

Alone

“Are you ever going to get that light cover replaced?”

“Yes dear.”

“Well, when is that going to happen? If you're not going to tear it out and put in those pot lights we talked about I'd like to have the light cover put back on.”

“I'll get on it soon dear.”

I strained to forget the conversation and pick up the track of the story I was writing.

“So are you going to get it today?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Well, I'm going to get my hair done. Sandy from next door is going to drop some tickets by, she'll either ring the bell or leave them in the door jamb. Don't forget to check it.”

“Yes dear.”

John Kelly

“I'm going now.”

“Good bye dear.”

I heard the garage door go up and gladly settled into trying to finish the piece I had to have done for Monday morning.

After a couple of trips to the refrigerator and bathroom, I settled into the flow of the story. A couple of hours later it was done and I saved the first draft. Connecting with the world again I wondered why Sandy hadn't come over. Well, maybe she had and I hadn't heard the door. I checked. Nope, nothing there. There was still daylight so the hardware store would be open a few more hours, I wasn't worried about that. A lightweight jacket would do against a mild cooling so I grabbed it from the closet and headed out. The neighborhood was quiet, but it always is. I like it that way.

Driving out I saw no one else, but that's not abnormal. I congratulated myself on my luck when I reached the main feeder road to the freeway and found no other traffic. Usually that didn't happen unless I was way early in the morning.

After half a mile on the feeder it began to reach me that I hadn't seen anyone anywhere. Nothing was moving. I sailed through the green traffic light at the bottom of the hill and saw

no traffic on the road ahead. There were always other vehicles around by this point. It was eerie, today, now, nothing.

By the time I reached the freeway it was crystal clear that something was wrong. No traffic, no cars, no people, nowhere. Usually a line of cars half a mile long obstructs passage, but today no one was anywhere. Not on the freeway, either direction, not on the side roads, not at the stores nearby. This wasn't good anymore, if nobody else was here, was I in danger? Did some warning happen that I missed?

I made a U-turn and parked at the door of a large grocery store. There were cars in the lot, but no people, anywhere. Inside, the store was well lit, cool and clean and... ..empty.

No people that is. No one in the aisles, not at the registers, not in the offices, the deli or the meat department. Just nobody. This was nuts!

I went back out to my car. There were no cars wrecked beside the roads, on the freeways, not a damn thing out of place, except me. Where the hell did everybody go? Nobody would neatly run off and leave their stores wide open. And how did they go? Why wouldn't somebody have called me?

Remembering my phone I pulled it out and rang my wife. No answer. I rang my son's house. No answer and his wife's

always home. I dialed my doctor's office and after the silly-ass voice menu nobody responded. I called my son-in-law in Seattle. No answer.

Desperate, I called 911. No one answered.

My car was running so I turned it off. It was quieter than I'd ever heard it before. As I listened I heard birds. I heard my engine ticking as it cooled. I saw some squirrels scurrying out in the empty lot next to the gas station. I could hear the click when the lights changed at the corner. I could hear my own damn heart beat!

I scratched my head. No cars on the freeway, no wrecks, no bodies anywhere. There were cars neatly parked all around, but nobody to claim them.

If all these people got warned and went somewhere, why didn't somebody call me? If it was a weapon that had annihilated everyone why weren't wrecked vehicles all over the place? Where did the bodies go? What the hell kind of weapon or science could do this? A rational explanation eluded me and that was such an abyss I avoided thinking about it.

I began to worry that something or someone might be watching me. I drove to the salon where my wife would have

gone for her hair, but her car wasn't there. I tried a couple of stores she usually shopped but didn't see her car anywhere.

Nobody was home at city hall or the local police station either. I checked out everything, including the cells in the jail. Nothing and nobody.

Nobody at the local high school, nobody at the grade school, nobody in the neighborhoods, nobody at the gas stations. I went to the biggest station I knew of and there were some cars with the gas hoses still in them, but the owners were absent. Some gas hoses hung off the pump, like the car had been pulled out from under it so it just dropped.

I walked down an aisle of parked cars near another grocery store. Three had doors that were open or ajar, like people were at the car, but not in it when they were disappeared. A grocery cart stood with groceries in it at the end of an empty stall.

