s go home.” She cut the conversation short and put us back on track, or maybe she felt the discussion was taking a dangerous turn for Annah. I nodded, grateful.

Yeah, that was the best thing to do now and think calmly about our next steps without rushing things. Potentially, our world was going to change again, and abruptly even. But in what way?

Others?

Unexpected Expectations

Later that evening, all discussions revolved around what we had discovered that afternoon. We weren't alone anymore! Other people had survived! If someone was in Geneva, maybe more were alive in other locations, too. Maybe not so far either, just not as many as to make interactions and encounters easy and probable.

In the next days, we scanned the horizon more intensely, and frequently compared all the notes Mary and Annah had written down previously. Had anything changed? Were there more visible lights at night? Were there any houses with lit windows? Nothing. For what we could see from our home, everything was as dead as ever. I was tempted to put something visible from afar on the roof. Anything that would grab the attention, like a flag or a banner. At the same time, I was scared. Yes, in a deserted world where everyone around us had been killed, I was afraid to face other people and of what they were capable of. Paranooids do survive.

I didn't visit the nearby mall daily, and we had to presume it was probably the same with "the survivor" in town, as we now referred to the person who'd looted the drugstore and the department store in Eaux Vives. Were we ready to meet other people now, whoever they turned out to be? Those doubts came to me almost unconsciously. I was as surprised as Mary and Annah when I shared them.

"You don't want to?" Mary frowned.

"It's not that I don't want to..." I was afraid of the change.

We had just started to regain some normalcy in our lives. Things to do, things to focus on and hope for. Hope is a good feeling in itself. What if our hopes, about not being the only ones left on the planet, turned out to be ill-fated? Humans proved to be the most dangerous species of all in every century, most efficiently toward each other. The various "what if" implications worried me.

The Facebook ads campaign was now a multi-million page affair and still we had no results. Maybe survivors were not that common. Maybe at the mall it was just a girl, a woman, and that is all there was. Yet maybe she was not alone...maybe there were other people with her: Men. Violent? Desperate? Aggressive?

We had done a lot at home, and we were well organized. We were an enviable target for people looking for quick and easy gains. The world was full of con artists, swindlers ready to exploit our confidence and take advantage of us if we were naive. With no risks of facing any consequences, even murder could be a possible solution to ruthless people in our new world. I felt as if I had just found a stable base for us, and everything was collapsing again with unknown consequences.

Wait a second! This is exactly why we trained, to face dire situations should they come. Annah knew how to shoot, and Mary did, too. She'd managed to handle and fire the Glock just fine, hadn't she? Yes, but against fixed targets, and maybe just to please me. It wasn't going to be the same to shoot at another person. And the one who hesitates usually ends up horizontal. How would they react in front of a dangerous and menacing person? Would they hesitate?

I was torn, and the tension in the muscles around my neck hurt. 'Do you think there will be others of my age?' Annah had asked: the first thing she hoped for and thought of at the store. Did I have the right to shut the door on that possibility? Did I have the right to protect my family so much as to become the cause of their ultimate loss?

Mary and I had an agitated conversation, especially after we managed to kiss Annah goodnight. Our daughter made me promise that I would find whoever had been at the mall. "You promise, Dad?" It hurt inside and gave me troubles at night.

"Dan, if there's even the slightest hope that Annah won't live her life waiting for us to die..." She did not finish the phrase. She started to cry softly, and I didn't know whether she cried for us or for Annah. She looked straight at me. "Why do you hesitate?"

I snapped. "I'm scared, Mary! That's why! I *am* scared..."

I hadn't gone nuts, but I felt we were walking a very fine line. What I had managed to do so far would not be the solution of a lifetime. I knew it.

I remembered Albert Einstein once said, "We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking, if mankind is to survive," and I thought his words were perfectly applicable to our situation. I knew I had to find out who was out there. Was I adopting a new manner of thinking? Would it allow us to survive or ruin us?

An email from anyone alive in some distant location, unable to reach us, posed me no problem at all. That was safe knowledge, that others far away were struggling to survive the same way we did. Maybe we would exchange news and facts and nurture the hope that life, in some distant future, was going to be better. I was prepared for the possibility, dreamed about it even, that we'd be safe in our own bubble without external interferences.

Already, a sense of stability and safety had crept in as what we didn't know about the rest of the world couldn't harm us, could it? Now everything was different.

Mary had struck a chord. Why was I hesitating? Was that the vision I was preparing for Annah, for us? A life spent in a cocoon, pretending?

For no matter how safe it was at the time, things could become worse at any moment or at least more difficult to cope with. We would surely have to adjust to the loss of electricity, of Internet, running water, etc. We already had very little use of the phones. Could we ever adjust to being alone? And what about Annah?

We weren't going to be alive forever. One day will see our demise and what would become of Annah then? Living the rest of her life completely alone? Not the fate anyone ever had, even at the dawn of civilization. It would have been cruel. I hugged Mary and hid my face in her hair:

"I'm sorry. I will find out who that was," I whispered in Mary's ear. "I only need to think about how and in what terms."

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The next morning I explained what the night had told me in its wisdom, and I faced lots of disagreement, of course. Who am I kidding, disagreement? It was more of a fight. First, no, I was not going to show up at the mall and start to call out, nor was I going to drive around blowing the car's horn. Forget about that! And I was not going to bring them home with me either, or post notes with directions to our place and how to find us. No way! Instead, I

would go alone with Taxi and wait, hide where I would have a clear view and surveyed the entrance unseen. We knew they had been there; they didn't. I wasn't going to change my mind and lose our advantage, not immediately at least. Possibly I would be spending the night in town, if necessary, even a few nights. Gather all possible information before making contact.

Mary shook her head a few times before her first comment. "Where do you think you are, Dan? You're not in a combat zone."

We had a lively breakfast that morning. I did not give up and, although the vote was two against one, the majority lost the case. No democracy to invoke. There was no case. I would not go and look for anyone in town if not under my conditions. The only thing I agreed to was to come home before dark—at least for the first days—and to be in touch constantly.

It was Sunday, the first of April, and it amused me to end my remark with, "And I'll go on Monday. Today's April Fool's Day and I am not going to play that role any time soon." That defused the tension a bit. It was a glorious day and I even managed to convince Mary, with help from Annah, to stick to our previously established plan to prepare for a picnic and hit the golf course. Annah had wanted to show Mary her progress in the game for days, and it would have been just so good to spend some time together, as a family, leaving all the bad thoughts behind. In my heart, I hoped once more nothing was about to ruin what we had managed to build.

The morning after, I set out at dawn for town. As agreed, I took Taxi with me, with enough food and water to see us through the day. I wanted to arrive early to choose my location well and patiently prepare for a long wait and a boring task. I remembered to take the hoodie with me, well-sealed in the plastic bag.

"Be careful," warned Mary just before I got into the car. "And call as soon as possible. Don't dare make me wait, Mister."

We kissed and I left. During the entire trip, I could not help but think of what events I was about to trigger and who I was going to find. But the decision had been made and I hoped it would turn out to be the right one.

I parked the car blocks away from the shopping center. Didn't want anyone to notice a "new" vehicle suddenly appearing nearby. The town was dead, as usual. It felt so weird to walk close to walls—armed, with a trained and tense dog beside me—down the same streets only months before I had

shared with fellow citizens, leisurely walking in and out of a restaurant, or going shopping. If I closed my eyes, I could see streets full of people and hear life noises, shoes and stilettos smacking the sidewalks in an excited crescendo. The vision didn't last, as if reality suffered from a mystical photoshop retouch that had stripped of every human presence in a click. I shivered.

Silence. Oppressive silence, if not for the birds. I glanced around for stray dogs; I remembered well the one who almost succeeded in attacking me when I filled the tank the first time at the mall near home, or the pack we had met in town only a few days before. Having Taxi with me was crucial and reassuring. Slowly, we reached the block where the mall stood.

The day before I had noticed two possible hiding places. One, the mom-and-pop restaurant facing the side of the building and the center alternate entry. I would have a clear line of sight to the car park that served the center, a bit down the sidewalk below, though the high street leading to the entrance to the grocery level remained out of sight. The other was a photographer's shop at the corner of another building, in front of the mall. From its window, I would have an unobstructed view of the entry and the streets at the crossing but only a partial of the car park entry.

Even after considering the pros and cons of both nothing pointed to one location besting the other. I would have been well hidden in either. I opted for the photographer shop. I reasoned I would hear any approaching car with ease in the deadly silence Geneva had plunged into; it would be better than to be in front of the main entrance.

The photographer's shop also had another advantage: an old wood-framed French door. With the help of my hunting knife and my 200-plus pounds, I could manage to open the door easily. Yet, it took longer than I believed it would: a crowbar would be useful for future break-ins.

Once in, I inspected the place: empty picture frames on shelves, large photographs of old Geneva for sale, some portraits of past patrons, a small rear room with lamps and spotlights, and a chair against a light background where the photographer took pictures of his customers. The front windows were loaded with other decorations such as more pictures, large and framed old posters, fake plants and branches, and ornamental veils. They provided good cover.

I put down two bowls I brought with me for Taxi, one with water and another with some dry food. Taxi was the most critical asset I had, besides the

Glocks and the Benelli shotgun.

I set myself up for a long wait on the chair I took from the other room then I called home. Just to say I was settled and all was fine. I would get in touch again later and not to worry too much; Taxi was with me and we were out of view.

“Don’t call me back, Mary. It might happen at a wrong moment.”

“Don’t play the hero, sweet pea.”

Oh Mary, all her tenderness and ever-youthful love encased in those two little words, repeating themselves through the years like ripples in our pond of shared emotions. “It’s not Fool’s Day anymore,” I tried to joke. “I love you.” I hung up.

And so the morning passed. Taxi at my feet, half asleep, and I busy with constantly looking out the window.

Pigeons were coming and going. Was it only my imagination or were there many more of them around than before? Time oozed away, flowing like lava erupting lazily from a vent, slowly and impossible to stop, covering everything into oblivion under its dark layer of things that were and will never be again. And I had only to wait for the flow to reach me. Still, I almost dozed off.

Taxi suddenly stood up, nervous, and startled me. He went for the front door. Adrenaline woke me up rapidly and my heartbeat accelerated. I crouched and took up a better-concealed position before even summoning a rational thought in my mind. I couldn’t see what had got Taxi worried; I couldn’t hear anything but the rumbling of my heartbeat. Then, I saw it: on the other sidewalk, a dog strolled down the street. Taxi moaned. Shit.

“Sshhhhh. Sshhhh.” I reached and put my hand around his muzzle. “Quiet, Taxi.”

Outside, the dog paused. Sniffed the air briefly, raising its nose at each scent, then resumed its walk only to stop shortly after once again. It too obviously had detected something, but did not look too much interested or worried. I kept Taxi down and quiet. After a short while, the stray dog decided whatever it sensed was not his direct business and strolled away, turned left at the corner and we both lost sight of it. That was close. That wasn’t the time to engage into another canine dominance episode.

Apart from the birds, the dog was the only sign of life in town that day. In the afternoon, a pigeon—or was it a dove?—and a crow chased each other in mid-air for a while. A crow can really produce strident calls in an empty town.

The chase marked even more how deeply silent Geneva had become and turned the scene into a surreal canyon of concrete and steel.

I called Mary again, this time to tell her I was coming home. Nothing had happened, saw no one, heard no one. At home, Annah had her school lessons with Mary. After lunch, they'd enjoyed the garden with Tarantula and then went for the usual walk with her. I protested, mildly; if anything happened, I could not help them in any way.

Mary sounded a bit hurt by my remark. "Of course we've been careful. You shouldn't worry for us. Besides, it's your fault. Why did you make me and Annah spend so much time shooting, otherwise? We're able to defend ourselves. We don't need to stay home each time you're away."

"I'm sorry. I know you are." Indeed I knew she had been careful and was fully capable of caring for herself and Annah, too. That was not the problem; I had to adjust also to this change.

"Come home in one piece and don't be late now. Don't make us come and look for you." Luckily, Mary had found her cheerful mood again.

I smiled. "Yes, ma'am. Not to worry."

They were definitely not the same persons of a couple months before so I needed to start having a different perspective. I had told them exactly that: they had to learn to count on themselves. I could not be there all the time, every time, and it seemed I had reached my goal. With a pinch of regret, I was less indispensable. And it was good.

Before leaving the shop, I checked every visible area from there with the binoculars, one more time. Nothing. "C'mon, boy, time to go home. Our ladies are waiting, and are a bit nervous."

We left and returned to the car as swiftly as possible. Taxi stopped to empty his bladder against a tree, and I did the same; both of us marking territory. Crows started to gather on trees for the evening to come. I didn't remember having ever seen so many in one place before. Flying high, a hawk screeched.

Nature would not take long to reclaim Geneva. In a few years, things will deteriorate fast. Repeated cycles of freezing and warming will widen cracks between slabs of sidewalks, pipes will explode, and pavement separate and split with even more cracks. Weeds will be poking from the asphalt and building walls, and lichen seeds will sprout.

Fires will occur, maybe set by lightning to a wooden roof in the old town and move on to burn other buildings. Wild vegetation will cover streets and squares; the city sewage system will collapse and rainwater collect into puddles. Small flows from the higher districts to the lowest will appear and reach the lake. Cities will soon be a tough and harsh place to live or spend time.

For a moment, buildings became walls of stone; the streets, chasms and fissures in the earth; ravines and boulders, a crib for humanity. With all these images lingering in my mind, I put Taxi in the back seat and drove home.

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When I arrived, I moved the UPS truck, opened the gate, got the car in, parked the truck back in place again and closed the gate. Tedious and cumbersome, but safe. There was not much to tell Mary and Annah but that the wait had been long, and Taxi had warned me of the presence of a dog that I wouldn't have heard or noticed if it were not for him. I did not feel the need to come back to the small discussion we had over the phone about venturing out without me. Chapter closed. We were reaching a substantial new way of being ourselves.

"How was it, Dad?" Annah wanted to know.

"The dog? Just a dog, sweetie. Can't say the breed but it was black." She raised her shoulders, and lost all interest.

We had dinner as usual and the day was then officially over. We stayed together on the couch, in front of the fireplace, reading books. Pretending, needing to spend time together as if nothing had changed. Without Skype, and unable to chat with friends over the iPhone, Annah had discovered the pleasure of reading, and Mary was extremely happy she had.

We encouraged Annah to read everything and discuss the story, the plot and its meaning afterward. It became part of her education program, too. That evening Annah was reading "Pride and Prejudice," by Jane Austen and its issues of manners, upbringing, morality, education, and marriage in the society of early 19th-century England. The part Annah still didn't like to do, however, was producing the book report after each reading.

The next day, and the following for that matter, went similarly without much change or difference in the way I spent time. I got installed in the photographer shop early in the morning. The front door was as I had left it

and, although the lock was broken, it still held the door firmly. The dog we had seen on Monday was nowhere around.

On one of the following days, I decided to fulfill my desire and indulge myself: I visited Davidoff on my way to my observation post. I silenced the alarm once in, looked for and chose the largest humidor they had on display and, lo and behold, the cigar room was perfect as if nothing had ever occurred. The thought echoed repeatedly, and I could not chase it away: *'as if nothing had ever occurred.'*

The world had all its reasons not to miss humanity much. Could it be that I was becoming accustomed to it, or even enjoying the...freedom? I shivered entering the humidity-controlled room and I wasn't sure it was due only to the change in temperature.

The room was small, with a square central counter. All around, shelves full of cigars, cigars and more cigars, from floor to ceiling. I always marveled at that view. The Davidoff brand reigned of course, with its "Chateaux" and "Mille" series. The Cohiba as well, whose founder started rolling Cuban President Fidel Castro's own private cigars. Then cigars from Arturo Fuente, Augusto Reyes, Camacho, Cubita and many others which I have never heard of, all of them in alphabetical order.

I spent time in the room to look and read every single brand on each box, and kind, and cut of the cigars. I'd never had the occasion to do that before. Before, I didn't want to show the clerk that, in reality, I knew very little about the world of cigars.

I filled my new humidor with Cohiba's Esplendidos and, for good measure, I took two more sealed boxes of them. I left the place happy, knowing that I could come back whenever I wanted. Maybe that's the way billionaires feel about the world: never asking the price, knowing you can have as many as you want of everything, anytime, for how often you feel like it without ever thinking of the cost.

On Friday, I called it off. I was tired of spending my days that way, waiting. Besides, it was Good Friday. We declared together it was a long weekend. That Sunday was Easter. We would make some cakes to celebrate. This Easter was going to have a special meaning for us all. It celebrated Christ's resurrection, but we attached significance for us as well: our resurrection, our own struggle in order to achieve that.

On Saturday evening, we noticed some previously lit areas in the distance were no longer. Annah noticed the difference first and rushed to warn us. Although just a small spot on our visible horizon, it had gone dark.

Had the degradation started? Most probably it was something minor like a blown bulb or street lamps no longer receiving power. Anyway, I wouldn't go there just to check for the causes. It would have been another story if the opposite had happened: some new visible lights in previously dark areas. Then it would have been way different. So far, I believed we had been lucky thanks to the good season we'd had. When winter came, no doubt degradation would start for real.

The Click

Virtual Presences

Easter Sunday. For all Christian communities it was a date to celebrate with family and friends. Easter Monday would be, too, and Annah enjoyed the holiday from lessons. Taxi and Tarantula profited aplenty from Annah's freedom. Dates, celebrations, and recurring events were vital to observe for, in a sense, they were all that was left, the last tie with everything that was no more. Ephemeral things, days on the calendar had more meaning for us now than they had before.

Mary opened the window in the home office that morning and yelled. "Dan!"

Annah and I were in the yard taking care of—or playing with, to be honest—Taxi and Tarantula.

"Dan! Come upstairs, quick!" She sounded thrilled, not frightened.

"What the... Mary? Mary?" I shouted from down below. From the window on the top floor, she waved her hands excited. "The Facebook ads!"

She didn't need to say more. Both Annah and I rushed upstairs. When we arrived, Mary, triumphantly, pointed at the iMac screen. It showed the dashboard for the campaigns we launched back in February, with all the data collected into graphs.

Of all the details about reach, target, and others statistics, only one meant anything to us: the number of clicks... One!

The enormity of the event is difficult to explain or describe in words now. One person; one concrete, unquestionably real and strikingly present survivor. Someone saw and had clicked on our message.

One click. With one single click somewhere in the world, *our* world had abruptly changed again.

We checked all our email accounts. The last messages received were the usual automatic emails acknowledging our initial attempts to post into moderated forums or subscribe to mailing lists. No human beings involved.

Now, it had to be just a matter of hours before we would be contacted by whoever had seen our message.

The phones! I checked again to see if all were working. We had used them recently but they could die at any moment. Maybe we had a recorded message we had inexplicably missed. Nothing. Our voicemail was empty.

“It will happen, it will happen! Any moment now!” I told Mary, more to reassure myself than anything else. She and Annah watched as I verified again the campaign target details. “Twenty-five countries. That one click could come from anywhere.”

The dashboard had no details as to when the connection happened, not the date or the time. “Yesterday morning the click was not there. I’m sure because I went through the campaign ad details. If it happened during the previous night...could that mean it is from someone in the US? No, wait, maybe someone in the Far East? So many time zones separate us. Mary, did you check the page yesterday?”

I accessed the dashboard in the mornings, and it seemed impossible I had missed it! Wait a second; indeed the click could be from someone in Europe. Maybe someone *had* checked our message during the evening, and we missed it because no one had verified the page before going to bed.

“I don’t remember.” Mary noticed my anguished expression as I opened my hands. “How could you not remember?”

“I don’t remember exactly, ok? I think I did.” She took a deep breath. “Yes, I checked before dinner.”

Admittedly, with time, we had started to believe we'd have no luck at all with the Facebook campaign. We were no longer systematically following the initial scheduled check routine. I believed the probability that someone could actually see our message, and react, depended on so many factors that the whole thing had started to have only an emotional value, a faint hope.

“They will contact us again, right Dad?” Annah said.

“Yeah.” I sighed.

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Easter Monday passed spending time checking email and ensuring that all the phone lines were working properly. We all felt...pending. Here we had a solid and undeniable proof that others were alive; one very close, living in or

around Geneva; another in one of the countries covered in the Facebook ad campaign which miraculously had generated a click. One click, the most important click ever in the entire world digital history.

The truth was that, in all these weeks, I really didn't expect to see any response from the ads campaign: I feared the entire world was disconnected. But now I was excited so I checked the dashboard again and again—and all email accounts—almost maniacally. I didn't want hide in some photographer's shop waiting for someone to show up. Someone whom I'd waited for almost an entire week already. I wanted to stay with my family when we received a tangible sign, an email or a phone call, maybe both.

Nothing happened. Almost forty-eight hours had passed since that click and still nothing. No signs. My mood changed completely. I remembered those tee-shirts sold at tourist locations: "My sister went to London and all I got is this lousy T-shirt!" I felt the same. All we got was that lousy click.

We didn't know what to think. For all we knew, a glitch in the Facebook campaign could have been the cause. If it really was a person, why not getting in touch with us right away? I needed to go back to Geneva and see whether whoever had been at the shopping mall was going to resurface again. I couldn't neglect the survivor who was surely living nearby and trade that for an email or a phone call that could never come either.

I was disappointed; after all this waiting, the lost hopes, the renewed excitement, and then nothing. Nothing! Why? I urged Mary and Annah to keep a close eye on the dashboard and emails and immediately get in touch with me if... Yeah, if.

With a sense of betrayal from the entire human race, I left and resumed my sentinel watch at the shopping center.

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Taxi probably enjoyed the stalking game more than I did. He rested on the floor, and—at times—stared intently at me. He was alert all the time, probably because of my mood, but he was peaceful the same. I guess he knew we were there for something important. Maybe his master was going berserk and he could not fully relax.

Around midday, I enjoyed one of those treasured Esplendidos cigars Davidoff had graciously supplied me with. Taxi grunted at the smoke so I

kept the fanlight above the entrance door open and air circulated freely. I gave no thought that maybe, outside, the smell of cigars could reach distant places and betray my presence.

The back room also had a little oval window giving to the internal court of the building and providing some light to the back of the shop. With that one kept open as well, I prevented the entire place to turn into a gas chamber. The cigar gave me something to do, in addition to chatting with Mary on the iPhone from time to time.

“Still nothing?” Mary asked.

“No. Not a sound, nothing in sight. Any email?”

“I would have told you right away...”

“I know. What are you doing?”

“Nothing, we miss you.”

The Apocalypse in the real world wasn't the frantic zombie saga of some TV series.

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Another day passed. I came home feeling depressed a bit more every evening. Frustration replaced the excitement of the previous days, and anger surfaced, too.

I didn't know what to think, and neither did Mary. That click, and the mess at the mall, both were crucially important, and became a fixation and engulfed us all. We were fine as we were, right? But those were outrageously important, I kept repeating myself.

We had survived, and we had no future. Annah had no future. Her only hope rested on us and other survivors to be numerous enough to become pioneers again in our own world. In that case, will we begin anew as we once did? Eons ago? That's why it was vital to find other people.

We decided to leave a note at the shopping center. Mary put together a meaningful text. She explained we, as a family, had survived that fatal February night. That in the past months we had organized ourselves at home and maybe others were doing the same. We hoped for them to be safe. She did not add any details about our location or how many we were.

We agreed it was okay to leave our email; no phone numbers, though, in case others could access existing online services to trace back to our home

address. I had tried myself and did not succeed, but I didn't want to take the risk. Maybe I was becoming paranoid for real. We asked to leave an answer on a small billboard, left in the open, at the corner of Jargonnant-Terrasiere street, stuck to the sign pole.

I don't know whether in other situations, normal situations, we would have come out with such a plan. Maybe it sounds ridiculous now, but it was the best we could think of then.

We knew a contact might never happen; what we had found at the mall could have been the result of a one-time visit from someone on the move, never to return. We were improvising on a stage no one had prepared us to deal with. A scenario we hadn't chosen and for which there was no audience.

The next morning, Taxi and I went to the shopping center again. I was tired of hiding and waiting.

Birds had started to conquer the spaces. They were very vocal, and their calls the only noises to hear when once it was only cars, and traffic, and people walking and chatting. The never-ending buzz of a living town had died. The difference with the present was striking: with all the reflecting surfaces in a town, every single and rare sound now bounced to reach far distances and gave birth to an eerie echo.

When we got inside the mall, the same unchanged and unwelcoming scene greeted us: decaying plants and rotten pastries. I let Taxi sniff the hoodie I had recovered almost two weeks before. He examined it and snorted, trying to find traces of the old scent. With me close behind, Taxi wandered around seeking to find its track again, and I had the impression he did it only to please me. It seemed no one with that odor had visited the place recently.

We reached the aisle where we found the cereal box. The aisle was in the exact same state we left it. I took Mary's paperboard where she had written our message in English and in French. I secured it in place with sticky tape and headed toward the upper level. Just in case.

I showed Taxi the hoodie again. Once more, he didn't find any new clue. He spent some time in the women's apparel and clothing area, but the odor had weakened and Taxi wandered unable to catch it again.

After a while, we left for my hideout to spend another day waiting. Taxi and I had just reached our surveillance post across the street and settled in when the iPhone buzzed. It was a message from Mary. Actually, an email, a

straight email forward with no added comments from her. I watched the screen in awe:

From: Michael81_GG@hotmail.com Date: 13 April 2012 07:11:44 CET

"Hiya! Who the fuck are you? Not for nuttin' but the punks who whacked us are still here. If you're fucking with me, go see where you gotta go punk. M."

Who the fuck are we? If I was expecting alleluia, kumbayah, and "people of the world unite", forget it. I called home.

"Dan? Have you read it?" Mary's voice trembled.

"Yup." The message had troubled me. "I don't know what to think, Mary. And what does 'the punks are still here' mean?"

"It feels so...harsh."

"Do you know anything about long headers in emails?"

Silence.

"Never mind. I'll do it myself later. Maybe we can find where it comes from."

"Come home."

"Listen..." I disagreed, but I changed my mind. I had spent enough time in town already and it was pointless to stay any longer. "Ok. I'll be there soon."

That was not the message from someone eager to get in touch with anyone anytime soon. It showed distrust and suspicion. Well, I showed distrust and suspicion myself toward whomever I stalked for days there now. Still did, but this was different: I was just being careful and protected my family.

The guy must have searched for others, too, if he'd seen our message on Facebook. So why that reply? Moreover, whom was he referring to with that "still here." And the "us" in Michael81's email, whom the hell was he talking about? Other survivors or the entire humanity?

If there were other people...could it be that groups of survivors became hostile to one another where Michael81 was? Possible. But why? Again the Mad Max movie scenes came to life in my mind. Thus, I might've been right not coming out naively and looking around in the open, in full view for anyone who was still alive in Geneva.

This was no kumbayah world. Maybe criminals have had the same chances to survive as respectable and law abiding citizens. If Michael81—and his group?—got whacked...by whom? We could get whacked as well. Now I really

wanted to go back home. Nothing better than some uncontrolled mental surge to trigger muscular movement: We left our hideout.

Taxi and I ran to the car. I looked over my shoulder all the time in fear of some bullet and a sudden attack at every corner. Taxi didn't seem nervous. I knew I could count on him at every moment, even at the cost of his life. Dogs are that faithful.