I pride myself on being very rational, but this wasn't making any sense. Habit took me home. No one was there either.

I sat down at my computer to try and find something, but I didn't have an Internet connection. The TV was just a snow

filled black hole on my wall. Without people it wouldn't ever come back on.

The park at the top of the hill offered a view of the valley so I walked up there to see if I could see anything. By sunset all I'd seen changing was the closest traffic light. No airplanes in the sky, no background thunder from the freeway, no lawns being mowed. No sirens, no voices, no thumping bass. No tire noise. The crows migrated down to the valley just before the sun set. Tits and wrens tsk-tsked in the bushes and trees. I heard dogs barking, and that bothered me. The houses above the park were dark. With no one to turn on the lights, they'd stay that way whether there was electricity or not.

The town that sprawled below the hill was not as well lighted as usual. The streetlights came on automatically after dusk, but there were no headlights. I could see rabbits as shadows edging out from the bushes onto the lawn. A coyote howled nearby and another answered. I felt vulnerable and left the park.

Dogs barked as I went past their houses. I went to the front door of one and opened it, but didn't get a happy greeting. Instead the dog inside growled and barked harshly so

that I jumped back. I left the door open, but don't know if the dog came out or not.

The neighbor's dog barked inside their house as I went by. A large mixed breed brown animal, it had always been friendly when I'd seen him before. I approached the front door and he barked menacingly, but I couldn't see him and I doubt he could see me.

I went around back where, like most of the homes in my neighborhood, a sliding patio door opened to a tidy little deck just inches above the lawn.

The dog recognized me through the glass. His tail was rotating like a propellor and his butt wriggled back and forth so much it nearly snapped his spine. The door was unlocked so I slid it open and went in.

Reflexively I hollered, "Hi, anyone here?" But no sound came from inside. I hadn't known the couple who lived there, just saw the man walking his dog occasionally.

I found a big bag of kibble in the pantry and filled the dog's food and water dishes. He wasted no time gobbling the food and I started to walk out having done my good deed for the day, but something stopped me just beyond the door. When I looked back the dog was just finishing its food. It quickly

bounded out the door to where I was and wriggled up against my legs.

It couldn't hurt to have a dog around. Especially at night. I might sleep better knowing the dog would sense any invaders before I could. I went back inside and grabbed the dog food bag, slinging it over my shoulder to tote it up the street to my house.

There's a pent-up need to express yourself that grows by the minute when you're used to having someone to talk to. I was frustrated being alone, afraid of what might come and unable to express that. I missed my wife, missed the counterpoint of conversation, she always brought humanity to our home despite my efforts to ignore it. Now I found myself longing for it.

Only automatic lights were on the houses around me. Whatever the event was it had happened in mid-afternoon. Not wanting to give away my location to anyone who might be watching I kept my lights to a minimum.

There was no TV. My cable provider was off the air. I dredged through my garage supplies until I found an old radio and refreshed its batteries. It worked, but produced no intelligible sounds.

The dog's name was Brandy, according to its collar tag. Brandy was affectionate, and house-broken, I assumed. I'd left its regular food dishes, but put out two bowls for kibble and water.

“Brandy, where the hell did everybody go?” I asked, but Brandy just sat in front of me trying to interpret my face.

Sleep didn't come until the wee hours of the morning. I was still troubled over the disappearance of everyone, but I had to look at it as my displacement, not theirs.

For a long time I couldn't begin to approach the thought of everyone I ever knew suffering some huge calamity. Surely sooner or later Tom Brokaw would appear on my TV explaining the mistake. Surely some military experiment caused me to blink out of normal existence into a different space, kind of like that Stephen King story about the airplane passengers.

Sometime in the night the electricity went off. My fitful sleep was broken by the silence. The fan above the bed wasn't moving, the refrigerator wasn't humming in the kitchen, there were no evil red lights from the computer gear in my office.

I'd have to look after myself until I could find out what was happening. As dawn began lightening the room it struck me

that with no competition I didn't need to stockpile anything. It would stay right where it was until I needed it, whatever it was. With no competition I could go anyplace and take whatever I wanted.

I just wasn't positive there was no competition...

A generator would let me use appliances to store food or use tools. I made it a goal to get a generator just before easing into my best hour and a half sleep of the night.

Survival movies always have the hero in a big tough truck so he can bust through walls, etc. I went after one and parked my trusty mini-van in front of a lot on auto row. Brandy and I toured the lot looking for something tough and practical. A nice four-wheel drive pickup truck seemed to fit the bill, but it took me about a half hour of browsing in the sales office to locate the keys.

A nearby gas station still had power, so I filled up there before driving over to the hardware store.

I picked out two ten-gallon gasoline cans and tossed them in the truck, a portable drill with a siphon pump attachment met my need for a gas siphon, and I scavenged a few sets to get extra batteries and chargers. It took awhile before I could find

adequate size hoses to match but eventually ran that out to the truck along with a cartful of batteries and flashlights.

Power was still on and the theft alarm went off as I pushed the cart out to toss my booty in the truck. It sure would be embarrassing if everybody came back right now, but they didn't.

I couldn't find the shutoff for the alarm so I grabbed some ear protectors and ignored the sound while I taught myself to drive a forklift. The forklift let me pick up a decent sized generator and put it into the back of the truck. Rope, pulleys and ramps would help me get it off later on, so those went in too. I topped that off with bolt cutters, crowbars and heavy duty extension cables.

Next stop was a local sporting goods store. There was still a possibility that this event was an invasion of some sort. What about roving gangs? My mind made up lots of reasons to have arms, so I got them.

The bolt cutters helped me free up a couple of rifles, handguns, ammunition, and rifle scopes. I took the biggest spotting scope I could find, and a low-light scope too.

When I was ready for war, I went back in to get camping goods, the best of course. On me.

Brandy looked thirsty so the pet store a few doors down provided food and water dishes that would travel well in the extended cab. I tossed a big kibble bag, a couple of treat boxes and a handful of dog toys into a cart and dumped those into the truck bed too.

The puppies and kittens caged in the store didn't look happy so I let them all out, dumped a bunch of food on the floor and left while they were eating it. I wasn't too bothered leaving the fish and lizards, guess I'm just a mammal bigot.

A growing mound of stuff piled up around the generator and ramps so I began thinking about where to put this stuff. I didn't have to sleep in my home, I could move into one of the ritzy places up the hill that would give me the ability to see farther.

I picked the highest house, shifted a few things in the back and shoved, pushed, pried and heaved at the generator until it slid pretty much uncontrolled off the back of the truck and down the ramps. As I stood gathering my breath and thanking God it hadn't hit my toes the thought struck me that the highest home would also be the easiest for someone else to see.

The generator just sat there. I knew it wasn't going back on the truck, ever.

“Shit,” I said, then banged my head on the side of the truck a couple of times.

Brandy came back to the sound of head bangs. Guess I'll have to train him to come to a whistle. He'd been playing with a new friend, a mid sized pekapoo or something of that nature ran around the unfenced yard.

I off-loaded the chargers then took a flashlight and went to inspect the house. Power'd been out only part of a day and there was a large chest freezer in the garage with a good supply of frozen food.

I opened up the garage doors and hooked up a power bar and extensions to the freezer and the house refrigerator, not too far inside. A couple of steaks from the freezer became dinner for Brandy and me after charring on the grill for a bit.

A pair of table lamps from the house provided lighting for the generator tableau. I left one of the gas can there too, deciding I'd have to change them for fives or twos. The tens were too heavy to move around full.

A flour sifter from inside helped me spread a fine layer of flour around the generator and over the driveway.

I took the truck and the rest of the gear to a smaller place farther down the hill. I only intended to stay there during the

day. Brandy, my armory and I all packed across the ravine to a nicely shaded spot where I could overlook the well-lighted generator.

I didn't get much rest that night either. The generator ran out of gas after about three hours and I decided to let it rest until morning. The ground was hard and any little sound woke me from what little sleep I could get. Brandy snored.

Around dawn, Brandy let out a low growl that was the first time I heard him alert, but the low-light scope showed only a coyote licking at the flour. Picking up my gear I walked back across the ravine to check my "trap".

Daylight always makes a bad idea look stupid. Ants were already working the flour and following the extension cord into the house. It wasn't all bad, the batteries were charged now. I filled the generator and fired it up again to keep the freezer working.