We rushed into the car—didn't even waste time to open the trunk—and reached home in a short time.

I was right to be paranoid, I repeated to myself. If anything, the message showed danger was still very present in our world and we had better treat any survivor as a potential threat. How silly I had been. "Homo hominis lupus," man is like a wolf to other men. The wisdom of the past and of our ancestors.

I secured our entrance as usual with the truck. Mary and Annah rushed out of the door and hugged me, barely uttering a word. We got inside quickly. I locked the door.

"I'm glad you're back." Mary frowned. "What do you think?"

"There must be organized groups of survivors. Maybe they fight for... what? Control of supplies?"

"Why, Dad?" Annah shook her head. "There's so much of everything for..." I think she was about to add 'for everyone', but Annah bit her tongue. I pretended not to notice.

"Yes, here we have everything we need. And plenty of it. Maybe it's different elsewhere, where this Michael lives, and people are fighting for it? I cannot really say, sweetie."

"There must be many others then," Mary reasoned.

Yes, sure, and not welcoming, I thought but kept my fears hidden. "Maybe."

"And...what about Geneva?" Mary went on.

"Maybe," I repeated.

"Did you place our message?"

"Yes, where the cereals are but now I need to go back to town."

"Why? What for?"

"Dad, no! Why?" Annah pulled my arm.

"The paperboard! We're saying we are in the surrounding area. Also, I'm going to change our Facebook message and remove our phone numbers; one could get to our address, too." There, the fear came out.

The possibility of finding a group of survivors who could turn hostile toward us was not quite what we needed, now or in the future. Nor what I expected to feel about other survivors. Moreover, we were not really hiding, and anyone determined to find people and provisions could easily get to and locate us. If a group of survivors were out there, how long would it take before they'd find us? Mad Max, Mad Max...he truly haunted me.

The Valley mall was a well-known location. How long before someone else, even if far from there, would think about paying it a visit? There were many good places in town, and between Geneva and Lausanne, too...places to find food and supplies. That made our mall not the first in line for anyone in Geneva, but in the future? A gush of acid reflux burned my throat and almost choked me. I swallowed hard.

By all odds, it was better if we discovered them first, to have the advantage and be prepared. Suddenly, the idea of putting up the paperboard did not seem like such a great one anymore. I needed to calm down or I would shoot at anything moving without thinking. I thought I was rational and cool in most situations but, if I had reached this point, what could have happened to someone more inclined to violence than me?

Mary interrupted my thoughts. "Okay, then. But we're coming with you."

I realized there was little to discuss. Our world was not as peaceful and safe as we had naively concluded it to be.

We all got back in the car armed with loaded guns—as if going into battle—and with a strange light piercing our eyes, as if the cold reflection of an indifferent moon over a frozen land had replaced the warmth and fuzziness of a benevolent sun.

Our perspective became acutely different in those moments, and all because of one single email that supposedly should have been an event received with celebration. I supposed we walked on the edge of a mental chasm. In its depths, violence, hatred, suspicion, and madness were all willing to embrace us to reach their ultimate climax.

We arrived in town without uttering a word, and I had been careful to approach the mall via back roads, taking a long improbable detour. If our paperboard had already been found, maybe there would be a welcoming party waiting for us, the happy and naive family. Mary and Annah kept their weapons ready. We parked on the sidewalk of a narrow street a few blocks

away, got out, and crouched between the car and the wall of a building. Ready to head off a confrontation.

Before moving forward, we scanned the surroundings with our binoculars. Nobody talked. The world had changed and it had changed us, more than I had imagined.

I signaled Mary and Annah to stay behind, and reached another safe spot with Taxi. I scanned the area once more, only then did I call the others to join us. Tired, we reached the corner in front of the shopping center entrance some twenty minutes later.

All was quiet and apparently safe. I pointed the binoculars to the photographer's shop. It was exactly as I had left it, but that meant nothing. I kneeled down to Taxi and Tarantula and hugged them both. Then I took the hoodie from my rucksack.

Annah understood what I was about to do. "Dad! No!"

I looked at her and put my index to my lips. My sight was like a cold, transfixing spear. Annah blanched. That was not the moment for discussions. I loved those dogs, but they were our life insurance at that moment.

Taxi and Tarantula sniffed the garment, sniffed the surrounding area, then raised their noses. I ordered, "Check."

They jumped forward into the open while I got the Benelli ready to shoot. I swear I would have shot whoever appeared if not with raised hands. Armed, Mary and Annah knelt behind a large concrete flower box at the corner of the restaurant.

Taxi and Tarantula dashed to cross the street and headed toward the automatic sliding doors. They had to stop there, undecided what to do, as the doors remained closed.

T&T had to be below the threshold for the motion detector trigger. They sniffed and looked around the entrance, and a bit up and down the street, too. Meanwhile, we three in the back stayed put, ready for any reaction, movement, or sound. Neither Taxi nor Tarantula seemed to sense anything out of the ordinary, or any danger. Taxi looked in our direction.

"Mary, cover me."

"Dan!" she protested and tried to grip my arm, but I had already started to run, half bent, strafing toward the dogs, scanning with the Benelli all around and ready to shoot at anything and at the first warning. Taxi and

Tarantula watched and waited for me, relaxed; they had done their job. I crouched against the wall and looked back. I breathed hard for a moment.

As I slowly approached the entrance, the doors opened with their usual lamentation that would have signaled my arrival miles away. I quickly stepped inside, followed by the dogs, knelt down and glanced around. Nothing. I held my breath and listened. Silence. Only then did I retreat and, when outside, waved for Mary and Annah to join us, all the while aiming the Benelli at the streets around them.

Mary and Annah quickly covered the short distance from the restaurant to the mall and we were soon all together again. We gathered right inside at the florist shop and let the automatic doors close. We paused for a moment without moving or making a sound to let our eyes adjust to the light conditions inside and to listen for any unexpected noise. Then, with Taxi and Tarantula in front, we moved quietly, very quietly. The two German Shepherds kept sniffing as they advanced. Watching our backs, and moving ever cautiously, we reached the produce store. The entry barriers opened.

We reached the aisle where I had stuck the paperboard with our message. It was still there. Then John Lennon and his catchy phrase struck: Taxi and Tarantula got tense and alert even if we could not hear or see any reason why. Soon after, we startled at a fast approaching whooshing sound. We jumped forward to the main aisle, guns at hands, ready for the worst.

A muffled cry in a high pitch came from a figure on rollerblades who screeched to a halt as it saw us and started frantically to run away.

"*Stay!*" I cried to prevent Taxi and Tarantula from running after the skater, then "*Wait!*" to the figure who had gained speed and dashed toward the exit. All had been very fast, and the skater was damned good on those rollers: definitely a young woman. She wore tight jeans, a black leather jacket and carried a large, empty backpack. She was wearing gloves and a black helmet that hid her hair entirely.

I started to run as fast as possible after the skating lady while Mary had held Annah behind her back all that time.

"*Wait!*" Mary yelled. But the girl reached the exit and jumped outside onto the street. The sliding doors closed in front of Taxi and Tarantula, who had started to run with me and passed me in the chase. I don't know what they would've done had they reached the girl in time.

I got to the exit and the sliding doors opened slowly so I pushed them; Mary and Annah caught up with me. I dashed out and, together with Mary and Annah, we got a glimpse of the skater girl speeding down the street and disappearing round a corner. I whistled for Taxi and Tarantula to come back.

“What do we do now?” Mary broke the silence. It made little difference now as the die had been cast. We all knew of the existence of each other, yet I had lost the advantage. “Give me a pen.”

“I don’t have any! What for?”

“Come, quickly.”

I ran back to the mall. The level above the grocery had a stationery shop near to where we had found the skating-girl's hoodie, as I was sure now it was hers. Everyone followed. I reached the upper level and the stationary area full of writing tools of every possible kind and for any writing surface. I got a black marker. Now to the paperboard.

“What are you doing?” Mary grabbed my arm.

“The only one sensible thing to do with a woman I just met. I’m asking for a date.” I said, smiling.

“What?” She cried.

I left Mary standing there, rather upset, and ran toward the sliding sidewalk and back to the grocery level.

Taxi and Tarantula were bemused and kept following me undecided whether to be worried, excited, afraid or angry at me for all that senseless running.

“Dad!” I guess Annah was not that amused.

When they finally reached me at the cereal aisle, I had already written my message on the paperboard.

Mary read what I had just written. “You’re crazy!”

“It’s the only thing to do.” I went for the exit.

I stuck our message next to the automatic doors. It covered the entire metal panel that showed the mall's opening hours. That girl seemed terrified. She wasn’t expecting to see our group there, and it must have been quite a shock.

Probably she got her food and anything else she needed there. She went around on rollerblades so maybe didn’t own a car, or too young for one. She must have lived not too far away either, but not in the blocks around the mall. Hence, I kept reasoning, she might not have the leisure, as we did, to neither

go far for supplies nor have the choice—or the need—of multiple places. The mall must be easy for her to reach.

She would be back there again, sooner or later. Maybe a bit later now that she was scared, but back nevertheless.

On the paperboard, I added that our intentions were good, we would not harm her or anyone who was with her. I gave her a daily appointment, alone and with no dogs, as proof of our trustworthiness. I would wait for her one hour every day. She had to show up on Jargonnant Street, near the car park entrance. I would come out to talk. From afar. No physical contacts. No harm.

“Mary, I have to do it!” I nodded toward Annah. “You know I have to, right?” I turned and grabbed Annah, pressed her against me. She curled up close to me like a baby.

Mary held both hands to her face as if she was praying. “Not this way.”

I didn’t reply; what to reply?

We got back to the car. Mary held my hand all the way home. Our world was changing rapidly, and there was still Michael81's pending message to deal with.

Epiphany

The Past And The Present

Michael, if that was truly his name, might have had valid reasons to mistrust our message. So far, we had it rather easy around here. Ours had been more of an emotional struggle, overcoming the initial fears and getting organized. We faced no menace nor dangers...so far. Maybe not everyone had gone through the same? "Who the fuck are you?" was not a good start for a friendly conversation, but we didn't have many options in selecting future relationships.

We replied in the best and most transparent way we could, and we started with a "Dear Michael." Already writing that quickened my pulse. We chose not to ask any questions, leaving the decision entirely to him whether or not to disclose any details of his situation or where he was. We described how we went through that morning in February, how we discovered things. We told him about the dead people; how they apparently all died for the same reasons and roughly at the same time.

Mary and Annah watched over my shoulder while I typed, rewriting things over and over with my palms sweating as if they were runners in a relay race in the effort of putting down the right words. Sharing emotions and passing Michael the baton with enough reasons to read our words and reply back. I had the impression to be under examination and that every word was wrong and in the wrong place.

Because of all the dead commuters, their demise had most likely occurred between 5:30-6:30am and everyone seemed to have died in the same way. We were in CET, or GMT+1, so he could use that if he lived in a different time zone than ours. He would then be able to verify whether there were any coincidences in timing. We shared we had proof of at least another person alive in town though we could not say if there were more survivors.

Funny, while writing those things, my brain felt as if it floated in a cold bath, detached, repelling emotions as poisonous spores that bogged down

rationality with their sticky ooze. I wondered whether my wife and daughter felt the same but I could not raise my eyes off the screen.

I told Michael that I didn't believe the causes to be poison or a plague of some sort. We had no symptoms of anything; we felt healthy, at least physically. Unless, for some mysterious quirks of our genes, we were immune to an external agent but I doubted that was what happened. Everything had been so sudden, with people dying in their vehicles, in their beds, or waiting for the first bus in the morning. Something or someone had access to the switch of human lives on Earth and decided to pull it.

For the first time since that February morning, I formulated a thought that lingered unexpressed and that I repelled, because it frightened me. As when as a child, I lay in bed at night, head under the covers, not daring to move a muscle. Holding my breath, certain of a malignant presence in the room that waited for me to move before it struck. Pretending to be dead to avoid death...

I wrote Michael that, as crazy as it sounded, I believed we could have suffered a preordained attack, and on such a large scale that everyone was dead or incapacitated. By whom or by what we had absolutely no clues, nor evidence. Maybe *we* were just crazy.

Mary squeezed my shoulder when I wrote those lines. I raised my hand to meet hers and we clung to each other; in the end, my emotions had been able to breach the steel barrier the brain raised so eagerly before. I turned to glance up at her face, and her eyes were swollen and wet, but there was no fear when she met mine.

We described our experiences with TV and the radio channels, our searches on the Internet and our inability to get any information beyond that fatal day. Nothing or no one contributed to the news anymore or broadcasted anything on any channel. Twitter didn't work for our accounts, was his still on? Or did he even have one? Utility services were still up and running where we lived on the outskirts of a major Swiss city. He did not need to provide us details of his location in case he felt in danger, unless he happened to be so close to us that we could eventually meet. We concluded hoping he could survive, hold on, and stay safe. I signed it, "Dan and family. God Bless."

My hands collapsed, aching. I realized how tense my entire body was. My neck and the muscles in my shoulders burned. I sighed and turned in the chair.

Annah sat on the couch, her legs raised to her chin. She was crying, making no sound. Only mute and silent tears ran down her face, marking time in a metronome maintaining a consistent tempo with despair and defeat.

A lump formed in my throat. I would give my life and concede to death to give hope and a future to my daughter. Even though death would have laughed at my proposition.

I turned around and hit “send”, hoping Michael⁸¹ would receive and read it, and be willing to reply to us. We knew we might never get an answer from him. Likewise, we might not ever again see the girl with the rollerblades, although in her case we had more things to do than writing a message.

The steel barrier my brain set up as a last defense had collapsed. “Mary, you and Annah are the reasons why I did not break down. We cannot live in fear, hiding like hunted animals or running away from the dangers and difficulties that arise from our situation, for however scary and unreal it is. The truth can be dangerous to know but, more than death, we should fear living in a cage behind bars until old age reaches us and all hope of a future is gone.”

I looked into Mary's eyes. “Our future is to work toward Annah's future. I will not hide anymore. I'll wait for the girl in rollers on the street, alone.”

“No, you're not. After what you've written just now...how could you say that? Are you willing to risk everything on a bet, an intuition?”

Mary took a step back. “You've assured us so far, but we only have each other. If anything happened to any of us now, the others will not survive. Don't you understand that?” She paused. “Do you really care for us?” She looked away from me and took a few deep breaths.

I wasn't prepared to answer such a question. I watched in awe as she turned her back on me, her head lowered in resignation. For all our lives together, no one has ever questioned or doubted the love we had for each other.

I glanced hopelessly toward Annah, but she'd shrunk even more on the couch, sobbing. I believed Annah wanted to say something, anything to stop what she believed was splitting her parents. Her lips moved and her mouth opened to a void; she started to shake.

Mary turned toward me again and my heart sunk as I expected the worst. My mouth was dry and, despite all my strength—physical and emotional—there I was, my legs suddenly feeling like rubber bands.

“Why, Dan?” My heart rushed and I felt the warmth of a blood surge rising to my cheeks. I loved her so much that I realized she had the power to crush me if she wanted to.

“I know you love us, so why? You know nothing about that girl.” She marked it with a punch to my chest with her open hand.

I didn’t know how long she’d kept all that inside. Trying not to let it go; trying to rationalize, always supporting my decisions. She couldn’t do it anymore. She could not hold everything back any longer. It all came out, and I felt it like a turbulent flood. All her temper, fears, angers, and love hit me at the same time. A rainbow of emotions slammed against me, but there was a golden pot at its end: she was still by my side. Yet, I was scared.

Mary vented all her frustration; I bent under the abrupt storm of her feelings. Exhausted, she collapsed on the couch near our daughter. Annah was still crying softly, silently. Mary hugged her and whispered into her ear. I couldn’t hear Mary’s words, but I recognized the rhythm of an ancient lullaby she used to sing to soothe Annah after a nightmare. I looked at them, and I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I cannot lose you; *we* cannot lose you.” Mary said with a welling up of threatened sobs.

I knelt in front of them, relieving my legs from the effort of keeping me standing. I opened my arms and embraced my girls: they were the reasons I kept going and I was the only firm and steady ground they had.

We stayed there, together, never feeling so alone and delicate than in those moments. We were a fragile knot of life, a blimp made of love, floating in a universe ever more indifferent and refusing to get involved. I was unable to imagine our future. That night, Mary and I expressed with love our rights to live and desire, and to nurture hope.

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The next morning, Mary’s words still echoed in my mind. I had been married to Mary for twenty-two years. Maybe I should have known that she’d never let me go alone as I planned. Against all reason, we all went together—dogs included—to the possible meeting with the girl.

We took a totally different route this time, with many small detours in between. In the end, we reached the Natural History Museum, on the tipping

point of a hill. From there, Mary and Annah would be on the lookout for anything suspicious and, at the very least, send Taxi and Tarantula for help. I did not want my wife and daughter to come trying to rescue me if I was truly in danger. In the worst case, I preferred they'd actually run or stay hidden. If I faced a fatal threat and if odds were against me, I didn't want them to risk their lives.

In our favor, the Swiss society was not a violent one. "Mad Max", a realistic movie scenario for most of the US, would have not been credible if that story was to unfold in Switzerland, Geneva even more so. Mary used my own reassuring terms as their reasons to accompany me.

"Ok, I agree with you, it's improbable that there will be people out there waiting to kill you or harm you. Fine! Then there's no reason at all for us to stay home and wait, right?"

Annah gave me *her look* as if to say, "She got you one more time, Dad."

I called Mary on her mobile and put the iPhone in the top pocket of my vest. This way, I could talk to her all the time. Instead of walking straight toward the mall, I took a little detour and talked on and off to Mary to make sure she could still hear me well. I arrived at the photographer's shop from a lateral street. The mall was at the corner, to my right. I crossed the street and paused in the middle of the intersection.

"See me?"

"Yes." Mary confirmed. That lonely whisper—uttered as in a last breath—made me shiver. I felt her love in one single word and, alone in the deserted city, I felt the ache of the world.

I rubbed my face to hide I was talking. "Okay. I'm about to reach the shop." There could have been more onlookers than just Mary and Annah that morning, but I also needed to wipe off my eyes, swollen and wet. All theories about a non-violent society were going to be put to the test and I was the specimen for the experiment.

I kept walking, thinking only about the next step to take, the tension cramped my body from shoulders to belly. As on a minefield, I feared every move I made could have been my last one.

I reached the shop and went to open the door. *I am getting into a trap*, I thought, and my hand hovered, undecided. Sweat trickled down my back. I closed my eyes and rested my hand on the knob for a split second. I sighed and opened the door slowly, peeking inside. Everything seemed untouched.

No one had been there. I stepped in and, with a trembling hand, I took the phone.

“Mary, I’m fine. Nothing to do now but wait.” I don’t know whether I’d been able to hide from Mary the lump I had in my throat.

“Dan...I love you.” Mary’s reply came as a reminder of everything I risked and all my assurance melted away like a jellyfish abandoned on a shore, pierced by the hostile light of a deadly sun.

An hour later and no one showed up. I verified with the binoculars that the paperboard was still sticking up fine, left the shop, and walked back the same way I had before. There were fewer reasons then to believe my life was in danger but still my back was rigid as if I had swallowed a broomstick.

Mary and Annah waited near the car. Mary hugged me. “You look tired, hon. We’ve seen nothing unusual from up here. Maybe she didn’t come.”

“Dad, I checked all nearby buildings and the neighborhood with the binoculars. And Taxi and Tarantula have been calm all the time. Can we go home now?”

Faking a smile, I nodded. We went home.

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It had become tedious, to say the least. Rollerblade-girl was a 'no show' and Michael had not cared to reply yet. Or could not. I tried to perform an IP reverse lookup, but the process did not provide much information either.

Our lives went on as usual. Annah kept studying with Mary. I went around with the dogs, checking on our neighborhood and other nearby villages, or fixing things in the house and getting even more prepared for the next winter. Everyone tended to the garden and the first lettuces were starting to be visible. Tomatoes, cabbages and eggplants seemed fine, too. We also cultivated sprouts of various kinds to add to our diet and soon, during summer, I would go hunting for fruits. One of the advantages of living in a rural area, orchards were not far, and everything was at our disposal.

Days passed uneventfully until one morning, approaching the shopping mall entrance for the usual appointment with Rollerblade-girl, I noticed someone had finally written back on our paperboard: “You were not alone!”

I called Mary right away. “Rollerblade-girl wrote back! She must have seen you. Come over here and pick me up. I think we can go home for today.”

In the few minutes waiting for Mary and Annah to drive the short distance to the shopping center, I started to write down a reply on the paperboard. Who knows, maybe Rollerblade-girl was watching me at that very moment. “I will be alone next time. You can count on me!”

The noise of our Volvo grew louder and, a few seconds later, Mary and Annah were at the corner. I got into the car.

“What happened?” Mary asked.

“She must have checked the surroundings these last few days and noticed you and Annah. She wrote 'You were not alone!' with exclamation mark included.”

Mary kept silent for a moment, her hands gripping the steering wheel with force. “You plan to go by yourself now, right?”

She definitely knew me. I didn’t answer immediately and searched for words. “Mary, I don’t think I'm facing a danger anymore.”

She nodded. There was nothing more to say.

During the drive back home, the three of us stayed silent. Taxi and Tarantula, sensible dogs that they were, kept quiet too.

Mary drove slowly, and the desolation and solitude around us were palpable. Especially that day. I didn’t know what my wife and daughter were thinking about, but I couldn’t chase away the thought that there were now four people alive in the area. Four!

I spent the day without having a specific goal; there was so much at stake, for everyone. My mind seemed unable to formulate one thought and bring it to a close.

Thoughts jumped at me and flew away before I could grab them and understand their implications. We held on so much to our previous life; I had clung to that and created a cocoon around us. But the new life was there, so tangible and manifest that the cocoon could not last much longer. I didn’t know it then, but the past was catching up with me.

That evening, Michael⁸¹ resurfaced: “Youz guys seem kosher,” he wrote.

We learned that he came from the East Coast and lived in New York City. There were other survivors with him, gathered little by little in the past weeks, and they'd started to get organized, also little by little. In March, they had seen heavy raining and the rivers, forced underground by Manhattan construction through pipes and through the years, had invaded practically all subway tunnels.

Water was flowing freely in some streets now, bursting through sewers and the same subway stations. There had not been enough sunny weather for water to evaporate, and building shades did not help either. In many areas, water had collected into large and smelly puddles. It had been, all in all, a quite chilly month.

Electrical power was still pretty much available around the city though some areas were in the dark and, when night came, street lights were not functioning anymore. Water reached higher than the curbs in most places and flooded the ground levels. Freezing nights had widened cracks of the asphalt and sidewalks slabs were popping up, turning them into packs of domino tiles, slanted and piled atop each other. Especially in the Lexington area, where pipes had actually exploded, adding to the water flow. Weeds and cockroaches were everywhere.

In the early days, they saw Central Park horse-drawn carriages riding alone, at times with their dead driver perched on the bench. The scene still gave them all goose bumps. "How can you ever get used to that?" Michael asked.

Some zoo animals must have managed to escape as he swore he'd heard some kind of a lion roaring. He and others never went out unarmed, and never alone. They have been in and out of apartment buildings, to look for others, or for any clue of what had happened.

They had found a girl that way one day, going around with air horns and blowing them to attract people. Michael and his group had almost left the area when she ran down the stairs because the elevators in her building were not working anymore. The poor thing was breathless and he said, "She burst into tears in our arms."

They'd also spotted strange auras at night. "Did you see them where you are?" Michael asked in his email. "Sure you did. They must wear a suit that glows, that's what it must be. They whacked us, man," he wrote. "They're the cause for all that happened and they are after God knows what. They cleaned NYC of the dead. Are they around in the daylight, too? We've not spotted them. Who knows?"

He had seen our messages a good couple of weeks before he decided to finally make contact. He thought us to be a trap. He wrote, "But them, they don't seem to care, they're not after survivors, they're more after the corpses. At least for now. Where they appear, the area is clean afterwards."

He kept saying they didn't have Internet connection where they're staying so, "I'm writing this from an Internet café we broke into recently. You shouldn't expect an answer right away if you write back. We check online for others, but not daily."

Michael went on with a most noteworthy fact: He shot at them once one evening, from afar, with a 7mm Dakota rifle. He swears he got the guy. His head should have exploded and instead he simply turned toward his direction, unhurt: "He looked right at me, man, from that distance and right into my scope. It freaked the hell out of me and I ran." He did not try a second time; he stayed put now, especially at night, when it seemed the 'aliens' preferred to go around. "So, take care, be careful and watch out!"

I had to read the whole thing again. Had we seen "them"? Seen whom? At first, I couldn't make much sense of what Michael wrote: "them," "spotted at night," "aura." I read that part again and it gave me a cold chill, a sudden numbing dread in a fearful anticipation. Internally, and unaware still, a dot from the past had started to connect.

We had not seen anyone ourselves, apart from the rapidly disappearing Rollerblade-girl. And she disappeared behind a corner, not out of some Harry Potter trick. We hadn't seen anything or anyone glowing in the dark.

I didn't want to alarm Mary, so I edited Michael's message, removed all the parts referring to 'them' and printed it. I brought the copy downstairs. Mary was preparing dinner and Annah was reading a book in her room. At home, it seemed we were in some sort of denial, acting as if everything was as normal as ever. Mary had even made a list of books for Annah to read. So that "memories will not disappear," she told her, and Annah could cultivate those memories in her own time and share further. *With whom?* I thought cynically.

I walked into the kitchen. "Michael, from New York." I showed Mary the email.

She shook her head, without even looking at the paper. "Read it to me."

I did, and finished the whole story with the Central Park carriages strolling around by themselves, and that he was typing the email from an Internet café. Then the good wishes, and that survivors there were starting to get organized. "New York is much larger than Geneva, and this proves there could be others. With time, maybe, many others."

Mary nodded.

She was somber and stared at the stove. Without raising her eyes from the dinner she was preparing, she asked: “How many, Dan? Can you tell me? Maybe it’s just that girl we saw...and we might not see her ever again.” She paused then, looking straight into my eyes. “I love you, Dan. And I love Annah. Sometimes I wonder whether all this makes sense. What will be our life next winter, or a year or more from now? Can you tell me?”

“Mary...” I started, but Mary raised her hand to silence me.

“I will carry on, for you and Annah. But I cannot promise you for how long, Not this way. Why didn’t we die, too? Why, Dan?” Her body seemed to implode, as if something broke internally. Resting both stiff arms on the counter, her head collapsed between her shoulders. “It would have been so much easier now.”

“Now? What are you talking about? We’d be dead, now. You would be dead, Annah would be dead. Is that what you want? You’ve seen those rotting remains. Mary, don’t do this...”

She kept her head down. “Just hold me, Dan. Please.”

I held her tightly in my arms. I cried without making any sound. Mary wasn’t, and that made me cry even more. Warm tears, heavy, and coming from the depths. I couldn’t lose her. I could simply not.

As if she was reading my mind, Mary whispered in my ear, “I don’t have any more tears...”

I stayed there, and hugged my wife hoping she would not crumble any further. That night, the whole night, I kept searching for her, continuously pressing my body against her, breathing her.

During the night, Mary complained a few times she was cold, and asked me to lay next to her even closer and to put my arms around her. I prayed to God that I could be the fire that kept her alive, that kept her away from that cold that grows from the inside. It rises like a shivering fever, and consumes you inexorably, eating up all your strengths and leaving you emptied, hopeless, and ready to give up.