The more I thought about what I was doing the less I liked it.

The generator made so damn much noise I couldn't hear anything but it. There were lots of places I could watch the generator from on the hillside, but the best view of the roads approaching the house were from the kitchen of the house.

We stayed there a couple more days. I tried another fruitless night vigil but the next day fell deeply asleep in a lawn chair

on the shaded patio at mid-day. Nothing disturbed my rest. No jets overhead, no lawnmowers, no sirens, no engines running, no tire noise on the road, just birds calling each other in the trees.

How I envied them calling each other... ...and getting a reply.

Eventually I gave up on the generator, it was just too much hassle. My diet became pretty much what I could find in canned goods when I went into stores, but over the first week stores were becoming more than a little dodgy. I plundered an army/navy surplus store for a full face gas mask to go in them. Packs of dogs fought over and guarded the piles of meat rotting in enclosed compartments.

Mold rampaged across the once fresh vegetables and fruits. Flies swarmed in the fetid air while rats and mice scurried around the shelves of flour and other softly wrapped goods competing with the ants and cockroaches. No doubt other critters who preyed on these were already present or soon would be.

I began dressing like I was entering a biological hazard area when I had to go in grocery stores and made sure to get the most out of my raid that I could. I parked a bit away from the entrance, which was broken from my first entries after the power went, got a cart from the parking lot, attached road warning flares on its front and lit them as I entered the store. That kept the critters at bay and provided light for me to see and finish my foray. I used a grabber to reach into the shelves for cans and made sure nothing but the can came back to the cart.

I ransacked an auto electronics store to find a really good all band radio that I could hook up in the truck. I needed something that would search for a signal and home on it automatically. Getting it hooked up to work didn't seem like much effort as long as I kept track of the wiring for the unit that came with the truck. It wasn't the best job I suppose, but it seemed to work. It homed in on an emergency broadcast signal and that was all it would pick up. After a week I got tired of it and shit canned it, swapping in a multi-CD player. I could raid stores for CDs.

After a couple of weeks, I guess, I tried a signal. I hadn't been keeping track of the days. It really didn't matter much.

I finally got tired of waiting for invaders or roving gangs and decided I could live with anyone who was left out there. A signal attempt made sense to me until I did it. Then it made a greasy spot in the sky and burned down about a square mile of town. I'd never seen the real voraciousness of fire before, so I didn't think much about it when I torched an older house that sat a little away from a dirt road. The fire took the house, jumped to some nearby trees, to the grass, the bushes, took the next house, that neighborhood, the next neighborhood and a commercial area next to that one as I rapidly retreated. Eventually wide roads stifled the fire, but it took twenty miles of freeway to escape the noxious greasy smell.

Abandoned pets tended to accumulate where ever I stayed. I tried pushing them away by dumping truckloads of dog food down by a local reservoir and cutting open the fence so they could get to water, but they still gathered near me. And they were becoming wilder. Bloody vicious fights took place daily and I'm sure they were cannibalizing the smaller animals. A large aggressive Sheppard-type threatened Brandy so I shot him. That kept the wilder ones away for about a week. I started moving to different sections of town every week or so to get away from the not-so-tame pets.

After a couple of months I decided we needed to travel and traded the truck for an RV with built-in generator. I moved a few essentials into it, equipped it with fresh bedding from a department store and hit the road. I marveled that I hadn't thought of it before.

The RV had two big gas tanks and I got tired of running the drills to pump gas, so a hardware store loaned me an electric pump that I could run off the RV's power system, and bigger hoses. Once I tried opening up a gas pump and just powering it up, but I couldn't figure out how to get around the payment process so I just went back to using my own pump.

After a couple weeks of aimless wandering in the LA Basin, I decided we needed to check out some other places. Winter was pushing into spring and I decided to cruise the larger cities of the Southwest.

Somewhere near the Cajon pass, I pulled into a little freeway gas stop. Brandy didn't want to leave the RV, so I left her inside. I'd gotten pretty casual about strolling into places for what I wanted, but got a rude comeuppance when I stepped through the double glass doors into the store. The smell should have put me off, but lots of things started smelling

strange after D for Disappearance,-day, and I'd become too accustomed to ignoring strange odors.

They say, or used to say, we learn from our mistakes. I must be a great learner...

The big mountain lion was totally focused on me. It lay still as a statue on the counter next to a coffee urn, where it had been since before I sauntered in. Its eyes locked on me and it slowly unfolded its front feet from a relaxed position to places that would support its weight. After a quick recovery from the shock of its size and closeness, I eased back out the door.

The huge cat dropped off the counter-top and disappeared behind a standing shelf. Cold sweat made the door handles slippery as I tried to make sure they were braced against an assault from inside. After a minute I realized the cat must have another way in and out, because it didn't come to the door. Did it already go out a back entrance? Was it stalking me from the sides of the place? What would happen if I let go the door and sprinted for the RV?

My head swiveled from side to side like a ping-pong referee's anticipating that it was going to come at me from one side or another to attack me. If I stayed at the doors, I could

duck back inside if it came at me. What if there was another cat inside?

After a couple of tense minutes I let go of the doors and backed towards the RV, flexing my aching hands. I remembered reading somewhere the mountain lions attack the neck from behind. Crap! Now I had to watch both sides of the store and look behind me quickly too. By the time I got to the RV my neck hurt.

I haven't got a clue where it went. It probably ran straight away from the station into the hills beyond.

I slipped into my shoulder holster and jacked a round into the chamber of the automatic, dropping it loosely into the holster.

With my rifle in hand I went back outside the RV and fired off a couple of rounds on each side of the store, aiming at big rocks I could see to try and make more noise out further. Guess that let it know who was boss... . . . for now. Brandy still didn't want to have anything to do with the place.

My nerves made filling the RV's gas tanks more effort than it needed. I tried to do everything with one hand so I could keep a gun in my other hand. That didn't work well, so I'd check for the cat, do the next thing quickly and usually badly,

check for the cat, do it again, etc. Eventually the tanks filled so I pulled my hoses and let them air out while I went back into the store with automatic in hand. After tossing a few handy cans of something close to the door around the place I figured it was clear of cats. I took one of the little shopping baskets and filled it with water bottles and soft drinks from the long inoperative coolers. The water was usually okay, and sodas that hadn't leaked were sometimes okay too, although more often lately some of them had leaked their CO2 and gone flat.

I felt better after we got back on the road, but swore to never leave my gun behind again.

Daytimes I tried to keep busy with some goal or another. Nights were tours in depression. If I let my mind start ticking over what had happened it would drive me nuts. Attempting to sidetrack it, I discovered I could no longer masturbate.

I'd look at a girlie magazine and instead of flipping out into photographically augmented fantasies I'd just think, she doesn't exist anymore, and get more depressed. If I couldn't even fantasize about getting laid anymore the future was looking dim indeed.

If I'd shifted into a different dimension than the rest of the people, why were the stores and houses still here? If they'd

gone away, why was it such a neat disappearance? Everything was orderly, except where I went.

Well, everything was orderly according to nature. Distant smoke always stained the horizon out on the open road. Burn scars were common on one side or the other of the freeway, the grass fires seldom jumped freeways. In towns it was more common to see residential areas burned than commercial areas. The commercial zones were better protected by concrete.

Roughly four months after the event, I ran across my first organized dog pack. I drove around a corner in Phoenix and they were spread across the road in front of me, maybe twenty dogs, medium to large, all hearty looking breeds or mixes.

The one out front was large, spotted like a hyena, but with a pit-bull look. Brandy's hackles rose immediately. He would have fit in the group by size, but not disposition. They all watched the RV closely. A couple of them sat down and their mouths dropped open, tongues hanging out. Maybe they anticipated humans or their owners, but I couldn't trust their connection to humanity anymore. The hyena looking pit bull definitely didn't look at all friendly. They followed me a couple miles before disappearing.

Why would the dogs and cats be left behind? The questions were making me crazy.

Sometimes I'd stop at an orchard or farm and pick what I could use if anything was ripe and easy to get at. All the meats in my diet were canned long before my road trip started. Greens I found in a surprising number of backyard gardens, with tons of tomatoes, but I had tons of canned vegetables available too.