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The morning after, I feared leaving Mary alone. Instead, she looked at me in her special way, that one look she used so many times in all the years we'd

been together, to tell me “You can let go, it's okay.” That released all tensions. I knew she wasn't lying and I needed to foster hope.

She smiled. “I'm fine, don't worry.” Then turned to our daughter. “Annah, tell your dad that we'll be fine.”

“Don't worry, Dad. Come back home soon. You promise?”

“I promise.” I hoped I wasn't going to disappoint her.

Devotees said that praying to the Lord only when you're in need is hypocritical. Instead, they say, you should pray always, and especially when things go well.

I think the Lord knows better and can see better than anyone into everyone's heart. He knows whether we are sincere or not. He has no need to judge a soul from the number of prayers He receives, even more so when those become, with time, a mere ritual.

Others have mandatory scheduled daily prayers. Does that make them better, or does God prefer them to all His other creatures? Is His love measured by prayer hours?

In my heart, I was sure He knew. If He had time to listen, He knew I was sincere that morning. Besides, I did not pray for myself. I prayed for my wife; I prayed for Mary.

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I arrived where I was supposed to be to meet with Rollerblade-girl. This time, I did everything in plain view. I stopped the car in the middle of the street. I lowered the windows, stepped out and even opened the trunk. Nothing to hide. Then I sat cross-legged, well in front of the car. I had a Glock tucked at my back, under my vest, and one under the driver seat. My hands rested on my knees. I waited.

The sun started to warm up the air, and the asphalt, too. The hot bitumen's smell and the petroleum vapors soaked my senses. I felt its taste in my mouth and it intoxicated me. *I am getting high*, I thought, lightheaded. A few crows gathered as casual spectators, perched on the tree in the middle of the traffic island at the end of the street. Unless I imagined all that. There I was, sitting like a duck with a wobbling head like those figurines in the back window of cars. Good thing Geneva didn't have zoos in town as in New York;

in that position, and the way I felt, I would have been easy prey for the “kind of a lion” Michael believed roamed freely in Manhattan.

Almost an hour had passed and I could not stand to sit much longer. My joints hurt and sleepiness crept in as the body oxygen level was replaced by the aromatic tar vapors. At that moment, I heard the swishing sound of the rollerblades from behind. The adrenaline rush heightened all my senses. My breathing and heart rate jumped. My blood pressure shot up and a hot flush erupted like a fever making me sweat as if I was taking a shower from within.

Everything happened very fast: a screeching sound made me shiver as the wheels came to a halt and, although it was somewhere to my left and out of my field of vision, I didn't have to turn my head to see her vividly in my mind, menacing.

A cold chill slid up my spine and I felt a pair of eyes staring at me, carving holes into my back; the burning sensation of a bullseye glued to my neck.

Rollerblade-girl was breathing hard behind me.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, still seated and about to change position. I heard a sound and had the impression Rollerblade-girl jolted when I opened my mouth.

“Who are you? And stay as you are. Don't turn to look at me! You didn't trust me, I don't trust you.”

My God! I heard another voice, a different voice than mine, Mary or Annah's after such a long time!

The voice was pleasant, that of a young woman. Not exactly afraid, not calm either. I tried to combine the few images I glimpsed the first time we saw her with this voice, and tried to imagine even more details about her.

We lived a world deprived of laughter, children cries, chatters, the always present human murmuring that we took for granted everywhere in the world. One can never feel the presence of something as strongly as when it is no more; the void replaces what once gave us reassurance, continuity, fulfillment. Don't people talk about the deafening sound of silence? I experienced in a flash the unbearable weight of emptiness.

She had a pleasant Italian accent. At a pub, it was the kind of voice that makes you look for its owner. When the charm of the voice marries with the charm of the person then one is gratified with the pleasure of having discovered harmony in human incarnation.

She sounded determined. I didn't move. "Well, I do trust you now. I wouldn't be here sitting like this otherwise. The people you saw are my wife and daughter. And they were worried for me. They still are. They...I...we wouldn't have hurt you."

The voice erupted. "Where are you coming from? Do you know what happened? Is everyone dead? How can that be true?"

"From out of town, in the countryside, and could you stop shooting questions like darts?"

There was a moment of silence.

"Funny you are saying that..."

I didn't make out the meaning of her last remark.

"Don't stand up. Turn around slowly."

With the help of both hands, I twisted around, slowly, as she requested. Rollerblade-girl stood firmly her ground. She was fit, a rather athletic body, dressed entirely in black if not for a peach-colored top that I could perceive more than see from her semi-opened zipped black leather jacket, hiding a full breast. Her recent "shopping" from the mall, no doubt. She wore jeans, tight and low-waisted that perfectly sculpted her figure. A rebellious lock of black hair refused to be constrained by the helmet she wore. Her eyes were invisible behind dark sunglasses. She was very attractive and she kept a crossbow pointed right at me.

"Well, I'm at your mercy it seems. I assure you, I'm totally alone." I noticed she was glancing around searching for the presence of others.

She fixed her eyes on mine. "Okay, mister. What do we do now?"

"Honestly? May I stretch my legs? They hurt."

Rollerblade-girl nodded, and I did it with a grunt of satisfaction which raised a hint of a smile on her lips. While massaging my knees, I went on. "My name is Dan, Daniel Amenta." I pointed to a bulge near my groin. "And that is an iPhone in my pocket. I would like to call my family."

Her lips raised into a smile again. She must have liked my funny contortions. I couldn't be faster than her dart in the remote case I wanted to try anything.

The crossbow made a short upward jerky motion that I took for agreement so I slowly and carefully took the phone out and showed it to the girl, raising my eyebrows.

She nodded. "Put the speaker on."

I did as she commanded and called home. “Mary?”

“Dan! What happened? How are you? Did you see the girl?”

“All’s fine. Why everyone’s asking multiple questions?”

“What?” Mary said; Rollerblade-girl smiled more openly.

I couldn’t see her eyes through the sunglasses, but the crossbow was no longer pointing straight at my chest, and I noticed her hands were less tense on the grip. “Never mind. I’m okay and I’m with...” I looked up at Rollerblade-girl. She hesitated. I raised my eyebrows again and gestured with the phone.

“Laura,” she replied.

I am with Laura.”

“Laura? That’s the girl’s name? Can she hear me?”

“I bet she can, hon...”

“Laura? This is Mary, Dan’s wife. If he introduced himself that is. I’m so sorry if we scared you last time. We meant no harm. You are the first one we have seen in months. Alive I mean...” She paused, then with a firm voice she continued, “If you are alone, you’re welcome to come home with Dan...and stay.”

I looked at the phone, then at Laura whose expression I could not decipher. I didn’t expect that, or to come so soon. Mary was still capable of surprising me after all these years. “Mary? I don’t know what’s on Laura’s mind,” I said while looking at the girl. “We’ve just met so maybe that’s premature. I only wanted to reassure you—”

Mary cut me short, ignoring what I said. “Laura, I love this stupid man. Let him come home...please!”

What the...! Why and how had Mary taken for granted that I wasn’t in control of the situation, and that Laura was in charge?

Laura lowered her crossbow and interrupted my mental rumination. “Tell her not to worry.”

“Thank you, Laura. Thank you!” Mary’s voice burst from the speaker before I could speak.

“If you ladies will allow, may I intervene?” I was ignored again.

“No, I thank *you*, Mary. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I’m frightened and I want to get out of Geneva, too.” Laura kept looking around as if she still expected to see someone suddenly coming out of nowhere.

“Okay... I believe I’ll be home soon...with Laura.” I glanced at the girl, who leaned now carelessly on the car. “I’ll call you again.”

“I’ll get the cottage ready,” was the terse reply.

Ever so cautiously, I began to stand up. Laura did not react, watching calmly. I stepped forward and stretched out my hand. “Shall we start again? Dan...”

She put the crossbow on the hood, took her helmet and glasses off, and gave me her hand to shake. “Laura,” she said with a smile.

She had beautiful light blue eyes with a dark blue outer ring. The contrast with her dark hair struck me. Her eyes were undeniably attractive, but what I noticed most was that they were frightened, too. And not because of me.

“If the world before had let women do the talking, we men would’ve had less occasion to fight.” I smiled and pointed at her crossbow. “Do you really know how to use that thing?”

Laura smiled back. “You’d be surprised.” Then a somber veil fell on her eyes. “I’m less afraid to venture out during the day but I spend the nights hiding. Sometimes I’m too scared to fall asleep. I thought I was the only one alive.” She paused. “Instead, you seem...cool and relaxed?”

I gazed at her. “Well, we were scared, too, the first days. We didn’t know what to expect. Then we fell back to a sort of normality in our lives. We aren’t in need of anything, but we are prepared for the worst. I’m ashamed to say that we practically go along with our lives as we did before...after adjustments, that is. I am lucky, with wife and daughter both doing well.”

Laura stared at me as if I came from another planet. I felt she had a burning question, but maybe she was too afraid to ask it right then.

“By the way,” I added, “indeed we’re not alone. And just to be clear, are you coming with me?”

She began to take off her rollerblades and pulled a pair of sneakers from her backpack, gazing at me for a long moment. “The little girl I saw...your daughter?”

“Yeah. Annah. She’s twelve. Almost thirteen she’d want me to say.”

Laura nodded. “I don’t know if my little brother is still alive. I am...I was in Geneva to study toward a Master’s degree. I’ve not been able to reach anyone from my family.” Her voice broke a little before she regained some composure, straightening up her figure despite the weight of her losses.

I got busy with rolling up the car windows and closing the trunk. Laura put her rollerblades in the car and was about to put on her sneakers. I watched her for a moment; she moved graciously and... I shook my head. I laid her crossbow on the back seat and forced my eyes away from her.

“Listen,” I said. “You don't need to come right now if you're not sure...maybe some other day.” I glanced up at her.

She gave me a long, level look as if I'd said something weird. I couldn't tell what she was thinking; there were no emotions in her eyes. Then, fear appeared again.

“No! I'm coming with you!” The words erupted as if they were darts from her crossbow; fast, direct, piercing. Laura's face paled, and her lips tightened like the string of her weapon, ready to fire more darts. She paused and her eyes wandered around, again as if to make sure we were indeed alone. Then, more calmly, in an almost apologetic tone, she said, “I need to get some stuff from my place. I don't own much, mostly clothing. Maybe we can go back to my apartment another day, too? But before it gets dark!” She hesitated. “I also have some food left.”

It sounded as if she tried to give me reasons to take her there. She was no longer the resolute girl who'd kept me under the threat of a deadly dart, and I wondered why.

“Food's not a problem, yet. What is with the dark? What exactly are you afraid of?”

Laura did not reply; she got in the car. I sighed. I went to the driver seat, puzzled by that abrupt change. “So, where are you staying?” I asked while starting the car.

“Champel. It's not far from here. Maybe a couple of miles. Turn around and go toward the Cantonal Hospital.”

“Alright.”

Before reaching the hospital, Laura made me stop in front of an old apartment building. One of those beautiful old Geneva buildings with marble and stone decorations, and with steep old shingled roofs. Six floors, but as tall as a ten-story modern building.

She noticed my surprise and explained she rented a studio there. Her family paid the rent directly to the landlord, an old lady she only met once.

I didn't bother to park and stopped the car in the middle of the street, blocking the non-existing traffic. We got out. The slamming of the doors

sounded particularly loud in the deafening silence that surrounded us. Silence that always struck me every time a sudden noise broke it. Like smashing a perfect glass pane, invisible until the precise moment it explodes in thousands of fragments instants later.

“It’s on the third floor.” Laura looked up. “I’ll get some clothes, and be right back.”

I glanced up as well and tried to single out a window or a balcony, but they all looked the same. We covered the short distance from the sidewalk to the entrance of the building. The hallway had marble floors, and a beautiful iron balustrade in the staircase surrounding the elevator cage. In that moment, the scene seemed blatantly normal, as if I was taking a date back home.

She stopped on the first step of the flight of stairs, turned and stared wide-eyed at me. “There are two women in the elevator. Sophie and Monique. They worked as nurses at the hospital. I found them both that morning when leaving for my classes.”

She did not wait for my reply and started to climb the stairs to reach her floor.

I didn’t call the elevator to verify her story. I imagined well what waited for me. Rotten corpses, mouths agape, darkened dry blood. No need to add those images to the ones I fought against on a daily basis. Like shingles, they flew angrily toward me, blown off by that powerful night wind that started everything. I dodged them all, one by one but they kept coming and some splatted on my face, and they hurt.

While Laura was busy getting her stuff, I called Mary and told her about the last twenty minutes or so. Something in Laura worried me. Above, I heard a door closing and steps coming down the stairs. I hung up and, a few seconds later, Laura appeared.

She had changed, and put on a dress and wore flat shoes. She handed me a large bag. Again, I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she was. “Ladies things.” She paused. “I want to make a good impression if I can.” She smiled.

Well, she did. I held the doorway open for her. “Thank you!” She stepped out. “Where do you live, Dan?” she asked when we got back in the car.

I turned. “Near a little village in France. Some fifteen miles from here.”

A somber expression appeared on her face and, again, the veil of fright in her eyes. She looked even younger. “You...you are not with them, are you?”

I was about to turn the ignition key, and I froze for a second. I straightened back in my seat, and met her eyes. “Them?! Them who?” I frowned. “Someone told me about *them* just yesterday. He’s another survivor. We exchanged emails. In his last message, he refers to some *people* and used the same expression: *Them!* He lives in New York. Actually, I still have to get back to him.” I paused and stared at her. “Who are these people, Laura?”

She hesitated before answering. Then, she looked straight into my eyes. “I don’t think they are...people.”

The past got busy catching up and connecting dots. Laura told me what she saw. She was shaken, and while she talked scenes from my youth burst in front of my eyes with a kind of superimposed vision.

What Michael hinted at, and what Laura now described in better terms, I had seen it already, years before. Maybe some twenty-five years before. Shocking. I was ready to imagine every possible scenario but that one.

Laura went on. “I have seen them only during the evenings, though. Three or four times. The first time, I spent the whole night hiding, too afraid to move.” She shivered. “During the day, I guess they aren’t around. They always start to leave just before dawn, when their luminescence begins to fade.”

The difference between Michael’s recounting, Laura’s encounters, and my experience were that they saw them from a distance, and it had been frightening.

I took a deep breath. I *had seen* them, too. Only one of them to be precise, next to me for what seemed a long time, but I didn’t get scared at all. On the contrary, but I wasn’t ready to share that with Laura, yet. “You’ll need to tell Mary, too. Where we are, and nearby, we haven’t seen anyone of the sort you describe.”

I only half-lied. We hadn’t seen them where we lived in the last couple of months. In that sense, I told the truth. Haven’t seen any anymore, though physical evidence of that first and unique encounter was vividly present in every moment of my life.

Laura noticed I was troubled. Anyone would have been by what she had said. She didn’t question me, though. In any case, she had no way to imagine the real reason why her recount troubled me so much.

So, all that happened was not the fault of humans. Or maybe it was...but not directly.

The Dots Connect

Unexpected Expectations

I was probably ten or eleven years old. We lived in an apartment on the top floor of a seven-story building. My family was no different from any other middle-class family of that period. We lacked nothing essential, but what we had was not always of the best quality, and we couldn't afford the latest and greatest. Superfluous expenses didn't have a place in our single-salary budget.

Mother was raised in a working class family and came from the middle of Italy. She once had a stable nursing position, which she quit under pressure from both my father and his family when their first was born, my older brother. She stopped dreaming about returning to a job she truly loved when I was born three years later. She regretted that decision all her life, putting the blame on a husband she discovered was not Prince Charming only weeks after they got married.

Father had squandered a good education. For lack of ambition, or just laziness, he resolved to work at the family business. My father's family small enterprise allowed my grandparents to live a wealthy life...and they dilapidated a fortune. By the time my parents got married, the business only allowed an average life, just above struggling.

Father must have cultivated an inner frustration, and made sure his wife was there to pay the price, too. He felt superior due to her humble origins.

I discovered the anguish and the sadness of my mother only later when, still young, I became her confidante. She felt guilty she had no one else to talk about her pains but me. She knew it wasn't right to open up the way she did with her son, but she couldn't do without: she had no family members close by, having moved hundreds of miles away from home to follow her work aspirations. In the fifties, that was no meager accomplishment for a young woman. Her family, too, made her pay the price.

She managed to keep everything to herself for years and then decided to release it all on me before exploding or committing suicide. She tried a few

times, as she once admitted amid tears. She had stepped back from the balcony barrier at the last minute. She told me the void almost talked to her in an assuaging voice...“a few seconds and all will be over.” The crude and painful image of my father getting remarried, her children raised by a stepmother who didn't care about them prevented her from taking her own life.

She was raised Catholic, my mother, and for years after the marriage she had been observant. My father had his own ideas about God and spirituality, and he kept searching obsessively for a path of faith that could provide answers to his unrest and tormented soul.

My mother stuck to her Catholicism, and that was a reason for fights and cruel criticisms from my father. It made him exceedingly bitter toward his wife whose only blame was that she didn't need to follow him on his anguished spiritual quests.

In different periods of his life, my father followed and experienced the Mennonites, Mormons and the Latter Days Saints Church, the Lutherans, and then Freemasonry and Rosicrucians. He ended up in outright esotericism when he finally decided confessions were all wrong in one way or another, and swarmed with fanatics, heretics who didn't understand the true message of Jesus Christ, or whatever Master he was involved with at the moment. He believed true spiritual dimension had to be accessible if one truly wanted to.

He had beaten my mother once, the one time I know of, when she vehemently opposed that we children were to be raised as anything but Catholics, especially after seeing my father changing churches and faith so often. If it were up to him, I would have been baptized multiple times, with multiple confessions, and introduced to different rituals because the previous ones had to be “erased” and amended for with the new ones.

When he got into esoteric practices, he scared my mom by conducting séances at home. He befriended various mediums who came and went, sometimes without warning. Of course, he had planned for those visits, but he didn't care to communicate or share with his wife. Once, my mother confessed me, she came out of the shower dressed only in a babydoll nightie and faced a total stranger. It was the scare of her life, not to talk about the humiliation of being seen practically naked.

My mother protested only once about what went on at home. She had to wear dark glasses for weeks so neighbors would not notice the bruises and the black eye my father's hand caused her.

She had been able to keep us children from witnessing her struggles, unaffected by the ordeal she lived in her marriage. Alone, pretending everything was fine.

While my older brother had always been confrontational, my father, a man who was never at rest, intellectually speaking intrigued me.

Mentally, he communicated an internal turmoil that often erupted in verbal violence and abuse against whoever dared to contradict him. He wasn't a man to accept rebuttals to his sayings or to listen calmly to refutations. He would have talked and talked, more and more vehemently until the other person had either to quit discussing or punch him in the face. I think he was shrewd enough to sense whether the other side would have capitulated before resorting to those extremes.

Thinking of it, I am not sure whether it was my father who quit the various religious and esoteric congregations he was involved with at any given time. Most probably, they instead resolved to get rid of a disturbing and unmanageable member.

Father freely talked to me about these things and he called me "the one who listens," and avoided my older brother who had an aversion for everything my father dug into. His interest in me increased the moment he discovered I was able to sense when he held séances at home, or one of his "spiritual enhancement experiments" as he called them.

He tested me to prove whether I could truly have this...capability. He started to organize sessions while casually telling everyone in the family that he differed in plans. He made sure I was to spend the day, for example, with my grandparents. All this terrified mom. Although she couldn't make him stop, she succeeded in preventing my participations in his rituals.

After his séances, most times I felt discomfort for a couple of days. A hostile aura hovered at home, and I sensed it in this or that other room where he had conducted his spiritual enhancement sessions, alone or with other members. Sometimes I felt repulsion approaching objects that had a direct role in his practices. He was fascinated by my sensibility, and discussed the facts with his medium friends who invariably wanted to spend time alone with me, hypnotize me, or work with me and my inner power.

Mom would have rather died at the idea that I could be involved. She showed to have a strong resolve to oppose Dad's plans, more than for any other things she disliked in her marriage. I think my father understood and

resented that: he could manipulate her and bend her will whenever and however in almost everything, but when it was her children's safety at stake, Mom never flinched. The only option he had was to kill her rather than hoping to convince her.

Who knows, he might have caressed the idea in some wild dreams of his, especially when he was suspected to entertain a mistress, too. He must have reasoned that the risks and possible consequences were too high for his liking. He always calculated. Besides, in part, I think he was afraid that I would steal his spotlight in his communities if truly I had spiritual powers, so he kept my participation to a minimum or limited to only his personal tests.

Once, I remember, I became unable to enter into the living room for days, the aversion was so extreme. I screamed when he forced me into the room, and I pulled and struggled until I escaped his grip and left the room, running. Later, he confessed he had to “dismantle” an esoteric protection he had put in place to test me; something to do with summoning a Guardian. He called it the “Guardian of the Threshold.”

Whatever he was doing with those esoteric experiences, they had a clear impact on me. In certain circumstances of my life, I had a strange infancy; otherwise normal and rather a common one under many others.

Over the years, I became convinced that not everything is charlatanism. In my late teens, I tried esotericism myself. It was familiar, even if I didn't like the weirdness and the uneasiness that those early experiences provoked in me. Once, during a séance, a medium announced that I held an opening and that spiritual energy kept flowing through me to him. I didn't like the idea of anything flowing from me to that guy. I didn't like him much in the first place. The séances, though, were interesting, and I saw ectoplasms in a few of them. Maybe they were real, or maybe just cunning tricks. I honestly could not say.

I'm one of those individuals who had gone through out of body experiences. All of them felt like a kind of lucid-dream: the sensation of being fully awake and, yet, floating into this bright world which kept a resemblance with the physical one, as if seen through a sort of a force field that distorted shapes and colors.

One night, the out of body event happened all by itself, without me trying to induce it via learned practices. The experience had been tremendously physical. Something violently grabbed and pulled my legs up, and jerked my whole “me” away from my physical body. Only my spiritual head still

overlapped with the physical one and held me in place. I was shaken relentlessly. My heartbeat raced like crazy, and when everything stopped suddenly, I was drenched in sweat. It never happened again after that night, and I never tried to provoke it myself anymore. I don't like it when I can't control a situation, or am not fully aware of all possible outcomes. But I digress...

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So, I have seen *them* well before Michael and Laura. I don't recall any abnormal events in the days before their visitation, nor any change from the routine that I could point at as a possible explanation. No fever or food poisoning as possible causes for hallucinations, nor Father playing with his esoteric tricks. Besides, though I never doubted what happened, the things I read and heard from Michael and Laura came as confirmation, if I actually needed one. Hence, what I saw when a child was real, not a lucid dream.

That evening, we had dinner together, as a family. We watched some TV, then my brother and I were sent to bed. We shared the same room, as my parents could not afford a bigger apartment. Our bedroom gave into the living room: a double French door with opaque glass panes separated the two. That room also had its own independent access from the entry hall.

We used our room to study and play. During the day, we kept the French doors open, using both spaces. From my bed, to the left, there was a large window and a glass door that led to a wide balcony. To the right, a door opened into a corridor which itself gave access to additional rooms; my parent's was the last one, down at the far end. We had moved to our room the year before and—for the occasion—we got fold-away beds to make it seem larger.

I was about to fall asleep when I started to hear whistling sounds, and whispers and hisses. I called my parents, crying because the noises scared me and I couldn't sleep. I told them I heard whistles inside my head.

Dad thought I had bugs in my ears so he took me to the kitchen and tried to attract a possible insect out with the help of a flashlight, telling me in his commanding voice to stay still. But there were no insects. "What's wrong with you, Dan!" I felt guilty for not having bugs in my ears.

The noises came and went. It was stressful for me and for my parents, too. Mom was worried, Dad annoyed. Then, after a last intermittence, they stopped. Parents were relieved, each for their own reasons. Mom decided I needed to go see a doctor the next day. At least for the moment, I was able to go back to bed and get some rest. Mom stayed at my bedside, caressing my head, and she held my hand until I fell asleep.

That night I awoke suddenly, and perfectly lucid. The faint light from city streets entered through the thin veil that mom placed as curtain at the window. The house was silent; everyone was asleep.

I sat on my bed, turned to my left and saw my brother sound asleep. A faint white glow came from the entry hall. The glow was steady and cold, as if it came from neon lights. While its source was clearly in the hall, the glow gave light to the living room, too, and to the corridor. I remember how I could distinguish details of our bedroom, normally invisible in the darkness of the nights.

The living room got slightly darker as the light intensity grew toward the corridor: the source of the glow had started to move. I can relive it now as vividly as then. A total and unnatural calm engulfed me, sweeping over my senses as a high tide of warm waters.

I called my brother in a whisper, raising my voice at every attempt but he kept sleeping, breathing hard.

The glow left the hall. The living room plunged into darkness as the light moved into the corridor. Then it appeared, standing at the door, occupying its whole space. Tall, it must have been around 6.5 feet and had large shoulders. He stood there for a few seconds—in that moment I sensed the entity was a male—and, turning his head slowly, he scanned the room as if he examined the place.

A glow prevented me from clearly distinguishing his facial traits and the entity lacked sharp contours—it looked fuzzy to me. Our bedroom was flooded with his light and his head turned toward me. I stared at him, motionless, and with the strange sensation that everything was perfectly fine. I was calm, and at peace.

The entity stepped forward and entered the room. He stopped and stood in front of my bed. His body continued backwards with a large and thick protrusion from the lumbosacral area in his back. No, it didn't seem to be anything like a tail. The protrusion was as big as a grown man's thigh, and

long, maybe four to five feet, getting thinner toward the end. As with the rest of the body, the end was fuzzy with no sharp edges inside the glow. It was part of him, and at the same time it wasn't. I don't know how to explain it better than that.

He turned slowly and faced me, while I sat peacefully on my bed; I watched the whole scene as if I had no part in it. I had the feeling he wondered about me, asking himself whether I was as he expected.

After a while, he stepped to the side, then moved forward to come to a halt at the left side of my bed. I could reach for him if I wanted to.

This surprises me even today. Why that profound serenity? Wouldn't it have been natural for me to panic, to scream for help? Why nothing? Yet, I had no fear or anxiety, just an internal peace like one I've never felt again.

The entity sat. On my bed, next to me! I did not move. I don't know how long he sat there. Time froze and we were still silhouettes in a black and white picture. Even that close, I wasn't able to clearly see his facial details. Still, he seemed wise and profound. I felt his piercing stares within his opaque glowing face. He was benevolent, with kindly feelings. I sensed all that, and that he was there to do something good for me.

He raised his left arm and, ever slowly, he approached his hand toward my face. He kept raising it and finally rested it on my forehead. There, the hissing noises started again, abruptly, as if he had switched them back on. The renewed influx of noises in my ears did not startle me though. They've never left me since.

He kept his hand there, and slightly lowered his head, closing his eyes. Like that we sat, together. My head itched from the inside. I closed my eyes; colors and shapes danced in my vision. After a while, he pulled back his hand, the colors faded, and I opened my eyes. He rested his arm on his lap. He raised his head again and stared at me. I touched my forehead; it had started to give me a tingling sensation.

I then had an impulse, and did the same: I raised my arm and stretched my hand toward his chest. I started to feel a prickling sensation to my fingertips. My opened hand did not find a firm and solid obstacle. Exerting more pressure, my hand penetrated inside the glow, and there it disappeared. My hand and wrist got inside the entity and I could feel nothing but a growing stinging sensation and warmth. I wasn't harmed, nor was my hand hurting.

After a short while, I pulled my hand back; it tingled as did my forehead. What happened next is hard to believe: the entity stood up and made a gesture with his right hand, as if to show he didn't hold or hide anything. I lay back down on my bed and went under the cover, up to my head. The glow rapidly diminished in intensity and retreated. The entity had gone, the room had plunged back into darkness. I fell asleep. I never told this story to anyone. No one. Ever.

The loud hissing noises have stayed with me since that night, and I hear them all the time. Initially, it was difficult to fall asleep, but soon I got used to them. Later on, I even profited from their presence, using the noise to achieve a trance-like state focusing from one tone and hiss to another.

Often, while doing that, I enter a lucid dream where I hear music, beautiful and enchanting, and then the tinnitus disappears altogether. The music only lasts a few seconds, and I sort of awaken again to start the cycle over. I regret that I do not know how to write music; I would transcribe those melodies.

Other times it is voices, words spoken here and there, but never a full statement though. My name is called, or I hear words of warnings, or reassuring short phrases. It does not happen when I'm awake, only during this transitional phase before I fall asleep. If I am crazy, then it must be a well-conceived madness as it is limited in time and I have never received orders to do anything from those callings in my head. So far.

My tinnitus is exceptionally loud. I heard it even in airplanes when flying for business. Even the in-flight noise of the plane cabin is not stronger. Usually, doctors say tinnitus is the result of a hearing trauma, but my hearing has been tested and examined multiple times and with increasing technologies over the years. It's just perfect, actually, much better than average: I hear pure tones in a large spectrum of frequencies and at an extremely low intensity. Doctors said over 98% of the entire population do not hear the way I do.

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Without possibly having any knowledge of this, Laura described—though in less detail—the entity who visited me when I was a child. She said she saw a few of them on different occasions. She never tried to approach them and rushed to hide when she crossed them in town. They terrified her.

I was shocked by her story and not for the reasons she might have guessed then.

“I can’t believe you’ve never seen them.” Laura eyebrows raised, and she slightly tilted her head. I avoided her glance.

“Yeah, me neither.” I started the engine, which hummed softly as we drove toward the lake.

Laura was watching a spot between her legs, her hand clenching the folds of her dress. “They did it, right?” She asked without raising her head.

I did not reply. What other possible explanation could I provide? Mentally, I took note that maybe I had better chase them around for a special reunion. Our survival, our future was not entirely up to us after all.

My hand reached for hers to free up that tension. She resisted my touch only briefly then she took my hand between hers and slowly brought it closer to her hip.

I called home, and announced that I was bringing someone with me. That generated cheerful reactions from Annah who longed to be with somebody else than just her parents. Smiling, I turned toward Laura, and saw her eyes wet with tears she tried to hide from me. Crying and smiling at the same time. That was good; it spoke well of her personality and brought hopes for the first step of a growing community. Maybe.

When we arrived, Annah was already opening the gate: in our world, one could hear a car coming from miles away.

Laura marveled at the UPS truck, and the barbed-wired fence. She recognized T&T, our two German Shepherds, next to Annah. She got out of the car and watched me operate the truck with a question clearly spelled out on her face. I smiled and invited her to go meet Annah and Mary who waited in the driveway.

Laura caressed Annah’s hair and fell into an emotional hug within Mary’s opened arms. Taxi and Tarantula recognized Laura, too; her scent had to be still fresh in their memory. They welcomed her with whimpers and joyful barks, and I had to calm them down a little.

Laura and Mary cried and sobbed, hugging like old friends finally reunited, amazed to see each other after having lost all hopes to meet again one day.

“Thank you, thank you...” Laura kept repeating while Mary kept reassuring her that the worst, her worst, was a thing of the past now. “It’s over, you’ll be fine here, it’s over...”

What had we done to deserve all this pain, all those deaths, all the losses? Apocalypse theories and scriptures have always been a regular presence in all mental ejaculations about the future of the human race. God's judgment, the final days, the ultimate justice taking place in some near or remote time. Christian eschatology is full of those things. Were we fully into it? Apocalypse also stood for the process of disclosure of a truth hidden to the majority of mankind, in an era dominated by falsehood and misconception. What was the truth we were yet to discover? Were Saint John's Riders of the Apocalypse glowing too?

I'm sure those who were very informed and had studied the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Book of Revelation or John's Apocalypse and similar, would explain everything and point to proof everywhere around us. Each of them would affirm proudly that they were right. They were not here, though, and they were probably dead. Maybe somewhere, someone can tell everybody, "I told you, I told you." Meager solace now.

"Dad?" Annah grabbed my attention. I was lost in my thoughts. She pointed to the gate still open. I went to attend the complicated procedure to lock us safely in, UPS truck first. The three women started to walk toward the house. Taxi and Tarantula had taken their share of hugs and were trotting alongside. Mary turned briefly, glanced at me and smiled. I was sure she had something in mind, but what?

Mary and Annah showed Laura around: the vegetable garden, the basement with our provisions, the preparations I had ready for when electricity abandoned us, the generators, the stock of fuel, our food storage, our home, and how Laura could fit in with all that.

I judged I was one too many if I joined the show so, after checking everything was sound and fine, I went upstairs. I wanted to get back in touch with Michael and describe what Laura had told me, and tell him about Laura, too. Maybe there will be others joining us some day.

Laura

Unstable Stabilities

Our property included an adjacent cottage we used for when family and friends came to visit us. Mary showed Laura the place and gave her the keys. Laura held them to her heart. “You’ll never regret to have me. You rescued me.”

Annah cheered even more when Laura said that and rushed to hug her. Laura hugged her back and closed her eyes. Although there was not less than ten years difference, at least, the two girls hit it off quickly. The young woman fascinated Annah, and Laura probably thought of her brother who would have been about the same age as our daughter.

After dinner that evening, we all took Annah to bed. Laura promised her she would be there the next morning, and for the days to come. “You will be my little sister and I will be your big sister if you want.”

Annah smiled, happy. “Would you teach me roller skating?”

“I’d love that. We need to make sure you get the proper equipment, then we will hit the roads. You’ll learn in no time. You’ll see.”

I felt a sweeping sense of gratitude toward Laura.

We tugged Annah in, and the three of us went to sit downstairs on the couch. I lit the fire. Mary wanted to know about Laura: her past, her ideas, what triggered her and what gave her pleasure. Laura glanced first at Mary, then at me. She lowered her eyes and, with a sigh, she opened up.

“I was raised in Italy. My mother is French and she met dad in front of a fuming dish of spaghetti all’amatriciana. ‘Hot as a volcano and as spicy as our love,’ Dad used to say.”

I exchanged a smile with Mary as I took my place on the couch.

“My infancy was nothing but ordinary, surrounded by love, care, and family values. I was an only child for twelve years, then my little brother was born, somewhat unexpectedly.” She paused. “I miss him.”

Mary reached for her hand. “You don’t need to continue.”

“No, I want to.” Laura reassured us. “My dad is...was a university professor of philosophy.” Laura eyes got bright with tears, reflecting the dancing colors of the cracking fire. Tears that were like the dew on our blue iris on late summer mornings. She had changed to past tense as she was talking about dead people.

“Mom was a midwife. In high school, I became passionate about Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in particular. There was a time when I almost only read Freud.”

Mary started to get interested. I wasn't particularly into humanistic studies. Only math and physics. But Mary loved the arts, philosophy and literature. She changed position to get more comfortable and more apt to listen carefully, as if she needed to shut out body signals to focus on what Laura said.

“Together with philosophy, art history was my favorite subject and, in high school, I learned to truly *look*. I've always liked the whole history of art, in any period: ancient, medieval, Renaissance, Baroque...a certain taste for surrealism that was accompanied by philosophical interest. I think I made my dad proud. Paul, my brother, was mom's darling, and he looked up to me for everything. He always asked me to explain what dad meant when he talked philosophy.” Laura paused for a long moment, then she smiled.

“The very first time, he asked me what ‘*fsolopy*’ was...” She sighed, fighting some inner demons and her hands trembled. Before we could say anything, she changed the subject, abruptly.

“Over the past three years, I've come to know about the great music and composers thanks to some friends...one in particular. He liked haute cuisine, too.” She paused again, and her eyes lost the inner brightness they had before, as when a dark cloud hides the sun, promising rain and cold and shivering.

“I could go on, but I prefer not to bore you any longer. I don't have any news from him, back in Italy. He hasn't replied to my calls or emails. I haven't seen him since the time I left to come study here, last July. I don't believe in God, now. Now I have even more reasons to believe I'm right not to.”

Laura's voice broke with those last words and she couldn't hold back her emotions anymore. She cried, big tears traced her face. It hurt us too. Her pain flowed into us and with us, melting our agonies together. Laura collapsed into Mary's arms. In that moment, our grievances became one. We felt the intensity of the hardship, and the misery, and maybe we started then the mourning of billions of lives.

“Why did it happen, Mary?” Laura cried. “I am sorry, I didn’t want to cry, but I miss them so much, so much. Oh, Mary... I didn’t have time to tell them anything. My brother, he was so young. Why wasn’t I there with him?”

We all cried, weeping like kids who had lost their best friend. Fused into one single, miserable, aching heart. We felt the crushing weight of merciless avalanches of the souls of everyone we lost, and whom we’d never see, hear, feel, or touch again.

Mary held Laura’s hand. “You’re not alone. Don’t cry, you’re with us now.” Mary managed to say while sobbing. My throat was a knot, unable to utter a word. Mary continued to soothe Laura’s ache, then she spoke in a voice full of love, words almost whispered, and it was as if she poured an ointment on our wounds.

“Laura...darling. Life has not given us the opportunity to share moments of joy. We meet in times of grief. Each of us must deal with deep wounds, the loss of family and be strong to cherish what remains. We’ve been deeply wounded. Time will never heal this pain, but we have to turn the page. We will not have the chance to forget.”

She told how it had been for us, and how we discovered what happened when I took Annah to school that morning. Our initial searches for others, the fears, the vanishing hopes, the burial of Joe and Beth. I’d almost forgot the sadness of those moments. We mourned.

Laura told us about her first days and weeks. How she woke up that day, got ready for her lessons, and left home. She called for the elevator and then the horror started. The doors opened and she screamed and could not stop.

“Monique and Sophie lived together on the fifth floor. They had collapsed in the elevator, crammed together. Their faces were swollen, and blood came out of their nose and ears. Their lips were bluish and their eyes were almost out of their sockets, everything sprayed with blood.”

Laura stared. “I screamed for help, ringing all the door bells on my floor and others. No one came out to help. I couldn’t understand why everyone ignored me, why no one came.”

She told us she had collapsed when no one answered at the first-floor corner apartment where a young couple from Italy, with their baby girl, had just moved in only weeks before.

“She was so cute, their baby Stella. I kept banging on their door, calling their names. I kept hitting that door until my hands hurt. I was in terror.” She

called out for Antonella, Stella's mother, until her voice faltered and she fell against their door, sobbing. She realized then how everything was oppressively silent.

Laura finally ran out of the building, calling for help, and the terror grew even more after she started to see the first corpses. In a car, or a bicycle rider, a weird, unnatural, contorted figure, forever framed within his bicycle. She panicked even more when she started to realize how quiet Geneva was that early morning in February...and why.

She reached the place where some of her friends lived. A renovated old villa hosting fifteen students, not far from the Cantonal Hospital. She tried the intercom of her colleagues first, then everybody else: no one answered. She didn't know what to do at that point. She wandered around most of the day, afraid to go back home. She reached the old town almost without realizing it, meeting no one alive. She thought she had lost her mind and does not remember much of those first hours. In the evening, she became aware of where she was or what she was doing. Maybe because she started to be cold. Inside.

In fear of everything, and in the unnatural silence of a dead town, she returned to her apartment at dark. She remembered, shivering, not to approach the elevator. She crashed into her bed and fell asleep; a heavy dreamless sleep until she awoke because someone was screaming. It took her a while to realize it was her, and then she started to cry until dawn, when she fell asleep again as if losing consciousness.

The next morning, she was more rational and tried to call everyone she knew, starting with her family. The more numbers she dialed, the more desperate she got. "I could not continue. I couldn't see the numbers anymore because of my tears. I threw the cell phone against the wall and broke it."

None of her family answered, neither her friends nor any colleagues. She never tried to call the police.

"Why not?" I asked. Laura had no answer. She didn't, that's all.

She had no Internet at home, and used only the free wireless service of the University. It was too expensive to get a connection at home, on her student budget. "I didn't want to be even more of a financial burden for my family."

They weren't rich, and it was an effort for her parents to allow her to get a higher education in Geneva. Her leisure had been the rollerblades and her

crossbow; she practiced shooting with it at the Archers Association of Geneva.

She looked at me mockingly. "I could have pierced your heart in a blink."

"I am glad I gave you no reason to even think about it."

Laura paused and grinned, "I thought about it..."

We had lost Mary, so I told her how I had been waiting for Laura to show up. When I called home, Laura was actually pointing her crossbow at me.

"You are out of your mind," Mary punched me. "And you?" She looked at Laura. "Would you really have shot this idiot here?"

Laura smiled. "No, I don't think so."

Laura added she thought about what to do next after she almost bumped into us at the mall. "I got the scare of my life. You were not that reassuring with your guns, and the dogs. I could think of only one thing: run!"

And she did, as fast as she was able to. She was about to fall right out of the mall but managed to regain her balance at the last instant and dash down the street profiting from the descent to gain speed.

"I was afraid you would've sent the dogs after me. I did not dare to approach the mall for days. Actually, I didn't dare to leave home for days."

She understood we were a family; she had seen Mary and Annah and, in those split seconds, noticed how Mary reacted to protect Annah, hiding our daughter behind her body. We couldn't be bad people, and she convinced herself that we did not have evil intentions. She needed to believe that.

"How did you manage to see us?" Mary asked. "We thought we were well hidden."

"I was just lucky, I guess. Then, I left a message on your paperboard, the rest... it's now our common story."

Laura went on to tell us about her first days, alone in the city. She left the apartment each time she emptied the fridge, and only then. The shopping center, the Eaux Vives 2000, was the largest and closest to her place. She found the automatic doors worked so started to visit it regularly. The first days, she only got enough for one meal. She was afraid to be caught, even against all evidence that no one was going to complain or stop her, ever.

She soon started to replenish her fridge like it had never been before. From then on, she went once or twice every week. At first, just for food, then she started looking for other stuff as well. She went everywhere on her skates,

visiting all the places she knew when she felt a bit safer. Eventually she did, sort of bring the worst of her mourning to a closure.

“I was emptied and devastated. I resisted the urge to jump off the Mont Blanc bridge each time I crossed it. Get it over with, you know, and the water was hypnotizing. The idea of being alone, where everyone was dead, terrified me.”

She was glad she didn't now that she had met us. When it happened, she wasn't prepared. She had given up all hope of finding other survivors.

“That's why I ran. It was so unexpected, and you scared me so.”

She was always scared, she added, ever since she saw...*them*. One evening in late February, she went too far to get back home during daylight. She was still half an hour away from her place, and it was sunset already. Skating fast, with a sense of urgency, even though she knew no one could hurt her because no one was alive in town. She rushed homeward as the streetlights came on. She didn't want to be out at dark. She rushed all the time.

She was coming down fast from the rail station toward the Mont Blanc bridge. As she reached it at full speed, she noticed something that looked like flashes of light. They were around the old “Batiment des Forces Motrices.” I remembered the building as she kept talking from memory.

She stopped on a dime and crouched behind the first pillar of the bridge. Then she peeked out, and peed herself in terror at what she saw, a diffusing warmth between her legs she at first did not recognize. From the bridge, she saw strange figures with thick tails coming out of their backs. They were glowing. From afar, they looked like sideways capital “T”s.

She froze for a second then pressed her back against the pillar, gasping for air, her heart pounding. She could not breathe properly and started to sweat, a cold sweat that made her shiver. It was her first ever panic attack.

“I was petrified. On all fours, I forced myself to reach the Four Seasons Hotel across the street. I couldn't stand up anymore, my legs were not responding.”

She advanced slowly, moaning with the effort. The sliding doors opened and she got into the elegant hall. She hid there all night, scared to death that one of those glowing figures might appear and find her.

“The next morning I ventured out only when the sun was high, and dashed home.”

From that day, she never left without the crossbow. In March, she saw *them* two more times, and always when the night set in. Never during the day, thank God. She would have been too scared to leave her apartment even to search for food.

I held Mary encircled in my arms, sitting with her back against me. I couldn't see her expression, though it was evident she was moved by Laura's story. When she mentioned the glowing figures, Mary became very tense. Her fingernails dug into my arm.

"Mary, you are hurting me."

She turned and gazed at me. She was dazed. "Did you know all that?"

"No. I was shocked myself when Laura told me." I lied.

"Dan, this means..."

"Probably." There was no need for her to finish the sentence; I knew exactly what she meant. "Laura," I asked, "did they ever notice you?"

"I don't know, though once I believe they must have seen me. I was completely out of view, and still one of them looked right at me for a few seconds. Then he turned around, as if he didn't care I was there."

I'd asked that question more for Mary's benefit than for myself. I remembered Michael had practically said the same thing: the entity did not even react to Michael shooting at him. And they let him go.

"See, it does not seem they are after the few of us who are left." I realized immediately that maybe I had said a bit too much because Mary stared at me.

"What do you mean, and how could you say that?" She was scrutinizing me.

"I can only imagine. Also, because we haven't seen them scavenging around, have we?"

"We haven't had romantic walks in the moonlight either, honey!"

Laura must have sensed Mary suspected I wasn't telling the entire story and she came to my rescue. "I believe that too, Mary. They seemed to be just observing things, like when visiting..." she hesitated, "...ruins."

"Laura, if I were visiting the archeological site of Pompei and discovered one of the original inhabitants still alive, I would be *very* interested in him." Mary shook her head.

"Maybe they already know about us." I again regretted that as soon as I muttered the words. This time both women gazed at me. I was walking over eggshells. "I mean, enough to cull us the way they must have done. What

interest would one or two weaklings inferior do provide? Did the Spaniards show interest in the Incas after they massacred them? And Incas were much closer to Spaniards than we are to... *them.*”

They listened to me, but their faces revealed the doubts I had raised in their minds. Either I was talking bullshit or I wasn't and knew more than I admitted. “I'm pretty sure, if they wanted, they would find any of us in no time,” I added.

This appeared to be more plausible to both Mary and Laura, but not enough to close the deal, at least with Mary. “It has been an intense day, emotionally intense for everyone,” she said, and stood up.

The lady of the house decided the evening was over. She took Laura's hand and offered to walk her to the cottage but Laura asked to stay with us, in the house, and sleep on the couch, if possible. “I'd feel safer, at least for the first night,” she begged, and talked about how the past weeks affected her deeply. She was still shaken and Mary did not argue.

“Of course, Laura. Don't worry.”

I brought down covers and a spare pillow. When Laura was set for the night, we left and went upstairs to our bedroom.

Mary closed the door. “Are you okay if she sleeps here in the house with us?”

“Sure, if it's fine with you...oh, you mean for good?” I didn't want to start any discussion, hoping Mary would not bring up what I'd said, downstairs. I should have known better.

She faced me, arms crossed in a belligerent stance. “So, when did you see these entities before?”

If Mary were a dog, she would be a hound dog. She sensed there was something behind my evasive phrases and would not let it go. “You've never kept anything secret from me...” She paused. “Until now.”

“Mary, it is something I kept buried for years. I never mentioned it because I had simply buried the memory.”

“This is not anything recent, then?”

“No.”

In all those years, keeping it secret had not been that difficult. What would I have said anyway? Told everyone that I saw a ghost, a spirit when I was a young boy? It would have drawn laughter, then consternation. “I see dead people” only worked for Hollywood blockbusters. Not in real life. At best,

people would wonder what was wrong with me; at worst, they would be sure there *was* something wrong with me. Soon, I would have become the subject of conversations. When I wasn't around, that is.

Mary waited for me to go on. She put one loving hand on my arm and squeezed it gently. "Don't be afraid."

I sighed. "Also Michael in New York saw them." I blurted out.

"You didn't tell me that! Why?"

I turned around to face my wife, who confronted arms crossed. My voice rose out of control and flooded Mary with words, as if not daring to give her time to reply.

"Why? Why, Mary? Because! What about preserving what we have managed until now? What about giving hope and nurturing it? Why make you worry for no reason? Why? Because I am still shocked that they do exist, and I'm still nerve-wracked. Besides, also from what Michael said, I believe they are not interested in us, and I need to figure out what that means for us, all of us."

Mary kept silent.

I rubbed my face. "Michael shot at them. Didn't seem to do any harm, they just looked at him and he ran away."

"When did you see them, Dan?" Mary looked straight into my eyes.

I resigned. There was no point in keeping it to myself any longer. I told my wife everything. She knew about my tinnitus because of medical records and check-ups I went through even after I married her. I told her about the music and the uttered words I heard. I told Mary these glowing beings must have been on Earth for years. Maybe all the crazy fellas blabbering about aliens and abductions, and all the tin-foil cap buddies were not so crazy, after all. Maybe, just maybe, that is why we were alive and many others weren't.

"Laura hadn't seen them before in her life. And she's still alive."

"Yes, and all her family is dead. Mine is not. Oh, c'mon, Mary, I don't know! I don't know, okay? I wish I knew." I turned my gaze away from her, looking out the window. Inside, an inner voice kept telling me: *You need to know, you need to know!*

"You are out of your mind."

Startled, I turned to face her, to understand what she was talking about. "What?"

"After all these years, I can read you better than you can yourself. I see what happens in your mind. You are not going anywhere! You're not going out

to find them!”

“I was not—”

“Yes, you were!”

“Mary! What should I do now? Now that I know for sure it wasn’t a hallucination. Now that I know whatever it was, it wasn’t a moment of lucid craziness. I doubted myself for years.”

“I don’t know, Dan. I don’t know.”

That didn’t sound exactly right. It didn’t sound like the Mary I knew: strong, resolute, with her ‘there are more solutions than problems’ attitude.

It was difficult for Mary and I to have a good night’s sleep that night. At times, I was awake; at others, she was. A few times, we were awake together and our hands searched for each other. We fell asleep from exhaustion in the early hours of the morning.

When we woke up a bit later, the smell of coffee and cooking had miraculously reached our bedroom. A soft chatter came from downstairs. We looked at each other. Mary put on a robe and we both went down to the kitchen. Annah and Laura were chatting and preparing a large breakfast for us all. Grilled slices of white bread, scrambled eggs and bacon, orange juice, butter, jams and marmalade.

“I didn’t know whether you preferred a salty or sweet breakfast. Annah suggested we do both.” Laura greeted us with a glorious smile and sparkling eyes.

“Well, that is definitely a good start for the day. And it’s truly welcome.” I was already hungry!

Annah smiled and ran to hug her mother. “You’re not angry, are you, Mama?”

“Of course not, honey!” Mary smiled too as Laura’s presence seemed to have given Annah back the happy look she had lost recently.

“We discussed a lot, Annah and I.” Laura said, then she smiled at our daughter. “I now know everything about her, the school, her friends, and she knows everything about me and my university life. It has been good for both of us.”

I looked at Laura, knowingly. Ironically, it had been easier for Annah to open up to Laura, share her pains and fears with her, than to us. Mary understood that, too, and I was sure she would have asked Laura about it later. Unless Laura promised Annah to keep everything secret.

I looked out the window and wondered whether *they* were there. Glowing entities, invisible during the day, maybe, but definitely there, and very much real now. Why on Earth should I trust them and expose myself to that risk? Because they paid a visit to me in my childhood? Hadn't they nearly eradicated the human race from the planet? And very easily, too; rapidly, and so efficiently. How long did it take them to put an end to billions of lives on Earth? Hours, at most, it seemed. Why? This question burned and stung like a drop of acid, burning the flesh, and leaving toxic fumes that burnt the eyes.

My mind was filling up with questions like an unstoppable flood into a chasm in the ground. I knew where that would have brought me. For now, though, it was time to enjoy the moment and the rich breakfast, and start to get to know the new member of the family. For now, it was only laughter and smiles in the kitchen, and I felt better when I pushed all those torments away.

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With a lot of help and encouragement from Mary, Laura started to fit into our lives. She participated in Annah's teaching, and joined me in my patrol routines, preferring her crossbow to any guns. Laura took it upon herself to plan for a better search for others, too...she wanted to print leaflets to leave around in case someone out there was alive.

"If it were not for the poster you left at the shopping center, I wouldn't be here now," she pointed out, quelling my doubts.

She moved into our cottage after a few days. Annah spent quite some time there, too, together with Laura. They became very good friends; the 'big sister, little sister' they'd promised to become the very first night.

Mary started to stay home more often, and dedicate more time to what she loved best: gardening. She encouraged Laura to join my sorties at every occasion and we were now a steady patrolling duo. I think Laura enjoyed it, and I did, too. There was another good reason for it, at least in my mind: to have Taxi and Tarantula add Laura to their human pack.

In our patrols around nearby villages, we often split into two human-canine teams, keeping in touch with the walkie-talkies. Laura was meticulous, and she wanted to give others the new opportunity and the hope she'd received from us. She kept track of every spot we had been to, and marked on a map all visited villages, while planning for the others. She had established

rallying locations for survivors to give signs of their presence in the region. Just a lingering hope. The controlled area grew quickly, even too quickly for me, but I didn't want to dampen her enthusiasm.

Laura was well-educated, and Mary enjoyed discussing disparate issues with her. For myself, I just loved the intellectual fencing match between two beautiful women. Very engaging and entertaining, and better than TV, especially when all TV channels were dead. One evening, Laura and Mary engaged in a lively discussion about beauty and art. Laura talked fast, and waved her hands all around.

They could go on for hours and the beauty of it all was that I didn't need to participate. Only listening, and saying, "Yeah, that is an interesting concept. What do you think?" to keep the discussion alive. I enjoyed it.

One evening, when it was just us adults, with Annah sound asleep in her bedroom, we ended up talking about love and couples. At one point, while looking straight into our eyes, Laura told us, "I love that feeling of triumph that life is and... I love sex. I like to consider sexuality in all other aspects of life. I think I am a bit of a... *fauve*: the colors of my sexuality are the bright colors of Matisse, the 'Sacre du Printemps', and Positano." She laughed.

She told us about the short-lived and loose group of early twentieth-century modern artists whose works emphasized painterly qualities and strong colors over the representational or realistic values retained by Impressionism. That sparked another discussion with Mary about Cezanne and Van Gogh post-impressionism, fused with the pointillism of Seurat.

Laura brought the discussion back to couples and their role in society. "A responsible procreation requires consideration for the rights of the unborn. Rights including those set forth in theory by the Constitution: health, education, freedom. Even those claimed virtually by everyone, well-being, happiness, self-realization. I think you aim at those with Annah. I envy what you have..."

The more Laura opened herself up to us, the more it pushed us to do the same. After a while, Laura was part of everything we did.