I passed what used to be feed lots, normally crowded with cattle being grain fed before slaughter. I'd anticipated lots of dead cows, but was surprised to see only a few. Apparently when the feed stopped coming the cows moved elsewhere. The flies stayed.

Large herds of cows grazed a number of slopes and I suppose I could have shot one if I wanted a fresh steak, but then what? Skin and butcher it in the field? I sure as hell wasn't going to drag a dead one anywhere and killing a whole beast for one or two meals seemed acutely wasteful.

Twice herds of horses raced alongside the freeway somewhere in Nevada. They looked right, running free, like they belonged on the open range. Maybe they'd survive,

maybe not. They had a better hope than humanity which was hanging on by a thread that grew slimmer by the day.

The early summer months we circled from Phoenix to Tucson, Nogales, Socorro, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Gallup, Flagstaff and back to Las Vegas.

We found no one.

For a while, lights in Las Vegas gave me hope. But there was no one home there either. Power still flowed from Hoover dam, and some of the lighting was still working. But everywhere I checked one internal system or another had failed for lack of human intervention.

Habit eventually found me cruising back toward the LA Basin when I spotted a sign for Edwards AFB. A plane could take me farther and faster than an RV, and surely if someone were alive they'd signal a plane overhead.

Hope is such an eternal optimist.

Following the air base signs led me to an unguarded gate. There were no obstructions so I drove through. It seemed quite a ways until I began to approach structures, maybe a mile or so. A side road led out to where a huge jetliner stood, so I turned that way. This road was blocked by fence and ditches on one side and a gate on the other. I backed up a bit and used

the bolt cutters to snip my way through some clips and rolled the gate aside.

I had to zig around a couple of small buildings and past others before I found myself looking across a broad concrete apron at the scrubland beyond. Incredibly flat scrub brush extended toward the horizon, although the horizon itself was indistinct in the heat shimmer that rose in all directions. A few small dust devils swept up, danced for a few minutes then dissipated as I watched and there may have been a dozen hawks visible had I counted, but I was more interested in the big jetliner. It looked odd. It had special struts and an odd tail structure. I think it was the one they used to carry the space shuttle from its landings here back to Cape Canaveral in Florida.

Beyond the big plane was a bigger gantry and I drove on up to gawk at it. Huge, empty and destined now to stay that way it was probably what they used to load the shuttle onto the jetliner.

Arrayed along the parking strip in front of the gantry were some jets of different kinds, mostly fighter jets with odd paint schemes. When I turned and drove back past the jetliner I saw some small planes near a building on the right, back away

from the runway. They turned out to be gliders, not what I was interested in, but I wondered what they used them for.

On and on I cruised slowly into the shimmering gray of the taxiway ahead of me. It had to be a couple of miles long. I passed big jets, small jets, unmanned drones, trainers, fighters, tankers, transports and more. Twice I thought I was going to reach the end of it then it turned and grew back out toward its indistinct end.

Many Air Force Bases have flying clubs where non-pilots can learn to fly small airplanes. That was what I needed and wasn't finding. The taxiway turned again and beyond more airplanes I could see what I was sure was its final end.

I was looking for a low and slow airplane, and so far nothing fit that bill. Right at the end was a two engine prop driven transport that looked like it could hold twenty people. Too big for a beginner.

Disappointed, I turned back toward the tankers, then spotted more buildings way out to my right. Following a taxiway took me across a really wide, long runway, but it was over a mile to those buildings.

There were bombers in revetments in the back. One I recognized was the old B-52. The other looked newer. I rolled

on around to the front of the buildings, and found myself on a wide apron with a big collection of old and new bombers parked. It looked like a museum area.

Way beyond them, at the end of this world class parking lot was what I'd been looking for: Three small single-engine propeller driven planes, and two relatively small dual engine planes parked in a line at the end of the world.

One more single engine plane sat in what looked like a fueling area and beyond that was what looked like a clubhouse. The clubhouse would have mechanical and instructional texts I could use to figure out the basics.

It was out in the middle of nowhere, and I'd learned to be slow and noisy when opening new buildings. If there were any nasty things holed up there I wanted to give them plenty of time to move someplace else.

Brandy was happily chasing squirrels or rabbits or lizards out in the scrub. I left water for him and he could get back into the RV when he got tired of that.