It was roughly three weeks since Laura had moved in with us when the Internet stopped working. Initially, I tried to solve the issue hoping it was a local problem: restarted the wireless, checked all configurations, reset to factory default the ADSL router unit, then reconfigured all over again. Nothing. Either the synchronization of the signal was lost for good and could

not be regained, or the signal simply had gone cold. The only alternative was to check at the CERN laboratory to see whether Internet was still up and running, as I believed it would be.

“I need to go to CERN,” I announced one evening after dinner. “We are offline, and I don't know when it went cold; today or days before. I haven't checked lately. Anyway, it's dead.”

With Laura slowly integrating into our life routines, the Internet had taken a back seat as she stole the spotlight. Laura was way more concrete and present than Michael or any other hypothetical click on the Facebook ad campaign could ever be. If they were ever to show up, that is.

“Don't go alone. Take Laura with you,” Mary suggested. Laura was just about to get up but I disagreed.

“No, it'll be alright. I won't be long.” Laura sat back down and looked away from me. I could tell she was disappointed. She said nothing but she turned and her wet eyes begged me...in vain.

The Lab

Not Now

CERN laboratory was like a small town, services included. Actually, not even that small as it consisted of an eight-thousand-large community, much larger than many of the little villages in the area, in both the French and Swiss territories. The main lab site expands across the national border, part in Switzerland and part in France.

A number of villages are inside the circle of its accelerators complex, the largest one built inside a twenty-seven kilometers tunnel, and hosted the most powerful hadrons collider in the world. Protons or lead ions smash together at the site of its major experiments detectors, deep down below the surface. That infrastructure was now bound to be the ultimate one, unmatched by any other lab in the world. Competition was over.

I reached the entrance in the French territory, at the doorstep of the village closest to our house. I didn't take the expressway; I wanted to avoid going through the linear cemetery made of car wrecks, a multitude of open-air tombs with their macabre display of long-gone owners.

The laboratory was a 24/7 institution, with its few access barrier gates operated by the guard on duty while all buildings, inside the compound, could be accessed at all times. I stopped right in front of the security booth with its tinted glass and got out. The barrier remained lowered and blocked the entrance. I tried the door of the booth. It wasn't locked, though some obstructions inside blocked it from fully opening.

I couldn't see clearly inside, even when pressing my face against the glass pane of the door. I went back to the car and took the flashlight from the glove compartment, returned to the booth and forced the door. It opened a bit so I pushed harder and with all my weight. Something gave way and crushed. The nauseating stench of a decomposed body greeted me.

Covering my mouth, I entered the booth. The flashlight's beam traced the dusty air inside the booth. Particulate matter floated in the air. When I was a

child, I played with tiny little movements of my hand to create swirls in the air, watching how that translated into a dancing dust in the sunbeams.

Behind the door, the crushed skeletal mummy of the guard last on duty stared at me with its empty orbits. I coughed in repulsion. The flashlight showed me the location of the control box for the barrier. I pushed the button and the bar raised only to stop halfway with a grinding noise. Another damaged piece of engineering that no one will ever repair. Entropy at work, the gentle degradation of a dead civilization.

I drove through. The lab was a familiar place for me: I worked there for almost a decade. I knew well where my first stop was: the main building—or the “500”—hosted an area where a few computers were devoted for public access. It was a quick and easy plan with high chances for success.

Before that moment, I never gave much thought to all of the people who must have had died at CERN that February. Technicians, Ph.D. students and fellows, researchers All gone. All ideas, efforts, passion and imagination obliterated by someone’s decision. By then, I had stopped thinking Mother Nature had betrayed us in some mysterious way.

From the entrance, I went straight and kept to the right at every intersection, following the perimeter road. The main building was in front of Building 2, separated from Building 1 by Building 52. Funny enough, at CERN numbers didn’t help you to find a building.

I stopped the car right in front of the main building entrance, at the place where CERN shuttles made one of their stops. None was parked there nor would any appear later. Everywhere was now a perfect spot to leave a car, anywhere in the world. Someone had solved for us every traffic congestion problem on earth, an unpleasant thought.

It was dark inside. I switched on my flashlight and opened the doors. I followed the corridor leading to the User's Office where I would have found some ten PCs for public use. I would have liked to wander around; maybe later.

The PCs were on and, thankfully, there were no bodies in the area. Touching the spacebar on the keyboard of the first one made the screen come alive. After a little while, the Alt-Ctrl-Delete pop-up to log onto the Windows environment showed up.

Alt-Ctrl-Delete: I always wondered under the influence of what substance had a Microsoft software engineer conceived that peculiar sequence. The

feeling of sloppiness and mediocrity struck me then as it always did. Long live the Mac. Nope, that's gone too. Long live nothing! There was no chance to wish a long life to anything or anyone.

After a few minutes, the desktop was finally ready and responding. I launched Internet Explorer and waited still more. In addition to the inherent speed of the operating system, or lack thereof, these were public PCs. Old models and not particularly powerful so I had to be patient. Besides, Windows PCs at CERN were the slowest of all to come alive because of the myriad of security checks in place.

It didn't matter; no one was going to disturb me or hurry me up to finish my tasks.

Finally, after a small eternity, I was able to check all three of my email accounts and there it was: a message from Michael! A few days old, and I realized how much I had neglected checking the Internet.

“Hey, sorry for the radio silence. Lots of shit going down here. They fucking invaded us, man! INVADED, that's for sure. But they don't care about us. I don't know what these bastards are up to. We're leaving the City. We are a small group. Three men, four women and a couple kids. No relations.

One of the girls here comes from Danville, Pennsylvania. We'll go there first, then we'll see. There's no future in large cities now. Things are going to hell here. Most of the city is flooded and many blocks have no power anymore so we're getting out while we can. I think we'll do better on a farm or sumthin. Who knows, maybe we'll all become Amish. We will be the new Pilgrims, Dan. We'll rebuild. They did it, and with much less. We will do it again!

I don't have time for more now. Maybe one day we'll be in touch again. Take care, man! Don't let them get you!”

Well, there goes Michael, I thought. God help him and his friends. At least, we didn't need to leave a big city and try to survive in the country. Roughly, we had that already.

I checked the Facebook campaign; it was still going on but with no additional clicks. It was literally like a message in a bottle, depending on the cyber ocean good will. Who knows who was going to pick that up, or when.

Almost four months had passed and—slowly but surely—the world's technical prowess had started to regress, apart from some bubbles where

things were kept alive with effort and continuous care as we were doing at our place. Whoever was alive in the world most probably had more urgent things to do than Facebook, even if they had Internet access.

Nonetheless, I planned to visit CERN for as long as everything there worked to keep checking for even the slimmest chance of finding evidence of more survivors.

I got back to the car and drove through the exit on the Swiss side, this time. There, the gate barrier was already raised for outgoing traffic. I slowed down. Right in front, on the other side of the road, there was the building complex hosting the control room and the main access to the underground facilities of the Atlas experiment.

More on impulse than actual reasoning, I drove straight toward the compound. The barrier blocked the way. A single red and white bar that needed to be activated using a badge, which I didn't have. Well, security was not an issue anymore. I drove slowly forward and made contact with the front of the SUV. The bar bulged, bent, then broke with a loud snapping noise.

I moved forward and reached the space in front of the underground access. Further down, an external metal staircase led to the control room. The main building walls had the entire Atlas experiment frescoed in a geometrical perspective. From the road, it gave the illusion of a 3D representation of the entire huge detector. I got out and took the Benelli shotgun with me in addition to the always present Glock.

The moon was waxing crescent, and its faint light cast the building in a shadow. Inside, I thought, I'd need the flashlight. I advanced toward the metal staircase that climbed all the way up to the control room at the very top. Even with all my care, every step resonated in the ominous, pervasive silence. I briefly stopped midway, to glance around. Alone in a deserted world.

At the top, the door was closed; another badge lock. I took my 'universal' badge, the Benelli, and stepped back as far as I could. I aimed at the lock. I fired. The door slammed opened, almost kicked off its hinges. I pumped and reloaded the shotgun at once.

Inside, pitch dark. I pointed the flashlight into the corridor behind the broken door. Empty. With the flashlight in my left hand, I balanced the Benelli with my right and walked in. All was silent. I remembered, the door to the right led to the control room. I opened it and put the flashlight away. All monitors and computers screens were on and diffused enough light.

The room was quiet, but for the humming of the machines. There was no one in the room that I could see so I adjusted the Benelli at my back with its shoulder strap. I gripped my Glock, nonetheless.

I stepped further inside and discovered I wasn't truly alone as I thought. Should have realized it: however faint, the slightly sweet and pungent smell of long-dead rotten bodies lingered in the room. I think my brain, once I got in, simply ignored things like smell, and even sound, to concentrate on everything visual.

On the floor, behind the desks, the dried remains of three technicians, or physicists, greeted me with their obscene smile. Just a little better preserved than the guard in the booth but they were the same just a bunch of bones, cartilage and dried skins on a skeletal support. Who knows, maybe I would have even recognized them if they were not so decomposed.

Some of the monitors showed the scenes from webcams down in the experimental areas. On one, I recognized details of the wire-chambers of the muon detector spectrometer, but none showed the presence of any more bodies.

I had nothing more to see or to do there for the moment. I looked at my wristwatch; it was time to go home instead, postponing further exploration of the lab for other days.

Outside, the moon was a bit brighter, or so it seemed to me. I started to climb down slowly when my tinnitus grew louder and less chaotic at the same time. Similar to what happens to me when I wake up abruptly during the night because of a ringing phone, or when younger Annah screamed because of a nightmare. On those occasions, the tinnitus volume increases, louder for a few seconds and with an additional lower frequency humming, only to subside again until the mostly incoherent hisses, whispered noises, and tunes became predominant again. Like the crashing of a single gigantic ocean wave on a sandy beach: the thump, the roar and the shock wave, the surf subsiding soon after, and the noise of millions of grains of sand and pebbles rolling against each other and screeching all along. Then, steady and regular as always, the violence is forgotten as if it had never occurred until it happens again.

This time, though, it lasted, and there were regular modulations in both pitches and tunes that I'd never heard before. At the midway landing of the staircase, I turned around, instinctively, looking toward the car. I froze. A glow

came from the access area to the underground experimental facility. I recognized the glow. I didn't know what to do. The light pulsed irregularly.

I continued to climb down as quietly as I could and it took me some time to reach the last step. I moved to the side to have a better view, and then I saw them. There were four silhouettes, similar to the entity who visited me when I was a child. From where I stood, I couldn't distinguish any difference between them: clones of each other, each one glowing almost exactly as the others, although differently. They looked straight at me. Motionless. As if they were expecting me to come forward.

I knew, there and then, they had been waiting for me to come out. As many years before in my childhood bedroom, there we stood, not moving, with the additional discomfort of my now almost deafening tinnitus. However, that too was not exactly true; I could hear perfectly well. As if I had two separate hearing systems at work, with one not excluding the other. And I was calm, unnaturally calm; I recognized that old feeling. My rationality did not fight against it.

It was a stalemate situation unless I did something. The four entities were just standing and watching, aware of my presence but no gestures or actions. Not exactly what I would call an encouraging reunion after so many years. Then it happened.

I staggered. As if I got punched directly to my brain, I felt them. I say "felt" because I cannot use the term "heard". Instead, my tinnitus had almost disappeared and I received—yes, better word than *heard*—their superimposed messages: "Not now", "Later", "Too Soon", all forming in the 3D space around my head, a space the tinnitus had filled for so many years.

I felt a wave of unspoken approval. Was I doing what I was expected to do in that moment? Was I receiving the approval for my behavior in the past months?

While staring at the four entities, I approached the car and opened the door. Under constant watchful scrutiny from them, I stepped in, started the engine, and drove away in a state of trance. The unnatural serenity slowly disappeared as I got farther away and an uncontrollable tremor engulfed me. I stopped the car at the border and watched in the rear mirror to see if any glowing entity followed behind. The only light came from the moon and the lampposts.

My hands hurt; I was gripping the steering wheel so hard that my knuckles were all white. I let it go. Meanwhile, my tinnitus got back to its normal noise level and regular incoherence. I sweated. I'd not been killed, I had not been abducted. They told me it was too early. Too early for what?

My shaking was under control again. I was elated and excited, yet at the same time troubled and scared. Maybe—finally—I communicated with them! Or, at least, they knew how to communicate with me! More dots from the past got connected, providing further explanations. Things fell into place, slowly, revealing a larger portion of our new reality. The entities were for real, and I did not have just a weird childhood dream. They were real and talked to me!

I stepped on the gas pedal and accelerated into the night. By the time I reached home, I grew determined to keep the whole incident to myself. “Not now,” “Later,” “Too Soon,” resonated in my head, supporting that decision. I thought I would've received their approval for that decision, too.

Mary and Laura waited for me at the door; Annah must have already been in bed. Taxi and Tarantula greeted me with their pure canine effusions; joy that allowed me to spend a moment alone, pretending I was relaxed.

“We were worried. Mary was about to call you but you left your phone here. Next time I'll go with you...” Laura came closer. “You're sweating!”

She was sincerely worried, but I was married to another woman and Mary hadn't said anything yet. Then she asked, “So. How was it at CERN?” with a flat tone in her voice.

I got the impression she really didn't care, and that struck me like a slap to my face. Mary's expression changed to a quizzical frown as if her tone must have sounded odd to her, too. I glanced at her but she did not look back at me.

I told both about the room full of old public access PCs and that they still worked. Then about Michael's message, most probably his last one. He and his group had decided to go to Pennsylvania and try to found a new rural community, helping each other rebuild...whatever that meant. Things in New York had deteriorated, and faster than here, apparently. We were not in the same hurry and even if more people were to join us, the best short-term solution would have been to occupy Joe and Beth's house rather than going anywhere else.

I was not so keen about leaving what we had already achieved, unless it was for something certain to be better. Even if power were to disappear, we

still had the generators, and the basement was packed with supplies of all kinds. We could even continue to run fridges and freezers down there. Besides...“Not Now,” “Later,” “Too Soon,” replayed in my mind. What did *they* mean by that?

“I’m sure there are others alive somewhere,” Laura said. “But for now we should think of our world as if we were the only ones, and *adapt!*”

She stressed the last word and looked at Mary. Something had happened between them while I was away. I sensed it, but I couldn’t guess what.

Later, when Laura left and I was alone with Mary, I tried to understand the subtle change I felt. I didn’t get anything specific from Mary, just that they were worried because I was there, at the lab alone, and they had nothing to do but wait. Nor could they reach me: “Why did you leave the phone at home?”

“I’m sorry. I guess because I left in a hurry. I didn’t think it would take that long.”

“Doesn’t matter. The important thing is you’re here now... Do you like Laura?”

That came unexpectedly. She asked the question abruptly and out of context. Her eyes were fixed on me, trying to read the answer from my face rather than hearing it from my voice.

“Why, yes...of course. I think we’ve been lucky with her. Besides, she’s fantastic with Annah. And not just with Annah, to tell the truth. I think she’s bringing a lot to everyone here.”

Mary kept looking intensely at me. I straightened up and ran a hand through my hair. She followed my gesture with her eyes.

“Indeed. I like her too,” she said. “She’s bright and full of energy. She’s young...and she likes you, too.”

Now I was sure there was something cooking. Uncomfortable, as when at school I knew the teacher was about to ask me something I hadn’t prepared for, waiting for the blow to strike and to be sent back to my seat with a bad note.

“What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“Nothing!” Mary replied, too rapidly to be true. “I agree with you, she’s bringing a lot to everyone.”

I couldn’t get more from Mary that night. I knew I was missing something crucial, but Mary erected a wall of avoidance, refusing to speak of anything but everyday tasks. That was not like her.

“Mary, I love you. I do love you. Never forget that.”

“I know. And I love you, too... In this different world, even more.” She caressed me, lovingly and with nostalgia, as if I was about to leave forever...or she was.

I was troubled, too troubled to go to bed and sleep. I told Mary I needed to relax for a while and went downstairs. I grabbed an Esplendidos. I filled half a glass with Caol Ila, one of my favorites whiskey, and went outside.

Taxi and Tarantula lay in their kennels, half asleep. They raised their heads alerted when I went out. I shushed them gently but firmly, and patted their heads. No, it wasn't time for an impromptu stroll. “Be good guys, lie down and stay still!” They yawned and drifted back to sleep.

I sat comfortably on the terrace, lit my cigar, and gulped a mouthful of whiskey. My mind was spinning fast, though no clearly formulated thoughts queued up at my brain's door. I was confused.

Honestly, the confusion had set in months ago. The world had changed and it was changing still. And now I'd seen *them* again, too. We needed to adapt, Laura said. Hadn't we adapted already? Wasn't it enough? What was she really saying? I was sure it had to be in relation to Mary, but how?

I looked around, mentally noting all the things that were not visible from my lawn chair: our supplies in the basement, the shooting range we'd built, the nearby hardware store, our gas storage in Joe's tool shed. We had adapted, hadn't we? *We have adapted!* I shouted mentally, as if someone was indeed able to hear my thoughts.

Laura was still awake. I could see the light in her cottage. Her door opened and she peeked outside. Just before I could say anything, she saw me and stepped back inside. She closed the door, gently.

I stayed there with my hand half-raised in a missed greeting and feeling odd. A few seconds later, I heard the door being locked. The window shades were open and only a translucent curtain impeded a clear view of her bedroom inside.

Her silhouette appeared at the window and she began to undress...slowly. It was impossible she didn't realize I could see her.

She was suggestive in her movements, a sensuous disrobing that Laura prolonged with carefully chosen delays. A teasing show put on just for me. Laura covered her breasts with her hands when she took off her top, then began to caress herself between her legs. However, I only imagined this last

part, as I could not see below her belly from where I sat, but I didn't dare stand up for a better view.

I held my breath multiple times. Left alone in the ashtray, the cigar consumed itself and released dancing spirals of smoke sinuously seducing the moonlight.

Pliny the Elder wrote that a woman could lull a storm out at sea by stripping. I knew exactly what he meant. The light went off in the cottage and, shortly after, I could hear Laura moaning. She was...masturbating, leaving me with my galloping and fervid imagination.

I swallowed my whiskey. I was excited, too.

Adapt

Broken Hearts

The sun shone bright that day. Summer had definitely set in, even if it was only late May. In the distance, the Alps were perfectly visible, the air crystal clear. Even the weather seemed to be following a different pattern than the usual one.

That morning, I had a bit of trouble looking Laura in her eyes. Instead, she gazed at me quite thoroughly, and intensely. Annah was happy; summer and school holidays would soon come. She complained Mom made her study even more than when she was at school for real.

Mary was cheerful because her yearly spring allergy was abating. “Annah, get ready for our lessons. I’ll join you upstairs in a second.” She turned toward Laura and me, “and you two, leave us alone. Go for your patrolling and we’ll see you at lunch. If you have no preferences, I’m planning to have lasagna today.”

“Wonderful!” I couldn’t contain myself. Mary had always been great in the kitchen.

“You sure you don’t want any help with that?” added Laura.

“I’m sure,” I heard Mary reply. I was about to get Taxi ready but then she said, “No, Dan. Please leave Taxi home. Yesterday, Tarantula was very nervous and today we have a lot of new stuff to study. It’s difficult for Annah to pay attention with all that whining. Maybe Tarantula will behave better if Taxi is home with her.”

I turned to look at Mary with a quizzical expression stamped on my face. Was about to reply when Laura grabbed my hand and pulled me. “C’mon, big boy. Don’t delay the school schedule.” A mischievous smile rose to her lips. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there to protect you.”

She exchanged a mocking glance with Mary who gestured me to hurry up and gave me a long kiss. Her eyes beaming into mine, glued, as if she were seeing me for the last time.

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We had three rally points in Geneva, in addition to nearby villages. Laura always hoped that, with time, others would come across her messages. She regularly increased the radius we covered, arguing that the only reason we did not find other people yet was because I had limited myself to just a few miles away from home: “Imagine if everyone were doing as you did,” she once said laughing. “No one would ever know of the existence of others!”

She probably had a point. I had no intention to discourage her, or be accused of negative thinking and defeatism by bringing forward the theory of discrete uniform distributions. We were not a known, finite number of equally spaced survivors likely to have been spared.

I had little hopes of finding anyone nearby, especially after such a long time. Anyway, it was hard to visit all rally points in a same week. Hope is what keeps you going, even when all the odds are against you. Besides, I liked the passion Laura put into everything she did, and I also enjoyed her presence around me.

“Let’s go to Geneva first,” she said once in the car. Radiant and gleaming, eager to leave, as if we were about to go to a party.

I was amused and bemused, and her enthusiasm was contagious. I smiled.

She was alarmingly beautiful that morning. Especially after the evening before whose images still teased me. She had on tight, low-waisted workout pants, and a tee-shirt, both as revealing as they could be. Between her legs, she kept the bag she used to carry the leaflets she edited for the “people out there” along with the heavy duty staple gun. That thing was able to shoot a big staple into anything. We crossed the border quickly and reached Meyrin.

“Did you ever drive a Ferrari, Dan?”

“Huh?” Where did that come from? “A Ferrari? Nope. Never had the chance. Why?”

“What prevents us now?” She said, smiling with the naughty expression of a very bad girl. Teaser, again!

Geneva was a wealthy city and luxury cars were never lacking in town. A Ferrari and Maserati dealership had its showroom just five minutes from the airport.

“Turn there,” she said swiftly. Too surprised to reply, I did instinctively as she said.

“Keep going and, at the next crossing, turn right again.”

I knew where she was taking me. In no time, we were in front of ‘Modenas’, one of the official Ferrari dealers in Geneva, probably the largest one. In its parking lot, right in front of the showroom, there were two Bentley Continental GTC 6.0 convertibles, plus enough Ferraris to make any male drool in awe. We got out next to a red-walled cubic tunnel that acted as the entrance to the showroom.

Laura seized my hand, pulling me toward the windows. “Look!”

I didn’t need any encouragement.

In the showroom, a number of Ferrari 612s, a 599 GTB Fiorano, a GTO, and the new Ferrari Four sat majestically. I couldn’t take my eyes off those beauties and I wondered about the sensations I’d get from driving one of those mechanical jewels. I felt like a kid in front of a candy store, hands pressed against the glass.

Laura profited from my trance to disappear, unseen. Suddenly, I heard a couple of shots that awoke me from my daydreaming. Laura was missing. I ran toward the tunnel and, expecting the worst, my hand reached for the Glock.

Laura had stepped into the showroom, doors wide open, glass shattered on the floor. She was sparkling and waiting for me.

“Laura!” My heart resumed beating.

“What?” Laura smiled in excitement. I went to join her but she left to search for the dealer's office. I noticed mute alarm devices blinking furiously because of our intrusion. I ignored them: No one would be coming to check what we were doing.

The showroom boasted a sleek design along with the impressive display of cars. An open bar area was ready to welcome wealthy customers; I guess one must deserve a flute of champagne while waiting for such a brand new four-wheeled baby.

A panel informed visitors that they were at the largest showroom in Europe, with 6,600 square meters of display space and a permanent show of the most exceptional cars from the Maranello brand. The panel also explained that customers were able to configure any car to their liking on a multitude of touch terminal displays and a member of the staff would love to accompany them for a test drive.

“Dan!” Laura called from an adjoining workshop area.

Pulled reluctantly away from my car dreams and dream cars, I followed her voice. I found her in the back garage area with a few keys in her hand and the sexiest posture one could ever imagine. My memory saw her in front of her window, naked. I sighed. She already had the workshop's large barrier open into the private parking lot.

"We just need to check which key opens which car. Come!" She threw a bunch at me and ran to try the rest on the nearest Ferraris.

I thought we were out of our minds, but it was fun and thrilling.

Triumphantly, she turned the key on a roofless red Ferrari SA Aperta. While I watched in awe, she pushed the start button on the steering wheel and the four-valve V12 engine came alive. Pure mechanical ecstasy. And the sound... the perfect sonic expression of its powerful 670 hp engine.

"In the standard configuration, that is." Laura corrected me.

I had thought out loud without realizing it. I got in the passenger seat and watched Laura setting the switch on the right to the 'Race' setting.

"How do you know this?"

"Ferrari's? I love them and this is the most powerful roadster they make. A 6-gear, V12 takes you from zero to 100 km/h in about three and a half seconds."

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open. I was speechless. Laura laughed, then she smiled knowingly. "One of my ex's was crazy about Ferraris."

"One of your ex..." *Lucky guy.* The thought rushed through my mind like an avalanche and it wasn't about the Ferrari.

She handled the gear paddle, shifted gear, and we were off.

"Hold tight now!" She warned as she drove out of the parking lot and back to the street.

I was in awe of the car, in awe of her, in awe about everything. We reached the straight four-laned main road that connected Geneva to Meyrin and to the airport. There she stopped, right in the middle. The engine had the most beautiful sound ever and the exhaust note was pitch perfect. She pumped the gas pedal a few times and the engine roared. It felt like we were in pole position for a race.

"Look at this." She pointed at something on the left of the steering column. I bent to have a look. A silver plate with an F1 silhouette Ferrari stamped with the inscription "31 Formula 1 World Titles" and the registration number of the car itself. I nodded.

Before I realized anything, she slammed on the pedal.

Oh my... "Jeez!"

Laura laughed.

I was literally in a bullet. The Ferrari roared, and the acceleration slammed me against the seat. Laura was gleaming and screamed in pure joy. We reached 100 km/h in no time and got to 240 soon after while I held tight to the middle handle bar. Now I know why engineers put it there. It was a pure magical moment. I screamed in turn.

An epic wail emanated from the exhaust pipes. The wind roared and my vision tunneled narrowly with the increasing speed. The road shrank to a slim tape of asphalt. My soul was possessed by the gods of speed.

In a few seconds, the possession was over. We covered the straight mile stretch and fast approached the interchange. Laura geared down and slowed the car. We reached the end of the strip with my heart pumping hard. She stopped the car and jumped out like wild thing, a breathtaking wild animal. "Your turn now!" she said defiantly.

I jumped out, excited, and started toward the driver's side. Laura walked the opposite way and blocked me in front of the car, her hand on my chest. Without a word, she pulled me to her inviting lips and kissed me furiously. No, she was eating me, and pressed her body hard against me. I lost my balance from the surprise, the excitement, the loss of breathing. We landed on the hood of the Ferrari, warm and vibrant under me. I gasped.

"Laura. Oh my God, Laura...Wait!"

"Now, Dan, now. Please now." Her hands got busy with my belt.

My brain erupted in flames and I started to hyperventilate. "Laura! Mary!" I grabbed her arms and managed to hold her over me and, for a second, stop her frenzied lust to which, I knew, I was about to succumb at any moment.

She looked at me with her dazzling blue eyes, wide open in her fevered assault. "Idiot...she knows."

My grip weakened and she took advantage, forcing herself down and kissing me again with passion and paroxysm.

"She knows, she knows." The words hit me and crushed all reluctance while my body screamed, "Yes, yes!"

Laura took off her tee-shirt, revealing her breasts. Her nipples were hard and aroused. She unzipped my trousers and helped me pull them down; Laura

pulled down her workout pants, too. Naked underneath, she grabbed me and guided me inside her. “Oh God, oh God.”

She was so warm and tight, and she was so beautiful. Inside her, nothing mattered anymore. Her perfect breasts filled my vision. Her face was in ecstasy as I was. She kissed me in wild excitement and moaned. That excited me even more, if that was possible. Every muscle ached, and I gripped her whole body with strength. I feared I was going faster than the damned Ferrari, like a kid at his first time and got worried I would soon miss a beat.

We were both terribly excited and frightened and hopeful and doubtful. Everything mixed and at the same time. Laced together, beaded with sweat, swallowing her tongue and getting lost in her warm sweetness.

“Oh...slower, but don't stop, don't stop!” Laura reached down with one hand and images of what happened the night before filled my mind.

She pulsed hard around me and brought me rapidly to paroxysm with the last few powerful moments. I tightened my arms around her and bit her neck.

Laura screamed and pulled herself aside. She grabbed me and, before I could protest, she gave me the most intimate kiss until I couldn't resist anymore.

Laura then crawled up to me and rested her beautiful body over my chest, panting. She was breathless and I was still gasping. My head was spinning and dizzy. I was emptied and drained—physically and emotionally—and my mind was invaded with mixed feelings and a burning sense of guilt. The conscience hurt while everything else floated in nirvana.

“Oh my God, Dan. You can't imagine how I feel. It has been so long...”

I caressed her. Laura was truly beautiful and I had developed a sincere affection for her. I guess it was more than I admitted to myself. I wasn't prepared for this. I began to understand recent events. How Mary and Laura's complicity had grown over the last month... and last night. I kissed her tenderly.

“She knows!” echoed in my mind. “You planned all this, right? I mean, both of you.”

“Mary knew you wouldn't notice anything until the last minute. You're such a nice boy.” She chuckled. “It's a different world, Dan. I think I love you, and I love Mary and Annah, too. And you are probably the only man around, and will be for who knows how long.”

“And Mary accepts all this?”

“Not at first. Then she understood. I told her I would’ve never ever try anything with you, unless she agreed.” She paused. “I would’ve left, Dan. One day, I would have left you all.”

I listened to her and so I understood why Mary seemed to have changed. Her questions and her glances, the brief looks at me and Laura, the allusions I refused to consider or take into account, and her sober mood at times. It must have begun around the time Mary decided or when Laura told her. All started to coalesce into a meaningful structure. Like when you see the hundreds of pieces of a do-it-yourself furniture kit. It is a mess until you get your hands on the instructions. Then, the sequential order makes sense, and you can see the final product through the thousands of pieces scattered on the floor.

“She’s a fantastic woman, Dan.”

“That she is. Before, you said she knows? About today?”

“Yes, keeping Taxi at home, the Ferrari.” She chuckled again. “We have planned everything.”

“And yesterday?”

“Yesterday...sort of. A lucky coincidence. I saw you on the terrace, I improvised. Mary told me you’re a good man and that I had to really seduce you, otherwise, you would have resisted, or forced yourself not to notice anything.” She laughed gently and cheerfully. “Would you have resisted?”

“Laura...” I had no words. I didn't know whether to feel outraged, happy, flattered, or what.

“By the way, the Ferrari is our gift. From Mary and I with love.”

“The Ferrari...part of the plan too, huh?” I felt like an idiot talking about all that with a beautiful and naked young woman languidly resting over me and caressing me.

“Weren’t you surprised by how fast I got in, found the right keys, had the workshop garage door open and all the rest?”

“What if I had found a working key before you?”

“You couldn’t.” She said, chuckling and smiling knowingly.

“Okay, I give up.” This time I chuckled, too.

Then, Laura continued more seriously. “Ah, yes. If we go back home with the Ferrari, Mary will know and there will be no urgent need for you to talk or discuss anything. She loves you, Dan, and she doesn’t want you to feel guilty. Neither do I.”

I knew all this had been done with the best possible intentions but... “Maybe I don't feel guilty. I mean, why was I not part of this...process? After all, I had to have an active role in it. Or am I wrong?”

Laura said nothing.

“I feel a bit used, now. So... Mary essentially gave you permission to seduce me? What am I? A sex toy? To you both?”

“You are taking it all wrong now.”

“Fine. Then explain it to me.”

“What do you think? That it's just about sex? Mary loves you profoundly. And selflessly. You said many times we all have a duty to survive. Well, open up your ears and clean out your eyes, Dan. Mary is surviving, I am surviving and, if you do not understand this, maybe Mary's wrong in holding you in such high esteem.”

She said that without taking a breath and she wasn't finished. Her face turned red when she filled her lungs. “What are you talking about permission? What Mary has done is the greatest proof of love she could give you, and to me, to us all! What do you think I am? A slut looking for sex? I saw you, and Mary, and your love. And started to love you as well, for who you are, not for what you have between your legs! Any other man—”

“There isn't any other man, Laura!”

She burst into tears and punched me on my chest and face and slapped me, waving her arms hysterically and screaming at a high pitch.

I struggled to stop her and managed to grab her arms before she hurt herself. Laura resisted forcefully, fiery and hot like the fauve she compared herself to.

“Wowowow, Laura! Stop, stop, calm down... shhhh... calm down...”

I succeeded in containing the fury and held her tight until she gave up fighting. My voice lowered to a whisper in her ear. “It's alright. I know of all the suffering. I know of the void and the pain, and I know of Mary's tears and imagine yours, too.”

I kissed her hair and her cheeks. Laura started to sob and shake—and finally—she totally and gently abandoned herself into my arms, letting me fully embrace her.

“Laura, Laura. Young and lovely, Laura. I'm sorry, I'm sorry...” I raised her chin to look into her swollen, beautiful and so vulnerable eyes. “I am just scared, Laura. I'm scared I will not be able to love you both and that I'd lose

you both!” I sighed. “I forced myself not to think about you. Because I love Mary and because there is Annah. That’s a role I know how to fulfill. Now, I don’t know where I’m going...”

She seemed to me even younger than she actually was. Laura was tearful. “Can't you love us both? Mary and me?” She seemed lost and afraid of my answer.

Lovely Laura. So strong and so fragile, too. And Mary, how has she been able to keep all this to herself? I couldn’t imagine the struggle and the inner strength that required. I’m not sure I would have been able to do the same if the situation were reversed.

The old world clashed with the new world and the old order made no sense in the new. What was right before was not necessarily the right thing to do now. Laura asked for love; to love and to be loved. And Mary, hers was the ultimate act of love and selflessness. I understood that. Who was I to elect myself judge, armed with old norms and morality and condemn what these two women had been capable of doing?

Laura had confessed her feelings to Mary and offered to leave us, preferring to put her life at risk, being alone, rather than hurting Mary and Annah. Yet, Mary had changed and accepted the challenge, adapting to a new world and new needs. Better than I had done, and better than I would have imagined. She judged Laura worthy of love, worthy of her love even before mine, and spared me from all the grief and the hurting she instead must have been enduring on her own.

“I’m only a man, Laura, and I’ll need your help. Yours and Mary’s. Help me never to become a jerk, never to hurt any of you.”

She hugged me and kissed me and cried even more, but those were different tears. She was radiant, like any woman who finally finds love.

“So, shall we go get the Volvo?” she said, drying her tears and giggling like a young girl. “I’ll drive that one home.”

Before I could reply, she met my eyes. “And I love you, Dan.” She kissed me. “Now drive this Ferrari. She’s waiting for you.”

I didn’t know whether she referred to Mary or the car. I smiled. We quickly put our clothes back on, and soon I was behind the steering wheel of a Ferrari SA Aperta. My own Ferrari!

I smiled at Laura, sitting next to me. So beautiful and, yes—in this new world—I could love and care for two women, and there was a chance it would

be all right.

The Ferrari responded forcefully to my commands; the steering was incredible and the sensation of power, incomparable. I didn't want to but it was irresistible: we screamed again, together.

We got home, as planned, Ferrari and all. Mary waited alone at the door when we pulled in, first the Ferrari then the Volvo. Mary smiled, knowingly. I felt embarrassed, as a child who had been caught after some naughty tricks. I attempted a smile, too. Mary's widened her arms and her eyes got misty. In my hesitation, Laura got out of the Volvo and preceded me. She and Mary hugged.

"Thank you," I heard Laura saying. "I love you."

Timidly, I walked toward them; Laura moved aside and Mary hugged me.

"Mary..."

"Shhh...don't say anything. You love me, remember? And I love you. Only this counts."

Laura smiled and her beautiful, loving blue eyes were wet with tears, too.

"Wooooh!" Annah finally appeared at the front door. She ran out toward the Ferrari, ignoring everything and everyone.

Now, we needed to think how to explain everything to Annah: our family was evolving, and changing, and adapting.

New Paths

Questions With No Answers

The dictionary says “deviant” is someone who “does not fit the conventions, ethical or behavioral, or social expectations of the group or the society in which he lives.” Did we reach the point where our conventions and beliefs faltered? Which were our social expectations?

Ethics, right and wrong behaviors, social good and wisdom, its acceptance and refusal, all come from interacting with others. One has to confer with others on these things. How do we understand, know about them? How do we judge when we talk about what is right and what is wrong? Can moral judgments be objectively true? Do they depend on historical beliefs, or must they suite the world we now live in? Were the Spartans righteous when they left disabled babies die on Mount Taigeto, or the Romans flung traitors from the Tarpeian cliff to their death?

Which were now the evident features of the world, those of our time? Human population had practically disappeared, culled and purged by external entities who appeared to our senses as humanoid figures, glowing in nature and difficult to distinguish from one another. Most probably, humans were now so few and scattered that small groups would need to grow significantly from within before the chance to interact with other communities could ever materialize in the future.

If our primary objective and duty was not to give up and disappear, like a blink in the planet's existence, then we needed to reinvent ourselves from the ground up. Were these not God's holy words: “That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying, I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven.” Was there a new start? Was this the age to come? If so, what would be our role and destiny?

As for the entities—apart from the seemingly obvious role of being our executioners—what was their role in our future, and what did we need to wait for? Had I understood them correctly? Was I coming too early, was it too soon

for them to deal with me, with us? Did they have expectations for us, and were we fulfilling them? And what if we weren't...?

Whatever our choices, did we deviate from the expected path? Deviance is far from being synonymous with freedom. I have always wondered mercilessly if I was ever free in my choices, or was I simply reactive and a mere slave to my reactions? This is even more crucial an issue for younger ones, like Annah and Laura, because youth is the age of choices. Important choices that may give a direction to one's life or lead to another, terribly different one. Will they be given the time to make their own choices?

We thought about the directions our lives might take and the bubble of "normality" that I strived to maintain around us. What was normal or abnormal could not be derived from absolute ethics only or from the behavioral conventions of a society which was no more. We had the freedom to choose anew what was normal and ethical. Didn't we? Could we?

What was freedom now, really? Was it, for example, not to be influenced by the education we had received? By the conventions and morals of the previous world? Certainly not. If that is the case, we shall never start to read our first book or learn from the experiences of others.

Instead, we can and must talk about freedom as coming from the multiplicity, variety, and quality of different influences that can break the chains of our own beliefs and convictions. Freedom is for the curious ones. Free is the one not influenced by taboos. Free is the one who reasons and evolves continuously, and refuses to accept anything without thinking.

Freedom is that which comes from knowledge, the freedom that comes from curiosity, the freedom that comes from the times when the first man did not refuse to look into a telescope and discovered other planets, the freedom that comes from those who tried relentlessly when all others said it was impossible. It is in this freedom that deviance has its roots.

Long live the freedom of those who have been derided or insulted. Those who first thought photography was art, who first thought humans could fly—or even walk on the moon...those who dreamed about the future and made it the present. Freedom had always had an impact on the world.

What happened with Laura certainly had an impact on me if my head was now filled with all these confused ideas and thoughts.

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Annah accepted our enlarged family as soon as she understood it would not undermine her parent's relationship. Much later, the announcement that Laura was pregnant and Annah was going to have a little sister or brother made things even easier. Our family would grow.

For myself, that was also the trigger for not wanting to passively wait anymore for signals or events that might harshly affect our world as we knew it. To survive and adapt we needed to know what the entities had in store for us.

During those weeks, I hadn't tried to get back in touch with the entities, or to contact them. Yes, I saw them a few other times and always at CERN. On every occasion, I had the sensation that I should not approach them any further. Again, the unspoken messages were received that it was too early and I obeyed. Retreating every time, yet feeling increasingly distressed and finding it a more difficult thing to do.

I didn't share those encounters with the family, which now fully included Laura. I couldn't think of us all as 'free' when we could be just entertaining specimens of a disappearing species, part of a short-term experiment soon to be concluded when *they* grew tired of observing us, specimens that could be discarded on a whim. So, whether or not it was the right time for those entities, it soon became the right time for myself.

"I have seen them, Mary. Again," I said one afternoon.

Astonished stares greeted my words. Laura didn't know yet about my childhood experience with one of the entities; it was time to tell her, too. She listened to my explanation with growing amazement.

She asked Mary. "Did you know that?"

"Dan told me only very recently, and I was as shocked as you are. He's probably right. This is not something that happened or was decided abruptly."

"And what do *you* think?" Laura asked Mary.

One of the problems of polygyny I learned from direct experience. "Wives" tend to talk to each other, and to support each other in all moments. Sometimes it grew a bit irritating, but I never expressed my feelings or complained about it directly.

I interjected. "I believe we must be part of something bigger, a larger plan." I paused. "Besides, you're pregnant, and in a few months we'll need to get ready for your delivery. Maybe it's better to know now than later."

“What do we do if...” Laura did not finish the phrase; we all understood what she meant.

“I don’t think they’ll harm me.” I replied quickly. “They’ve had plenty of occasions to do that. Laura, we cannot continue pretending they are not here.” I reminded them about Michael and his group in New York and that, as far as we knew, they too had not been bothered at all.

“As far as we know...” Laura stressed.

We reached a status quo where our lives were rather stable and secure. It was tempting, being ignored to continue ignoring. Very tempting. Living our lives undisturbed. At the same time, the knowledge that I could communicate with them, in some way, was paramount. From all that had happened, in the past and in the recent encounters, it seemed that it was not a hazard either. What became the most disturbing was the rather passive attitude I had adopted lately.

Sure, I had in mind first and foremost everyone’s safety and, so far, everything had been just phenomenal for us. I was scared to lose what we had. Life surely would become more difficult for us in the near future, but for now...

Nature had gained ground and everything looked more primeval. Vegetation and weeds were growing where they had never been allowed to before. Little wild animals had conquered more spaces. But apart from this? Nothing yet dangerous or disturbing. Actually, It was astonishing to see how a few months with no human activities had turned everything into a more rugged and rough scenario, and a more natural one, too. Taxi and Tarantula enjoyed that more than any of us. In the explorations of our vast territory, they loved hunting hares and rabbits found in our own neighborhood. No need to go into the woods anymore; the woods were coming to us.

But we were not alone and that was the strident note. It was not just us and the planet, us learning to share our space with the rest of all familiar living things. *They*, either visible or invisible, were a burden. A fearfully heavy presence. I could not ignore the fact they existed, we couldn’t ignore them. They were the only ones from whom we could receive answers and understand what had been our fate and why.

Okay, I admit it. Although when near them I experienced a surreal calm, I was scared afterwards and lived in fear of them. If they wanted to, I was sure they could end my life in no time just as they had with all the others. I could

be a nuisance or would soon become one: who did I think I was to believe I was important to them? Maybe there were thousands like me in the world right now, some even better than I was in their eyes. I had no clue. All was supposition, a rough guess that I was somehow needed. I had nothing really to support that, apart from the fact that they had paid a visit to me when I was a child. I had no directions. Stalemate.

Even when I used to play chess, I hated stalemate situations. I preferred to risk losing a game rather than aiming for or accepting a stalemate. I had the impression that the game was a failure if it ended as such. It had been years since I played my last chess game with a human being. I wasn't particularly good, but I wasn't particularly bad either as I was able to provide enjoyable chess games. However, the one I played with our glowing wardens wasn't particularly enjoyable, at least for me. It was a stalemate, and I had to break it.

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From what Michael wrote about the entities, we could not hide from them. Somehow, no matter how concealed a human would be, it seemed impossible to stay out of their sight. That made the initial idea of having Mary come with me out of the question. I would have exposed her to an unnecessary risk. And Laura was pregnant so she was excluded, too.

Besides, Michael fired at them without any discernible and tangible result. What could Mary do then? No, better to confront them alone, and hope they had no reason to get rid of me, an annoying lower life form. I knew it had to be done, but how and when? Yes, we got scared just thinking of it. Scared to do it, scared not to do it. A stalemate to be broken.

We spent days pretending everything was fine and we could see from each other's eyes that we thought about it all the time.

No doubts, I felt like the luckiest man on Earth and I probably was. We had reasonable prospects to live a comfortable life. I had the love of two women, my daughter. Envious, but we kept forgetting one factor. A fundamental one that urged me to break the stalemate rapidly: Annah and a new child coming.

Annah had started to hit some limits in her life. Growing up, it was inevitable. What chance did she have to live her life to its fullest? Very small. These were her concerns, and they took root in her and sapped her spirit. She

was thirteen then, and she pictured a lonely future for herself. Living long enough to see us all dying and, in the end, taking care of the new child Laura carried. In Annah's teen-aged eyes, we were already old and our death was imminent and impending in her mind.

Regardless—to her—she was heading inexorably toward loneliness. A future she started to fear as worthless and scary. I took care to spend time alone with her, whenever possible, even just for a leisurely stroll together with the dogs. That day we were talking about the baby. Possible names, which of her toys she could give him or her...then, her mood suddenly and abruptly worsened.

“Dad, do you think I'm pretty?” she asked with a smile, but then her face became serious. “Never mind, I will never be in love anyway.”

In a normal world, I would know what to say to reassure her. I would talk about the fears of first loves and first discoveries, when a single look is strong enough to make you blush or bring you joy and hope. When a smile is large enough to promise all mysteries will be revealed, the pains and the strong emotions, the warm fuzzes of first loves. But there and then? How could I tell my daughter about falling in love, finding a young man who would cherish her more than his own life, and that she will one day feel the same immense happiness I felt when she was born? Annah's words—*I will never be in love*—hit me like a hammer blow.

“Sweetheart, I don't know and you don't know. I can't tell when it will happen, but it will happen.” My heartbeat accelerated. “I know we are not the only ones alive, but your life will follow other paths than mine or your mom's. I'd be lying to you if I told you any differently.”

“There's no one, Dad. You tried, Laura is trying, there's no one. Mom has you, even Laura now has you. There's no one for me.”

“Annah. We will always be here for you.”

I regretted saying it immediately when she cried out, “Dad! Don't treat me like a baby. I am thirteen! It's not that! I am talking about being together, having my own life one day. I will never have what you have...you, Mom, Laura.” She paused. “And she even said she wanted to be my big sister!”

Annah burst into tears and walked away from me. I knew all too well what she meant, and that it would be more and more hurtful growing up. She did not deserve that.

I reached her and grabbed her by her shoulders. I looked into her eyes. “Annah! Annah...Laura loves you, and you know it. This is not the end of it. There are others, and I will find them! We’ll find others. There must be others. It will take time but I will find them.”

“How can you know for sure, Dad? How?”

I sighed. “It has to be, Annah. It has to be...” But then it was impossible for me to look at my daughter.

There was no way to know unless I confronted them. If I met them years before, as I had, who knows how long they'd already been among us. Watching, testing us, getting ready for what happened. Maybe, I was not the only one they had visited in the past; maybe, we were part of something much bigger. It had to be, I truly believed it had to be. I needed to hope it was. Otherwise, everything would have been meaningless, cruel, and mindless.

What I hadn’t considered was that sparing us could've arisen from a mere lack of concern. As when a boy stomps on an ant nest and destroys everything, just because, to see what happens. Kills most of the ants, disregarding those still alive. Digging up the underground lair to discover the inner chambers, smashing the larvae. Interested for a while, then leaving behind havoc and destruction without any additional thoughts about the struggling few left.

Were we like ants to them? It couldn't be! They had spoken to me, one appeared in front of me when I was a child. *I was no ant! I was no ant!* I repeated in the attempt to convince myself that there was going to be continuity, a new start. For Annah, even for us as a race.

I returned home with a somber Annah, but with a firm resolution. I took Mary and Laura aside. They did not like the idea of having me out there at night, chasing those entities, but they couldn’t think of any different plan or how to make me change plans.

“So you would rather stay put and wait, living in doubt? We have found our golden cage, is that it?” I asked.

Mary shook her head. “Aren’t you thinking about Laura? She’s pregnant, Dan! What if something happens to you?”

“Mary, what if anything happens to you, or Laura, and Annah? What if anything happens to any of us? Then it is over! The end of everything. Everything, Mary! Is that what you are wishing for us? I don’t!” I took a deep breath. “I cannot believe you could envisage that for us. And the children?”

They have no future: We will not live forever, Mary. What will happen to Annah and the baby? Mary, we cannot live this way!”

Then, I said it. “I think they did something to my brain when I was a child. A preparation for these times.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I can talk to them. Communicate, rather.”

“What?” Mary and Laura responded at almost the same time.

I told them what happened to my tinnitus in their presence; that I felt thoughts forming in my head. Not like real voices, but they were patently not my thoughts.

“Maybe it’s deeper than that. I can’t explain it any better. I never experienced telepathy, but I think that’s probably what it is. My senses are not involved, something else is at play!” I took a deep breath. “I mean, this is beyond everything imaginable, Mary. I am not scared about myself, you know me. I hesitated because of you all, but there is no more time to waste!”

I told them about the discussion I had with Annah. She was the future; the baby Laura carried in her womb was the future. We had to know for them, what future were we going to send them to? Maybe to no future at all, but at least we would try to do something about it. I would chase those entities and, this time, I would not back off quietly like an obedient and scared puppy.

We spent the whole night together, something that had never happened before. I could not leave either of my women alone. The next day, no one mentioned what we had talked about even as I prepared myself to spend the following nights away. I didn’t know how long it would take, because the entities were not at CERN on a regular basis.

If not CERN, maybe they were attracted by other technology sites, too? There were a couple electrical plants not too far from the lab and bio-med firms were established in the region. There was also a reactor facility at the EPFL, the technology institute in Lausanne, and there was the ‘Superphenix’ reactor in nearby France. It was shut down then but the nearby Bugey nuclear plant was probably still active, and only some twenty-five miles away from Geneva. I would travel there, too. I only had to hope that, now that I wanted to find them, they would not hide from me.

That same evening I kissed my girls goodbye, ensured they were safe, and left. Not that easy to leave, though, as there were unanswered questions in their eyes. Annah didn’t know all the details but knew or understood I was

leaving to keep my promise to her, to find other people, and that was enough. Mary and Laura listened to all my reasons and reassurances and tried to show they were strong, but their eyes betrayed them. They looked at me as if it was going to be our last time. Taxi and Tarantula would stay home with them, of course.

“I will be back. I am only spending the night out, then tomorrow I will be home. Don’t worry.”

Their smiles were forced. And, in my heart, I knew it would have been too much to hope for, that all I needed was to spend one more night at CERN. I actually thought it was useless, that *they* would rather show up when they decided to. But the stalemate had to be broken, one way or another.

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I reached CERN and spent the night there, visiting all experimental areas and workshops...waiting. Thinking hard “*I’m here*”, yet feeling stupid all the same. Nothing happened; I saw no one, no glowing, no lights. While exploring the site more thoroughly, I found other corpses. Judging from their clothing and general appearance, some must have been young Ph.D. students working on their thesis.

What a waste of lives and talents. With some distress, I fought away images of an enormous foot stomping on the human ant lair we were. As with everyone else, they had been caught while busy at their own duties at the lab. Death had come suddenly and struck all at the same time.

People had died at their desks, in front of still lit instruments, working at some detector prototype, or monitoring cryogenics. No one had time to run or hide. It had been so sudden. How? I wandered as a ghost among ghosts, all of them screaming at me, asking me to find out why they had to disappear. Their voices, myriads of voices, assaulted me like a swarm of angry bees: “Why?”

Worn out from a sleepless night, I got back home at the first light of day. Mary and Laura greeted me as if I had come back from war. I had little to share but the desolation and the emptiness I felt all night. I needed to rest, at least for a few hours. I took a shower that was unable to wake me up and crashed into bed.

Laura came to get me; lunch was ready. She sat on the bed and held me in her arms lovingly and, for a moment, she lulled me. Without knowing it, she

repeated the same urging words Mary had told me before. “I cannot lose you. What would I do? We would not survive,” she said, and placed one hand on her belly.

I rested my hand on hers. “It won’t happen. I can’t explain it, but I’m sure it won’t happen.”

“Dan, we didn’t have time to say goodbye to anyone. To anyone, you understand?”

I nodded, and I had no words to console her. I wasn’t yet accustomed to our situation. I loved both Mary and Laura, and I couldn’t prevent myself from thinking about Laura when I was with Mary, and about Mary when I was with Laura. I had to tune my feelings properly so as to be fully with Laura when Laura was with me, and fully with Mary when alone with Mary. No matter how odd it seemed, to be entirely with Laura and Mary when I was with both, everyday, in every situation. Change, adapt, survive.

It was a warm June day and we planned to spend a restful afternoon together. I wanted to stay with all of them. Breathing them, playing with Annah and the dogs, caressing Laura’s womb and kissing Mary, and everything at the same time. I was hungry, and wanted to taste everything as if I had not much time left. “Oh Lord, if you are there, make it so that nothing will be lost.” I didn’t know whether I had to say instead, “Oh gods, since you are there...” I wasn’t sure of Him alone anymore.

Evening came again, and again I got ready to spend one more sleepless night out. I headed back to the lab, for the third time now. And then, if unsuccessful as with the previous nights, the next day I would make the trip to the EPFL facility. The night would be very long, immeasurably so. It was not yet time to find sleep, and I could still hold out until the bright dawn. If only they could hear me speak, there or wherever I would be, about the human suffering they had caused. If only there was a chance for me to ward off this disgraceful devastation and have hope for a future.

I reached the lab, entering from the main gate. First, I again visited the places where I had seen them previously. There were no glowing lights, anywhere. I wandered from one area to another in the faint luminosity of the sparse electric light poles. I never felt so much grief as during that particular night. There was possibly one thing worse than hostility: indifference. Had they left and returned to where they'd come from? Not now, not when it was time for everything to start over.

The entities didn't show up and dawn came as an insult, a statement about our own insignificance. My heart was pounding and I felt as if they had killed us all again because of their indifference! "Not now," resonated in my mind. But if not now, when? What had to happen before we were judged worthy again of consideration?

When dawn came, I wept. I wept because of our fate in the hands of those who had already decided our destiny, and had decided to kill billions of us. I found myself on my knees, tasting my own warm and salty tears.

The sky was clear, and I watched the sun rise over the mountains where a golden light had lingered before it appeared. In ancient times, it was the Sun god that granted another day to the mortals, renewing its promises. Now, who were the gods ruling our lives? I had deceived myself about surviving and changing. There was no adaptation in my efforts to continue. I was only delaying our demise.

Annah's grief was a grief for us all. We had no future staying, we had no future leaving. One man, two women, a girl, and—soon—a newborn baby. These were not enough seeds for mankind's second chance.

I think I learned the true meaning of desperation that morning in June. I felt we had no hopes, and that we were without options. Around us, the world was beautiful; it, too, indifferent to the fate of men. The valley was resplendent. Birds singing more than ever now that their songs were not interrupted by the harsh and inappropriate noises people arrogantly produced. And the birds sounded so happy.

It was hard to accept what had happened, and it always will be. I felt numb and had trouble believing that the massive loss of human life had really happened on a global scale. What if all that was left were literally a few small groups, like ours and Michael's, on the entire planet? If that were so, then everything would be accomplished and done in a few more years. The fate of men sealed under the watch of indifferent gods after having vented their rage on us. Emptiness, despair, yearning, and deep loneliness grabbed my heart and squeezed it.

The morning haze disappeared fast, and I had lost track of time. The sun was high in the sky so Mary and the others were surely awake by then. With a mourning soul I stood up, aching like an old man, and returned home.

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Opening the gate, I felt guilt and anger over things I did or didn't do. Guilt for whoever did nothing to prevent the deaths, even if there was nothing anyone could have done. Could I have imagined all this when I saw them as a child? Had anyone else seen them, too? Did someone know more?

Even if the devastation was nobody's fault directly, I was angry and resentful. Angry at myself, and at God...and at Joe and Beth. At all who had died so easily and abandoned us. But I had no one to blame for what was done to us. I had no one to ask except the glowing gods that were not appearing anymore. I feared our own mortality: of having to endure life without Mary, or Laura and Annah, and about the responsibilities we now faced alone.

The ladies had prepared for my return, setting up breakfast on the patio. How normal everything seemed. As if nothing had ever happened, they struggled to make everything cheerful. This was a catastrophe without any of the connotations of a catastrophe. I felt Mephistopheles wrapping his arm around my shoulders. Mary and Laura saw my distress and came to me, angst in their eyes. I stopped their questioning.

"I am fine. There's no one, I saw no one, and I..."

I didn't know how to continue. I must have looked dreadful. Laura took my hand and Mary surrounded my face with hers. She looked straight in my eyes, as she always did. "Dan, it's not your fault. Maybe they'll show up again."

"Yes," Laura said. "Don't lose faith. If you do..."

I knew what Laura meant. If I gave up, what would happen to them? There were more ways for them to lose me than just physically. Probably more cruel ways than if anything fatal happened to me.

"You're both right, but I'm tired. Maybe it's just that."

"Come now, rest a bit. You're not alone, Dan. This is not a weight you need to carry on your shoulders alone."

They both pulled me to a lawn chair and lovingly took care of me. I didn't want to go inside. I wanted to have them and Annah around me; seeing them and listening to their chatting. Yes, I longed for noises, for things that broke the silence, a silence as heavy as lead. Tension and grief started to disappear, my tears became their tears, and they took my pain on them and dissolved it. Taxi and Tarantula approached and rested their heads on my lap.

After that, I fell asleep.

Daimones

Of Gods And Men

The weather changed in the next few days, and it rained a light but persistent rain. I gave up my forced schedule of visiting technology sites as the hope to meet with the entities there was slim. After all, nothing supported the hypothesis that they favored those places rather than others. In the end, the plan was just a wild shot in the dark. It could—or it could not—bring any results. Mary and Laura agreed that, if everything was as I told them, it was more probable for the entities to get back in touch with me rather than the opposite.

Spending those nights at home was good for the morale, especially when daily visits to CERN and checking for contacts via email or via the Facebook ad campaign had produced nothing. Life at home had a pleasant and regular flow made up of looking after daily chores, caring for the vegetable garden, and maintaining our efforts and commitment to create occasions for whoever could still be alive in the region to get in touch with us. And staying together. Pure and simple.

Laura's pregnancy had been uneventful so far, and she was able to keep up with the regular pace of our scouting activities. Sometimes, it was a casual outing, just to stay together. We visited places we didn't know before and took lunch with us to spend the day outside. The world was magnificent that summer. Daylight at our latitude lasted quite long; bed time came when it was still bright outside.

We didn't mention the entities at all those days. The grief and the sadness were almost forgotten: We had all we needed, and more than anything else, we had each other.

It was only after the end of June that I resolved to go to Lausanne and visit the EPFL. Maybe it was simply due to a full recovery of my moral strength. Everyone kind of agreed with the decision: In everyone's mind, the belief that the entities were not a danger had grown somewhat stronger.

On the evening chosen for the plan, I left home around 9:30pm so as to arrive about an hour later at the laboratories when the lazy night had yet to fall and I would still have a bit of lingering twilight before dusk. I drove toward the highway, not knowing what I would find there; so far, we had only traveled on local roads from one village to the other. Yet, I didn't expect the Lausanne area to be any different from that around Geneva.

Five months of urban and road management neglect had started to leave a trace. On the highway, the vegetation separating the lanes invaded part of the asphalt, and the shoulder had become a growing culture of weeds, low plants, and shrubs. Untreated asphalt cracks widened, and green timidly spotted an otherwise dark gray cut in the countryside scenery.

There weren't so many vehicle wrecks on the highway, which I welcomed. I got almost halfway through my journey when, in the distance, the lanes seemed to be entirely blocked by what soon appeared to be a rolled over double-trailer truck. Slowing down, I couldn't help but realize that there was no way to go any further. I stopped the car and got out cautiously to have a closer look.

Around me, everything was calm. I switched off the engine. The world of silence made every natural sound prominent. Not a noise interrupted the monotonous song of the crickets and the gentle breeze among the branches. The foliage had never been so chatty...before.

The trailer was loaded with what at first seemed to be large bags or casings jammed and piled onto each other. After a few more steps, though, I clearly saw the contents and stepped back from the sad scene. It was a cattle transport and all had died in the accident, or soon after. The decaying process of the bodies had taken place thoroughly and their skeletons were covered with mere rawhide and skin, hung on bones like an old coat. The pain for those animals must have been excruciating and surviving the accident made them suffer further, only to meet an even more terrible death. It was a good thing I was alone as this wasn't a scene for my ladies, no matter their age.

The cabin smashed in the accident, crumpled when the truck rolled over, and was now stuck against the guardrail. I realized then that we would never be able to get rid of obstacles such as that one without proper machines. Whenever and if ever we were to move somewhere else, we had to be ready to travel on alternative routes and be able to take those at any moment and from

any location. Probably that also meant avoiding any route that didn't provide us with multiple options to reach a destination, any destination.

I returned to the car, u-turned and drove on the highway in the opposite direction. Extremely dangerous in another world, but not in the one I lived in. Dusk came, and the highway was dark. The countryside was deserted and there was no sign of human life. As expected of course, but disturbing as ever.

After driving a few miles on the highway, a faint light appeared in the distance. It meant only one thing. I slowed down and unknowingly held my breath until I gasped for air. Getting closer, the distant glowing came from separate sources.

I stopped the car and got out. At that moment, I had a brief glimpse of a luminescent circular shape with spokes similar to a wheel quickly disappearing into the starry sky. But even today I could not be sure of what I saw in that brief moment.

I hesitated. I took a deep breath. Back in the car, I kept driving slowly until I clearly distinguished five entities standing in the middle of the lane as if they always had been there.

The tinnitus again rumbled in my head but, as before, it started to get less chaotic. I prepared myself to hear something, though I didn't know what 'prepare' meant. *They* did not move. Maybe they had all the time in the world. I didn't. My head felt like it was burning and buzzing inside. Not just from the strong tinnitus but from the many questions, too...all ending with a big "Why?"

I advanced the car until I got about fifty yards away from the standing figures. Stopping, I turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. The night was upon us by then. A clear night with bright stars, brighter than ever in a world where mankind no longer spewed pollution into the air, where no man was present but me.

This time it has to be different, I thought. I was resolved not to be chased away. I did not receive any negative feeling as I approached. On the contrary, I felt I was being encouraged. Again, an unnatural serenity captured me, more imposingly than ever before. As if they had desensitized me to any fear and anxiety when in their presence.

The tinnitus became a multi-toned, randomly fluctuating pitch sound, and the hissing white noise totally disappeared. I slowly walked forward until I was no more than ten yards from them. There, I stopped. They were

distinguishable after all. Similar but different. One in particular was shorter and thinner than the others.

The tinnitus changed now into a reduced group of pure notes, their pitch fluctuating high and low in unison. In my head, I heard “It is time.” I didn’t or couldn’t react physically but—emotionally—it was if the eye of the storm had finally reached me, revealing the sun and the blue sky when all around was dark devastation. The wind roared furiously. It was like one of those vivid dreams of mine, in the transitional phase just before falling asleep. It was happening for real, though, and it felt perfectly natural.

The five entities approached. I had the time to look at them carefully while they slowly advanced toward me. They seemed to be wearing a sort of tunic dress that hid their legs and feet. It touched the ground. The glow was rather intense, forcing me to squint my eyes. Their faces were old. Nope, bar that: They were wise, not old. They kept approaching until they encircled me and I was then flooded with light from all directions. I could not see anything but them now, and barely that. Beyond, pitch black. I had the impression they were smiling. They each raised one arm to the level of my head and kept advancing.

I was in a trance-like state that I knew had to be induced. I did not move; on the contrary, I longed for their touch. *If it has to be the end, so be it*, I thought. Did everyone actually die this way?

“No, Dan.” The voice was clear and loud in my head and it startled me.

Their hands fused together, clasping onto each other around my head and face. In that instant, I lost consciousness of my own body. My ever-lasting tinnitus turned into one long melodic note. At the same time, it was all possible notes even though the sensation was of perfect unity. The purest note which had the potential of all sounds, pitch and frequencies. The mother of all sounds.

My eyelids were shut and I saw a myriad of colors, vast plains stretching to the horizon. I was standing on the highway, and I was somewhere else at the same time. My vision didn't change whether I kept my eyes open or closed. Around me, the five entities stood like the spokes of a wheel and I was its hub. I could swear they were smiling. The pervasive calm allowed me to keep my rationality intact, unless that was a sign that I had actually lost my mind.

“Greetings, Dan.”

“Where am I? And who are you?”

“First, you are safe. You have no fear, have you?” But it wasn’t really a question. They lowered their arms.

“We are known as Moîrai, but we have had other names in your past. Krataimenês, Daimones....” I recognized that name. “No, that is not 'demons' in your language although some judged our actions as evil on certain occasions. So, in those cases, we could have been demons too. Those are names from the times when humans were aware of our presence. Not anymore. Apart from a few like you, no one is aware anymore.”

“Is that your name, Mourrais?”

“Moîrai? That is how we are known. No, what you call names...I am known as Alaston, and here with me are Mênis, Algea, Akhos and Kratos. I met you before. In your past.”

“Alaston? Would you be the one I saw when I was a child? Why? Why everything?”

“You will be told, human. In due time,” a different 'voice' interjected. I turned around toward the direction it came from.

“Algea,” the entity introduced herself. I didn’t have any reason or any specific knowledge about it but I knew I had to refer to the entity Algea as a “she”. It was the thinner and shorter of the entities I had previously noticed. The voices were melodic but they were not truly vocal. I didn’t hear them in the physical sense, rather it was more than in just the physical sense.

“We know of your questions. You, as others are now, will start to be instructed this time, and made aware. So that the same will not happen again.”

“Others?”

“Indeed. There are others of your species, as you have discovered. In the course of these events, special others have been selected. As you have been selected.”

“Selected? And why do you say you had other names in my past? I never...which past?” I realized suddenly they weren’t talking about me and this lifetime.

“The past of your race, as you are guessing correctly. After the First Loss, we decided to take a more proactive role rather than simply limiting ourselves to observation. It seemed to bear fruit. Nevertheless, we could not avoid the Second Loss. It has since been decided not to allow a Third Loss to ever happen.”

“I can’t follow you. Which losses? The second one? And what third loss has been avoided?” I turned back to the first entity. “Alaston? I’m afraid *I* am at a loss.”

“It is time, indeed, for you to start knowing of your past before you understand your present and can walk toward your future.”

I was in for a cosmic lesson and felt my questions had no more place then. I had to wait.

“Your race is young. And your race is not from the planet you call Earth. Your star system is young, formed not even five billion of your years ago, the way you count them now. There are civilizations in the Universe whose recorded history goes beyond that. In your time, your system is known to be composed of eight major planets and five dwarfs. These small ones were given names in your language: Ceres, Pluto, Haumea, Makemake and Eris. Your star is known to your people as Sun. There is still another undiscovered planet beyond Pluto with a large elliptical orbit which your race has yet to discover. We call it Uribi.

Alaston continued. “In the beginning, your race was prosperous on a planet that is no more but was once home to your race. Its name was Tiamat, the watery planet. Another planet, Eridu—or Earth, in your language—resembled Tiamat as being primarily covered with water. But Tiamat was much larger and richer than Eridu.

“Tiamat is still there in part, occupying its fifth position from your star, between the planets known to you as Mars and Jupiter. 2.8 times the distance between Eridu and the Sun, or some 260 million miles from the Sun if that is more familiar to you. Its ancient position is still vaguely remembered, even after the Second Loss, in some later civilization's numerology where the number five has a central position and a unifying role. It all comes from a once-existing planet, closing the first inner circle of four companions.

“Now it is no longer a planet. What remains of it forms what you call the Great Belt, also known as the Asteroids Belt, occupied by millions of irregularly-shaped bodies. The loss of Tiamat, and the lives which were also lost, constitute what we call the First Loss. This event took place around 65 million years in the past of your time. Your race caused that loss and all subsequent events. Tiamat finally exploded, and the shock disrupted the stability of the solar system. Some from your race left Tiamat in time and survived. Eridu was their destination, a home away from home.

“The mystery of the great rift on Mars comes from the impact of a Tiamat fragment. The moons of Neptune still show evidence of that violent disruption. In the gravity tidal waves that derived, planets were disturbed in their orbits. Mercury, which we call Nebu, played with Venus for a while, traveling with her in a quasi-dual-planet system.

“The gravitational disturbances affected all planetary orbits for millions of years before everything settled and reached the orbits they occupy at this moment. Saturn lost part of its mass in a massive struggle with Jupiter in the modified orbit while gaining its rings in the process. Mars? It once had many more moons. They went lost in the Sun after Tiamat disappeared.

“Pluto and Charon are moons of Neptune that escaped in the aftermath of the cataclysm your race created at the zenith of its evolution. Eridu and the other planets were struck with large fragments from the exploded Tiamat. The planetary system filled with debris, rocks, boulders and icy dust. Many collided with other bodies, others coalesced to become additional moons or displaced existing ones, some got lost in the interstellar space, others became comets, and the rings around Jupiter, Uranus, Saturn, Neptune, Pluto and Rhea started to take shape. For ages, much debris struck with violence when their elliptical orbits crossed, causing massive destruction on larger planets.

“At the time of the Second Loss, your race started to have the suspicion you were not the only civilization in the Universe, even though you occupied only a marginal and peripheral position in the Galaxy. Still, you soon began—again—on a path of self destruction and havoc. This knowledge you have lost because of your pride. Your race believed it was the only one in the Universe; if not, the most advanced one.

“Your pride and rage caused the loss of more than 16 billion lives on Tiamat alone. Your entire civilization almost got wiped out in your self-destructive foolishness. The First Loss, as it is known, was the largest any civilization in the Galaxy had ever endured and it rapidly plunged its survivors into a struggle for survival on virgin Eridu. Not one race, except yours, has ever destroyed its own planet.

“Eridu has seen the death of many of the largest animals, as well as several families of birds and mammals. Also, marine species have been cut from the evolutionary tree like dead branches. Never to be seen again, never to be remembered, never to evolve. The land was broken, leaving a cleaved planet.

“Your race hovered near Eridu for as long as was possible, then landed on the inhospitable planet. They completed the extinction of the large animals. Your race almost succumbed as it scattered in small and hostile groups, evolving independently because the old rage and hatred had not yet vanished from your minds. You chose the path of isolation, instead of the one of cooperation. Even in your most dire days, even at the cost of your possible extinction.

“Your wisdom, tremendous technology, and scientific achievements were all forgotten. Since then, you walked on Eridu, going backward in knowledge and losing about a million years of evolution. Eventually, your race grew again in number, and regained some of its knowledge. You fully populated Eridu and indulged in your old arrogance. Ultimately, your race discovered the power of fission and fusion of atoms and beyond. Its might grew again for thousands of years. Thousands of years ago. We all watched in amazement at the rebirth of a race and a civilization given up for lost. Your old nemesis though, your pride and rage, again unleashed destructive powers that almost generated another planetary destruction. Eridu was shocked with powerful blasts and mighty blows.

“Powerful continents and nations had been annihilated, vaporized by enormous heat from nuclear heat and pressure, consumed by your folly. Their remains still exist on Eridu as large areas of vitrified remnants of cities and their ruins, fused green glass slabs where the rocks and the sand melted. Fission and fusion fire, much more powerful than the ones you know, ravaged once flourishing plains and cities in Pierrelatte in Africa; in what you call the Euphrates Valley; and in what then became the Sahara Desert and the Gobi Desert. And the places you know as Iraq, the Mojave Desert, Scotland, the Old and Middle Kingdoms of Egypt, and south-central Turkey and more. What you would today call India, Syria, and Brazil...the entire known world had been defaced by the nuclear fire unleashed again by your race. “Blackened and shattered stones now cover western Arabia, once a lush and fruitful land. The Sinai Peninsula bears the scars. Some of those memories remain narrated in your most ancient scripts, in a more or less explicit way. Ancient memories being transcribed when their knowledge was long gone. Events that we refer to as the Second Loss, in a time your race calls pre-history. Another glimpse of your resurging arrogance.

“We revealed those events to those who had forgotten. Then, the ancient sages lived in a frightened state of mind, and rightly so. Fear justified by the events we revealed, events their ancestors witnessed and suffered, or perished from. Eridu was so mistreated that ancient drawings of the celestial bodies could not be made in accord with the current arrangement of the solar system as you know it today. And yet, they were remarkably precise in their times.

“Only very recently has your race begun to find inexplicable traces of an ancient race who left behind seemingly modern artifacts, from times when humans were not supposed to have seen yet the light of day on this planet. And those were only artifacts from the ages after the Second Loss. They might have given rise to questions for your wise ones to answer. It does not matter much now, does it?

“Following the Second Loss, we thought we could help your race avoid reenacting your doom by letting the new civilizations know about the ancient disasters. Lore of realms from the ancient Sumerian, the people of Babylon, the Indian epic, the glyphs of the Olmec, of the Aztecs and the Mayans are the remaining fruits of those revelations. Those events were unveiled explicitly and still remembered in some of the books you know.

“One, when trying to cover those times, recites: ‘Then the Lord rained down fire and tar from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah, and utterly destroyed them’ was nothing but the old memories of what your race endured once more. Or another, even more explicitly, says: ‘Nor is this world inhabited by man the first of things earthly created by God. He made several worlds before ours, but he destroyed them all.’

“Six times, your race was reborn and almost annihilated itself because of cataclysms originated from the First Loss and inflicted onto the entire planetary system. Because of the aftermath from the Second Loss, Eridu remained unstable for a long period. The repercussions from the destruction of Tiamat persisted for ages before the planets, as they are known to you, settled down. And even after the Second Loss, at about the time Eridu captured its Moon, over six thousand years ago.

“The repercussions from the destruction of the Second Loss persisted in Eridu for thousands of years. Violent earthquakes and unimaginable tidal waves caused repeated vast destruction in Asia Minor, in Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Palestine, in the Caucasus and Cyprus: All destroyed by the most frenzied elements of Eridu and the planetary system. Several times, during the

third and second millennia before the present era, the ancient East was disturbed by stupendous catastrophes.

“The ancient East and West went through massive natural paroxysms. At least five great upheavals put a sudden halt to flourishing new civilizations. At each of these occurrences, life course was disturbed, and the flow of history interrupted, often lost in oblivion. These catastrophes caused the termination of the great periods in your race's recent history. Earthquakes, flooding, and climate change did not spare a single land. These changes moved entire nations to endure large and vast migrations. You were the cause of immense concerns for many of your own kind.

“Eridu acquired, then lost, a highly inclined ring of meteors and dust about four thousand years ago. Many fell on its surface and over the oceans, causing large tsunamis. The ancients described events that were considered tales and inventions for entertainment of the mighty and powerful of vanished kingdoms, by those who came after them. Tales and inventions which are nonetheless present in all cultures, and in the entire world. When there were no witnesses, we made sure those events were not to be forgotten. To no avail though. The blind did not want to see.

“We helped in avoiding oblivion, so the memory of those events would survive. The same testimony is now present in all quarters of the planet, from all people, in all civilizations. Only those who forget, and do not want to know, dismiss them as myths. As if myths were just the pure invention of poets. Those scars, Dan, are painful even today, for those who do not forget! Those powerful cataclysms caused the interruption of cultural continuity, which the scholars of your time acknowledged but never explained, while the answer was always in front of their eyes.

“Ahh, those who forget and do not want to know. One of your race, Plato, warned you: ‘...All this, though told in mythic guise, is true, inasmuch as a deviation of the celestial bodies moving past the earth does, at long intervals, cause destruction of earthly things through burning heat...’

“We walked among men, thousands of years ago, and many of the myths and tales of gods were born in the epics of all men on Eridu. Some of those stories and myths arrived in your times, too; inscriptions, maps, descriptions, carvings of gods’ vehicles, and impossible technologies. They could not invent those, unless they had been told or had seen them.

“Your race is dangerous, Dan. Far more dangerous than you might understand now. Ever since the First Loss, you have been under careful watch. What your race caused recurred like a plague and brought down upon you a celestial current, each time leaving uncivilized remnants. Wherefore, you had to begin all over again, like children, without knowledge of what had taken place in older times on Eridu.

“For the last thousand years, we and others have been uncertain about your fate, fearing the day when the son of man would reach his might again and emerge corrupted. Your race might have kept an ancestral memory of its old knowledge, some speculated. A million years have passed after the First Loss before the conditions for the Second Loss were met. Now, only a few thousand years since that second great calamity, your race had again become capable of causing inevitably a Third Loss.

“Even more dangerously so, because the power humans regained was not balanced by the greatest other achievements reached by Eridu’s previous civilizations. Painfully unable to stop every and each of past havocs you caused Eridu. What would happen if, one day, your race should break this cycle and impose instead another Loss, not onto itself but onto others? Who would then be blamed the most? Those who have forgotten, or those who still remember and know well?

“For thousands of years, the struggle continued among us, without any party taking the lead, between those who wanted your race to be tested and possibly forgotten in a Final Loss, and those who despised this eventuality and feared a devastation that could have provoked cataclysms similar to the ones following the First Loss. This time, your race would have probably vanished forever, and those who forget would have been forgotten.

“The Cycle of Losses had to be broken, and we had to take action so that those who always forget could never forget again. Your race surprised us most when, in the last few thousand years, you jumped ahead and reacquired old powers. You used those powers immediately as they were discovered and, soon, you were on another uncontrolled path. Eridu is not to be disturbed again. So, we decided to start the Selection.”

I was overwhelmed. Alaston didn’t have a single moment of pause, where I could have reasoned with him, maybe rejected accusations, put in a word for the beauties the human race had been able to produce. Rationally, I couldn’t believe or accept anything of what Alaston had said. It clashed with all I knew

and studied. Emotionally, though, I knew it fit, and that he had no reasons to lie or invent things on such a grandiose scale.

Moreover, why lie to me? An infinitesimal grain of dust in the complexity of a Universe his words only alluded to. I was too insignificant in all that I heard to imagine I could be of such an importance for Alaston to need to invent all he'd just recounted. There was only one option: that he had spoken the truth, an unimaginable truth that explained everything. He described horror and anguish, and I knew we were capable of perpetrating all he said. Even in my lifetime, we had been able to accomplish the worst toward each other. Alaston had just given me the Unifying Theory of Human Evolution on Earth.

“Yes, human, there are no reasons for us to invent anything of what your own race has sown and reaped. The things that are happening to you now are the harvest of thoughts and actions sown in the past. Today's thoughts and actions are seeds being sown for a future harvest.” I turned toward the new voice.

“Mênis,” the entity introduced himself.

“Whoever sows sparingly, will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully, will also reap bountifully. It is time for your race to sow bountifully. Alas, it has proved time and again it cannot do so by itself. The readiness is now here, and it has been deemed acceptable. We want the Selected ones to know, in this one more severe test.” Mênis took a solemn tone.

“They will be given according to their means for the favor of taking part in the relief of their own race, and the breaking of the Cycle of Losses. And they will be given without having to endure the wraths of the past. Those wraths are now repressed and a new civilization has the chance for rebirth unless it will cause another even greater Loss for itself, but we will exert ourselves to avoid that. This too has contributed to the decision to initiate the Selection.”

I was humbled, uncertain of my role here. “I think I’ve heard those words before...”

The entity Mênis looked at me intensely and showed an expression of fanatical zeal and determination. Looking deep inside me, he addressed me again.

“Others were told those words before. If they resonate in you now, then the Selection has a chance to bring success. Those same words didn’t resonate at all on so many of your race for thousands of years. It is sane and healthy for you to be humble before you start the walk toward your future. No sane race could do something as horrible as what yours has perpetrated. Twice!”

That “twice!” slashed like a whip. It felt like a sharp and quick slap on the face to the human race. After all I had heard, an even more hurtful judgment came from the entity I subsequently came to know as Akhos and it caused distress, both in my body and mind.

“Your race scorns everything around it, and its gaze goes beyond in search of that which is fickle, with vain hopes. Never have you used your talents to do good, or to benefit others. You enjoyed your arrogance and leveraged your strength for brutal actions and wild deeds. Subduing, mistreating and exterminating those who fell in your hands or crossed your paths.

“For your race, respect, justice, fairness, and magnanimity are virtues only appreciated by those who lack the courage to hurt and are afraid of suffering. Not worthy of those who have the power to impose themselves with such traits.

“Your race learned well that possessions can be stolen, lands and kingdoms can be conquered by destruction. But the life of a sentient being is not found, human, nor can you buy or steal or gain it from the time when it left the cloister of his teeth in a last breath. Always you have been in search of that which is fickle and worthless!”

The last entity approached. “Akhos, I think the human has been lectured enough. Although our words did not hide anything, it is time to move on with his process. He heard from where the nemesis comes, and why his race had to suffer the inevitable consequences of the original offense it perpetrated. He needs to reach his own *aidos*, and feel now the reverence and the shame which will restrain men from doing wrong in their future. Only then, can the Cycle of Losses be broken.”

Those words came from the last entity, Kratos. He was now holding in his hands a circular disc, in the center of which appeared a four-pointed star turning into an eight-pointed star where wavy lines emanated between the points toward the outer ring. Kratos advanced holding the disc with both hands.

“Dan!” resumed Alaston and he startled me. “Words can only reach you up to a point. What you are receiving now is the Palladium. Our gift to the sons of man. Everywhere on Eridu, the ones who were selected will receive one as they will be ready. It will be a source of protection, and the safeguard we are imposing on your race to ensure the avoidance of a Third Loss. It will change you, as it will change all the others.

“At first you will feel more than hear things. The Palladium will ensure a permanent communication with us and will be your access to the memory, achievements, and knowledge of your race. Memories will not be erased this time. When connected to the Palladium, the Selected ones will be connected to and with each other. You will receive answers, if you learn how to formulate questions.

“The Palladium will give you according to your means—and beyond your means—of your own accord if you can endure it. And it will not be without sufferance. The Palladium will be deaf and silent when you will be deaf and silent within yourself. You will come to know. Expiating a sin does not mean doing something opposite to wallow in guilt, but to use that same guilt to achieve full knowledge of the sin. The fault lies more not in having committed certain acts, rather in having carried them out without reaching their intimate knowledge. And this leads to committing a wrong again and again. When you have intimate knowledge of your acts before you commit them, then you will be able to avoid those wrongs as if they were being done to you. Now, Dan, endure the Palladium.”

At this, Kratos raised the disc on top of my head then slowly lowered it. An almost unbearable heat assaulted me as the disc molded around my head, shaping into a sort of a crown. The star shapes and the wavy lines started to pulsate and glued to my skin, while my mind was sucked into the Palladium, or fusing with it. Or was the Palladium to be sucked into my mind? The burning heat invaded my entire body, flowing down like lava from my head to my torso, to my limbs. I wanted to scream but no sound came out of my wide-open mouth.

I have memory of the pain. I fully remember it as intense, excruciating. Still my brain did not urge me to flee. It wasn't associated with the 'fight or flight' instinct. I believe I was being helped to endure it. Physical pain allows us to survive as we can then avoid the damage it's causing. But I wasn't damaged

and I did not feel the urge to withdraw from the Palladium, to protect my body from it. My instincts were not triggered.

Algea later told me that they imposed their hands onto me and talked to me while I was going through the Palladium, or the Palladium was going through me. Whatever it was. In any case, the distinction is immaterial. I have no recollection of them around me nor do I have a conscious memory of their words. Then, amid the pain, I started to see and feel.

I felt the disruptions of Tiamat, felt it! I saw a different world, magnificent structures, and I suffered the torment of the lives lost. I saw continents break up, and shores sink, and heard the desperate cries of billions. I felt mountains crumbling down, flattening entire cities with their boulders. I saw oceans boiling, rushing toward a sky which tore like a corrupt canvas. I felt the agony of my ancestors of a million years ago. I felt their amazement at seeing those near them vaporized, just a moment before disappearing themselves.

I felt the desperation and the panic, heard the screams of mothers and fathers and children. Of lovers, holding each other until the last deadly moment before being engulfed by fire, by water, by mud, by falling rocks, by roaring blasts, by the air burning their flesh and lungs.

I felt all their languages crying “Mom”, “Dad”, and “I love you” the moment death grabbed them with her crooked, fleshless fingers. I heard their last attachment to life spoken in anguish: “Oh God, if only I had one more day, one more hour.” or “If only I could hold her, him, them, again.”

And I saw this race rise again on Earth, their struggles and forgotten sins repeated. New destructions and new devastations on familiar lands. Flying rods of adverse nations spreading death from above. Depressions on Earth created by immense blasts as if giants were pounding their fists on helpless cities. And the same cries, the same panic and terror...the ancient anguish repeating itself. Again!

I felt all that in waves, crushing over my very essence and purifying it. Voiding me of all strength while removing all remaining debris of consciousness: *How could we have forgotten all that? How could we have the right to another chance? How did we dare? What have we done? Damned, damned, damned!*

What remained in the end was their love, so painfully real. All their last moments of desperate love that gripped the throat and clutched it so tightly that you could hardly breathe anymore. And in doing this, the Palladium had been merciful: I was left with the enduring sensation of a tremendous flood of

love, desperate and anguished but nonetheless infinite. An unguent poured over my tormented spirit. The purest love of all for everything that was gone, for everything that could never be, for everyone who'd been lost. And it planted the seeds for the love of everything that will be.

I was exhausted and fell on my knees. The burning pain had gone though its memory was vivid. The Palladium had changed me in the process but in ways that I wasn't yet aware of. Kratos moved forward and touched the outer ring of the Palladium. It expanded, the wavy lines detached from my head, and its shape flattened to resume that of a disk with its two pronged stars in their perennial ballet of change. He took it off my head and gravely handed it to me. I stood up.

"The Palladium is now in you and you are in it. This is happening with all the Selected ones who will share the experience you just had. You will never be the same, human, and the Selected ones will help us in our daunting task."

I looked at them. "I have seen destruction and devastation, and I felt the aches and the afflictions. The madness and the sickness. It is still tormenting and torturing me, it has lacerated me deeply. But there was tremendous love as well, Kratos, at each time..." I stumbled over the words.

The Mo'irai all looked at me, and I realized then that I could discern their traits perfectly which I couldn't before the Palladium. They were no longer indistinguishable from each other; I saw that Algea was obviously a beautiful female. Neither was their glow hiding them from sight as before.

"In all these destructions which we have caused, an additional one is missing." The Mo'irai were all attentive and listened carefully to my words.

"I saw nothing of the Third Loss!" I could see clearly from their expressions that my remark was not entirely expected.

Algea lowered her eyes. Still looking at the ground, she spoke. "Dan, we have a great burden on our shoulders and an onus, too. We will be judged on how your race will rebirth. We have not been alone in this decision, but we have the full burden of obligation upon us. The responsibility is ours. If your race had gone through another massive destruction of Eridu, it would not have survived. Leaving you all to your destiny was not an option, and we have been guardians and companions of your race for eons as has happened with other young races. The way you can see us clearly now... It was that way, too, for the son of men in other places, in other times." Algea raised her head and looked straight at me.

“Dîos. During the last few thousand years, that word only meant divine. For your race, it means ‘pertaining to the gods’. Before, dîos referred instead to those who were shining, glittering, glowing. Do you understand? When the ancients used dîos to describe someone, the term primarily referred to their glowing, to the emanation of their inner light, the splendor that accompanied them and on which stood their shape. We have been judged to be interfering too much with another race, your race, and thus to have disturbed its evolution.

“Even in light of the First Loss, and of the Second Loss, there were those who pushed for us to step back. Which we did. We were compliant, we stopped walking together with men and retreated. Yet we kept watching and observing your evolution, mostly unseen. As Alaston already told you, your race acts, waiting for the judgments to drastically change.”

I couldn’t help but hold my breath as the enormity of what Algea was revealing went beyond any possible imagination.

“Yes, it was decided then to enforce another Loss. This time controlled, this time without the risk of massive planetary destruction which your race has demonstrated to be fully capable of. We did so without the tremendous suffering of the past, inflicted on all Eridu life forms, and allowing the remnants of yours to start afresh without enduring millenniums of dark ages. All sentient races have participated in the decision, and the Selection process started thus about fifty of your years ago.”

I understood better then the origins of the mythical Golden Age gods, when the people of light, the watu wa mwanga—where did that come from in my mind?—walked with the son of men. My lips were tense when I asked, “Without suffering, Algea?”

“Without the agony and torments they would have suffered otherwise.” Then Algea paused and her tone changed. “We bent the space and exposed all humans to a sudden vacuum. We tested sudden exposure to extremely low pressure on other life forms and we have been able to be highly selective in the process. The rapid decompression we provoked around those life forms, in the worst cases, produced only the rupture of eardrums and sinuses with bruising and blood seepage into soft tissues. The shock caused an immediate sharp increase in oxygen consumption that subsequently led to hypoxia.

“Any oxygen dissolved in the blood emptied into the lungs trying to equalize the partial pressure gradient. The lungs emptied. Once the

deoxygenated blood arrived at the brain, animals lost consciousness within a couple of seconds and died of hypoxia. We created a rapid decompression not taking more than a few tenths of a second, allowing the lungs to decompress rapidly while avoiding the pulmonary barotrauma. It was very natural and clement. The level of pain was minimal and very sudden. Unconsciousness was extremely rapid. So was death.”

I gasped. “You *bent* the space...and killed billions of people?”

Algea's tone changed again. This time, her voice was full of sadness and much compassion. “We gave your race another chance, Dan. The Selected ones will play a crucial role. If you do not see this, and do not see that your race can build a different, better future, then the interruption of the Cycle of Losses will be in vain. You will live the equivalent of many past generations because of the changes you received from the Palladium. Your direct offspring will carry your gene modifications and live long, about two hundred of your years at first, and in good health. Descendants generated via this first generation will live even longer, in the end matching yours and the other Selected Ones’ life span.”

With a vanishing hope, I asked, “You mean Annah, my daughter, and the baby Laura still carries?” But I knew the answer, and a needle of pure pain pierced my throat.

“No, Dan. We mean the ones you will generate from now on, and from other Selected ones and their descendants.” Algea lowered her eyes again.

I wasn’t surprised Algea knew about my family and I smiled; a sour, bitter smile. I wanted to swallow but couldn’t. The enormity of what I had been exposed to was overwhelming. We had been culled, and selected specimens chosen for controlled reproduction. We were going to be bred for a better race; something we humans used to do with animals, selecting specific traits and behavioral characteristics. And in the process, our habitat and environment had been preserved to enhance the chance of success. A surgical process.

I shook my head. “What if I or other Selected ones refuse to cooperate?”

“A percentage probably will, that is why there were so many chosen. The majority will work with us to generate a better human race. You are already a better human, Dan.”

“How many, Algea? How many have been spared?”

The cold explanation from Algea resumed. “Right now, on the planet, there are roughly ten million humans of which two million are the Selected ones. About 10,000 years ago, humans were only about five million. The mortality was very high, and the race which survived the Second Loss was extremely feeble. You were only 300,000,000 about two thousand years ago. Growth will be quite different this time. You will be one hundred million on Eridu by 2050 and one billion right after the century ends.

“It was around year 1800 of your calendar when your race reached the one billion mark. You will be alive when it happens again. Actually, you will still be young. In your long life span, the human race will soon reach numbers close to those at the time we enacted the selection and you will fully populate Eridu. With our help, and your help, it will be a much wiser, much more evolved human race. And, if you allow me...much more humane.”

“My race, Algea? It will be your race, the race you will have created. My race will be extinct soon.” My mind rushed in agony to Mary, Annah, Laura and our unborn child.

“What is a race, Dan? Just physical bodies, existing at a specific moment in time, or the minds that can inhabit them and are able to evolve over millions of years? The human race will live longer; it will be stronger and better. You and the Selected are already a member of this new race. Don’t turn your back on yourself or on your future. Your race can prosper soon and meet the others, too, claiming its rightful place. We are all waiting for this. And it will be a very short wait, rather than a slow, painful progression toward annihilation through a catastrophic, irrecoverable Third Loss.”

In their perspective, the selection had been a necessary and right thing to do. Actually, in their words, it had been well-doing in full knowledge while, on the contrary, sparing every human life would have condemned the entire race to oblivion and to a probable Armageddon where we would have killed each other—either slowly or in a few nuclear flashes—someday in the future.

I recalled how humans considered gods as distant entities, unreachable to the human mind and difficult to understand when they caused death and destruction. Gods to be revered, and pray to, so that their goodwill would have been the *will of good* we humans could understand and hope for.

I realized then that I was missing a crucial piece of information. “What about the other eight million people, Algea? They too will grow, or will the process entail more exposure to space bending?”

It was an acrid remark, though perfectly legitimate. I suppose they understood my bitterness as Algea had that very human reaction before answering. She lowered her eyes and paused, as if she were searching for the best words. When she spoke, she again sounded emotionless and she did not look directly into my eyes.

“The Selected have a strenuous task, in all their actions, their efforts, and during their life time. Many options have been considered and have been thoroughly evaluated based on everything we know about your race. The Palladium changes the Selected for the better but it cannot fully change their minds, too. Which would have been a great crime.

“You felt love at the end: Your race is capable of doing marvelous things, and terrible ones. It has been deemed worthy of all the efforts required. The wonderful things have been deemed worthy. We could not modify you completely, that would have been equivalent to losing you, only in a different way. You are more inclined now to do marvelous things and fight against repeating the terrible ones. But, basically, you are still the same. The potential is not lost; it has simply been helped toward its fulfillment.

“One of the options was to preserve the Selected, and only them. You would have woken up alone, your wife and daughter unspared. We could have lost you and the others before we could impose the Palladium on all of you. That option was discarded. You needed to go through your own mourning process for the past world and find in yourself the strength to carry on. That strength confirmed you were indeed capable of being part of the Selected: the strength to adapt, to change, and evolve. We could not give or impose too much onto you without losing you.” Algea briefly glanced at the others; at Alaston, in particular, who imperceptibly nodded his agreement.

Algea resumed. “The Selected ones are the seeds. Without them, all will be lost. Among the spared ones, the males will not be able to beget. The females can receive the semen of the Selected and generate a new first generation. The women among the Selected will generate descendants that will bear fully all the new traits and genes received with the Palladium. Among the Selected, this is set to happen through the Palladium itself. At first. The descendants of the spared females will be fertile again, and their offspring will carry fully the new traits of the Selected.

“The spared ones are living memories for the Selected. A motivation not to give up, a reminder of what each Selected has experienced the first time

with the Palladium. The respect for the fragility of the spared ones will allow you to grow into a better human; the fragility the rest of the planet has suffered already and that has been abused with terrible intensity by the strongest in your race with disdain and scorn. You will care for the spared ones, too.

“When all the Selected have received the Palladium, the Palladiums themselves will beam upwards. They will signal and announce to everyone about the new start. There is still lots to do, Dan, if you wish and if you can endure it. And there are more things that you will learn and discover. It is a path we will walk together. Every Selected must decide whether to walk in this path, or be lost in the darkness of destructive selfishness. We challenge you to make your life worthy.”

Humans

Of Men And Gods

The Palladium beamed on its marble pedestal in the center of the square. The beam was visible from miles and miles away and seemed to pierce the sky, uninterrupted. From our hill, two more beams were also visible where other communities prospered and grew as ours did.

Mary was pregnant with our second child; my first of the new generation though I will outlive this baby, too. My dear wife was as beautiful as ever, even more than ever if possible.

Laura gave birth to our lovely baby girl. We called her Hope. She was smart and extremely clever. At one-year-old, she was starting to walk almost without hesitation. I regretted that Hope had been conceived shortly before I received the Palladium but that made her ever more precious to my heart.

Algea was always present and helped us with everything in her power, which was a lot. Alaston made impromptu visits from time to time, always very welcomed. We discussed all possible subjects, present, past, and future. He revealed to me what existed out there; his civilization and others, too. A humbling experience.

Every Selected community was followed and helped, instructed closely by its own Moîrai. Little by little, we were just starting to have access to their technology. We were “given according to our means, and beyond our means at times, of our own accord” to rephrase what Mênis once told me. I wondered whether someday he would visit us, too. But I knew every Moîrai was quite busy with their obligations and would be for quite some time.

I still don't know if the Palladium had a role in changing our minds as, bar none, all Selected accepted to work with the Moîrai to rebuild the human race. In one year, over eight-hundred thousand children were born or were due to be and that was just counting the Selected women. No one stepped back from the role that had been planned for us by the Moîrai.

The pregnancies were, in themselves, a revelation. Selected women could feel their babies like no woman had ever been able to. They could also feel when the baby, still in the womb, gained self-consciousness. The regrowth numbers that Algea put in front of me only a year before didn't seem unreasonably optimistic anymore.

In the past year—with help from Algea and Alaston—others joined us and the spared ones were making our tasks more bearable. With...grace, should I say? I didn't know many details about the other communities but it seemed everyone got along as nicely as we were.

Jean Claude joined us a month after the Moîrai revealed their plan to me about the Selection process. He was now our Chief Agronomist and had one apprentice: Liliana, a girl from the Italian city of Aosta. Liliana and Jean Claude had a romance going on and, at the moment, they didn't much care that he wasn't going to be able to get her pregnant. They had discussions about Liliana having a baby 'otherwise' but it was entirely their decision. None of the Selected, nor the Moîrai, pushed spared women in that direction. For the moment, Jean Claude and Liliana were happy just getting to know each other.

Federico, too, was from Aosta. Together with Liliana, he was surviving in Aosta when we found them. Luckily for me and Mary, Federico was a truly nice guy. Luckily, because he had eyes for Annah. I wondered whether the spared ones had gone through a sort of selection of their own by the Moîrai. I supposed so. He was our handy man, able to fix and repair practically everything. He said he was our Utility Service Engineer and he knew what to do on every occasion. At seventeen years old, that was an accomplishment in our new world and he was instructed by both Algea and the Palladium. After all, the spared ones had an important role, too.

I didn't fully understand why everyone had not been allowed to receive the Palladium the way the Selected had. Algea was evasive on the subject and once replied that they, the Moîrai, actually felt they were very lucky to have been able to select so many of us anyway. And I wondered why they didn't select more than just two million? One day, I'll need to be told precisely the reasons. One day we will be strong again and be answered to.

Nonetheless, the Palladium was able to act as an instructional device for the spared ones, 'according to their means and inclinations' as explained Algea.

Federico, Jean Claude, and Liliana were all extremely knowledgeable thanks to it and knew well what to do to run things smoothly.

Two girls from the Haute Savoie joined us when we started our journey from Geneva toward the south, and toward more clement weather conditions, especially during winters. Sarah and Camille were both about nineteen years old, almost twenty now. They took care of our little farm with its few goats, sheep, and poultry and enjoyed their bucolic task a lot.

In the meanwhile, our canine community had also grown and four puppies were happily strolling around following in the steps of their parents, Taxi and Tarantula. Tarantula only got pregnant after we settled into our new place. I guess Mother Nature is wiser than any human ever could be.

I was in daily contact with the other Selected, especially the immediate neighbors: Marina, an Italian woman, and Luc, a Swiss guy. From their locations, they could see additional Palladium beams, too. We had come to the conclusion that, on average, we had one Selected and related community about every four thousand square hectares. On average meaning everything and nothing, of course.

The beams—and the Moîrai—were making sure all spared ones had joined, or were about to join, a community headed by a Selected. The Palladiums were beacons for all humanity.

Established communities were not evenly distributed throughout all lands or locations. There were higher concentrations in specific, more favorable areas. It was no surprise that the most beautiful places on Eridu had been favored, and many communities thrived. It also favored shared resources and contacts, even among the spared ones. *Location, location, location* still held true in our new world.

Communication-wise, distance meant very little. The Palladium was the ultimate channel and a more intimate one, too, as the Selected were able to let others feel and see what they were feeling while in communion with it.

After the Palladium experience, I started to call our planet Eridu, and the other Selected did the same. We used the old term 'Earth' only when talking to the spared ones. We all shared a protective role for them and were animated by a sense of urgency. Their life span was so short compared with ours now and with that of new generations to come...they were weak and vulnerable in comparison.

The Palladium must have provoked some subtle changes the Selected were still discovering with its use. For example, I recently started to *know* when some of the others, or one of the Moîrai, wanted to enter in communion with me. I simply knew that. The same happened to the others.

We Selected were organizing ourselves, pointing out to each other where and how other communities could help growth and prosperity. Many had relatives who had been spared, the way Mary and Annah had been from the very beginning, or at the very end of it all. It enhanced our collective sense of duty toward all spared ones and I believe it reinforced the protective feeling we Selected shared when talking about them. When all the spared ones were gone and only new generations remained alive, we would enter a new age for those who would carry on and evolve. Their short lifespan represented for everyone a sort of transitional period, where we would have lots to learn and discover about ourselves, and the others.

We established our group on a hilltop in Lazio, a central region on the Italian peninsula located about ninety miles north of Rome. The borough we chose to be our home during the transition was founded by the Etruscans over 2500 years ago. The little town was situated atop a plateau overlooking the Tiber River valley. Our community could grow easily and comfortably there before any need arose to occupy other areas.

The burg had a peculiar and unique history, having been practically deserted to become a sort of ghost town at the end of the nineties. Since then, it had enjoyed renewed interest as a haven of peace and an oasis of detachment, almost secluded from modern life. Most of its centuries-old houses had gone through intense renovation by wealthy people years before and the town was now a little jewel unto itself.

Mary had read about it and became fascinated. She always wanted to visit and spend a holiday away from everything. She influenced me into choosing this location for us. It was our home now, a sort of island in the surrounding countryside. I consulted with other Selected and we would not be far away from other communities either.

We had the impression that—through the stone portal gate—we were being admitted into a supernatural world, surviving in another dimension. It was not far away from the truth. The name itself, Civita, had prophetic significance to me as it meant a body of citizens who constituted a social

entity. Very much like a city-state, with shared responsibility and a common purpose. The town itself contributed to our growing sense of community.

With help from the Moîrai, the town church—named after an Italian saint, Donato—had been transformed into our agronomy lab and produce farm. It was the realm of Jean Claude and Liliana and it provided all we needed for our diet, in addition to what we had from our small animal farm, thanks to Sarah and Camille.

Algea had also been instrumental in equipping us with multi-junction solar cells that rendered us completely autonomous as they directly converted light into energy, able to capture the whole solar spectrum with high efficiency. From that point of view, the entire town did not need any other traditional supply. The Moîrai reassured us all, the Selected, that we would not need to rely on our old sources of energy in the future.

I entered the lab. Jean Claude was at work expanding the variety of sprouts and plants; especially the enhanced ones provided by Algea. By themselves, they were reducing the need for us to eat animal proteins.

“How is the crop production, JC? And the hydroponic farm?”

“Amazing, Dan, simply amazing. Look, aren’t they just perfect?” he said and showed me the lettuce, onions and radishes which were almost ready for our consumption. Indeed, they were astonishingly healthy and lush.

“And the new aeroponic installations... already they show progress over the hydroponics system. Meaning, we need much less water.” He smiled.

Rows and rows of plants were suspended in a semi-closed environment. The plants’ dangling roots and lower stems were constantly sprayed with a nutrient-rich water solution by a high pressure diaphragm pump that kept plants germ-free at the same time.

I smiled back. “I’d never seen before plants so beautiful and strong-looking.”

We could not have achieved so much in so little time if it had not been for Algea's support, and the Palladium itself.

I changed subject. “I think we are going to receive more people next week. I’m discussing this with Marina and she’s not against moving here with us. Both our communities would profit from each other. We might even put the ancient olive press to work again.”

Jean-Claude nodded. “That would be nice. The town is large enough to welcome many more people.”

“Yes, I thought that, too. It could happen next month if we decide on it.”

“Is there any reason not to?”

“Not really. It’s just a matter of organizing their move here. By the way, have you seen Federico?”

Overhearing our conversation, Liliana raised her eyes from the spinach and carrot plants she was taking care of. With the air of revealing a secret plot, she told me that Federico had finished checking the additional solar cell installation for the morning, and then had rushed to meet someone at Saint Mary’s Gate. He was going there with a bunch of flowers in his hands. “He asked me what flowers a girl would like.” Liliana smiled and winked at me. I knew what she meant and I smiled back.

“How is Snowball?” I nodded toward the puppy crouched at her feet.

“Oh, Snowy? I love her. We’re really good friends. Isn’t she adorable? By the way, Annah was with Tarantula.” She winked.

Couldn’t hide anything from Liliana, apparently, and I mentally thanked her for the information. I exchanged a glance with JC who rolled his eyes and gestured as if saying “and you haven't seen anything yet, my friend.”

Really, there was nothing to worry about but knowing Tarantula was with Annah comforted me just the same. I would have given Annah a bit of privacy before going to look for her because her world had changed, too. She was growing up fast.

“Ah...almost forgot, JC. I brought you the manuscript with our story. Everything that has happened since February; the first days, how we met Laura, how we discovered the Moîrai were among us and behind all the events...and why.”

JC took the manuscript from my hands as if it were the most precious object on Eridu. “Excellent. Thanks, Dan. Your memories cannot be lost. Will you share them with all the others?”

“Sure. The Selected are starting to discover we are growing shared memories. Individual souls part of a universal intellect, interlaced like cobwebs enveloping us as we walk on a country path. I have yet to get used to it. For all others...yes, it will be important. It’s the best of my recollection.”

“I will make copies, but first I want to read it myself. Ah, you even gave it a title. ‘Daimones’...very appropriate.”

I smiled and nodded. “That’s what they are.”

“Watu wa wmanga.” Voices from a radio broadcast burst into my mind and soon faded like sparks from a damaged wire. I remembered things. JC noticed my expression changed, as if a shadow had passed and obscured my face.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I left without further explanation.

Everyone but the Selected had lost everything; we had been spared the pain of losing everyone we loved. I reasoned, though, that even with the best intentions cruelty was always around the corner.

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Saint Mary’s Gate was the only access to Civita via a mostly-pedestrian, long bridge that crossed a deep chasm. As the day was sunny and warm, I decided to take a walk there. In the square, Mary and Laura enjoyed the sunlit balm while watching Hope who was playing at their feet and climbing on top of Taxi who patiently endured having his ears pulled by a laughing little girl.

It was an excellent idea to have Marina and her people join us. We all would profit from being a larger community. Although small, Civita was still way too large for us. Together, it would be easier...for many reasons. Sharing the transitional period with another Selected by my side was going to be good.

I stopped and enjoyed the scene for a moment when Annah and Federico showed up, Tarantula trotting gently beside them.

Annah held a beautiful bouquet of flowers and she was radiant. Oh, my little lovely girl. Her eyes met mine and she smiled happily.

Federico was a bit shy and, when he saw me in the square, he blushed lightly. Those signs were unmistakable. *Some things will never change...*but I could not finish the thought. I glanced at Mary. She was smiling, too, and watched the youngsters walk up toward the square, lightly touching their hands in secret.

Laura stood up and brought Hope with her. “Here, she’s been missing her Dad all day, you know.”

Beautiful Laura, beautiful Hope. I was a lucky man. Extremely lucky.

In due time, my descendants will probably join a community of sentient beings I could only try to imagine now, carrying my genes to all corners of the galaxy.

Algea says I will witness things my mind cannot grasp at this time and I believe her. These few years of learning, the duration of the lifetime of the spared ones, would reveal much of what is expected of us, as a race, in the future.

I stared at the Palladium. A long path was laid in front of us all. The Selected and I grew stronger each day; time had a different meaning and one day, yes, one day we will stand tall again. One day the future will fear our past.

I took a last intense look at my family, one after the other: Mary, Laura, Annah, Hope. And I thought of the new baby, too. Will it be a boy this time? I couldn't wait for when the baby started to think for the first time in Mary's womb...I couldn't wait to welcome this new life. Yes, I surely was a lucky man.

They saw me smiling, and they smiled back. It is a moment I'll never forget, carved in my mind and in my heart. Their lives, and that of Mary's new child, will pass in front of my eyes like a breeze at the end of a warm day. It will stop blowing rapidly...and too painfully. I and others have a huge price to pay just for having been selected.

I hope the Palladium will change *me* to be strong enough for when the race of man will be no more, when our obligation toward them will be no more.

I will lose the ones I cherished the most in this life...

I loved them from the moment they entered my life, and I will love them dearly until the moment they leave theirs.

— The Beginning —

The Daimones Trilogy continues with the Vol.2, "[Once Humans](#)" and is followed by Vol.3, "*The Rise of the Phoenix*"

Note to the Reader:

There's one more thing I'd like to add after this journey together in "Daimones."

Sales are great, press releases, interviews, live radio guest appearances are exciting, climbing the ranks and entering the Top 100 Authors for my genre is exhilarating, but nothing beats the support of all readers and friends and fellow writers who share the thrill with me. You're the best readers any writer could ever have. Without you giving my stories a chance, nothing would ever be possible.

"'Tis the good reader that makes the good book; in every book he finds passages which seem to be confidences or sides hidden from all else and unmistakably meant for his ear; the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader; the profound thought or passion sleeps as in a mine, until it is discovered by an equal mind and heart."

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Humbly yours.

<http://massimomarinoauthor.com>