I'd seen snakes inside other places like this and sure enough, something slithered back into a darker place when I opened the door. A rock served to prop the door open, and I eased in slow and careful, giving my eyes time to adjust to the

inside dimness before turning on my flashlight and making sure all the nearby niches were empty.

As long as they're not cornered, most animals just move somewhere else, there's not much point in chasing them, unless you're hungry.

The clubhouse had a pretty extensive library on each of the airplanes out on the apron so I picked a tech manual on the one that was already in the fuel dock.

There was a basic flight instruction manual, so I took that too. Except for some dust, everything inside was fairly neat. I closed the door and left the rest there. I could come back later if I needed anything.

After a couple of days I'd read over everything in the manual once, and several parts twice. I opened up the plane and located all the pieces, sat in the pilot's seat and went through the motions to make sure I knew where everything was, and thought I was ready to try taxiing around a bit.

A foray back into the clubhouse with a prybar helped find the keys. They were tagged by tail number which made finding the right one real easy.

I had to run back and forth onto the base a couple of times to get the right hoses to rig a pump that would work. I wanted

to do this more than once so I hauled out a small generator to set by the pumps that would make it easier the next time.

After I got the airplane fueled, I went over the checklists a couple of times, but when I turned the key nothing happened. I should have anticipated a dead battery, but no mind, there were instructions for jump starting the engine and I had cables in the RV. Eventually I got it started.

The spinning propeller scared me, I gave it a wide berth and moved the RV and other gear out of the way.

I'd followed the checklist for jump starting the engine. There were checklists for everything, which made learning it all much easier.

Taxiing the airplane around let me get the feel of it in motion. I spent a little while just rolling around on the big apron, feeling out the controls. I wasn't ready to take off, I just wanted to just feel my way into it until I got comfortable before actually trying a take-off. The manuals said it would fly at around 70 knots so I'd be sure to stay under that by at least 10 knots.

My little plane rolled out onto the main runway and I steered her toward the nearest end. Pulling the throttle out just a smidgeon bumped my speed quickly up to around 40. I

wanted to get it just under flying speed to feel how it acted with air moving over its control surfaces. I felt pretty good about it all so far, but I was still bouncing a lot more than I thought I should be.

The end of the runway started getting closer so I braked and started to turn around. I forgot to take the throttle back down and the turn was a little hairier than I was ready for. I managed to finally loosen the knurl nut and reduce the throttle a tad in the midst of the turn so I didn't end up out in the scrub brush. I sat for a minute and soon I'd calmed down and everything seemed OK again. Taking a big breath I pulled the throttle open again, ready to try a faster pass. Maybe 60. I left the knurl nut loose, just in case.

The little airplane ran along just fine and I began to feel some excitement. Around 55 knots I nudged my yoke back just a bit to see if the nose would come off the ground.

If I didn't add more throttle I should be able to just put it back down again, right? I'd have to build up more speed before I really took off the first time. Right?

A breeze must have kicked up or something. The airspeed jumped up without more throttle and the plane leaped up into

the air while I was looking down at the airspeed indicator. All of a sudden things smoothed out.

Panic seized me when I looked up and saw the ground falling away. I slammed the throttle in to reduce speed. I'd failed to set the knurl so the throttle would resist movement and the engine rpms just stopped.

There's a moment before you're about to hit the shit pile when you know you've screwed up and you're hanging in space and time just waiting for the hammer to fall. It can seem like a really long moment sometimes.

In that moment we hung suspended in space and time, but then reality kicked in and we fell back to the earth like Icarus with melted wings... ...hard. I've no idea how high we were before we fell back to the ground. The plane was tilted slightly to the left and when it hit, the left wheel strut collapsed. The left wing bit into the macadam surface, the cabin swung rapidly to the left and plunged onto the runway spinning to the left into the scrub covered hard pan.

The prop chewed itself to shrapnel and bent chunks trying to plow asphalt. The sliding pile that was left, including me, cleaned off a hundred feet of proto-tumbleweed on the old dry lake bed before it came to a steaming stop.

I thought to shutoff all the switches and turn the key off before I figured, the hell with that, just get out. Up through the overhead passenger door onto the high side, lucky I wasn't dead... ..maybe. The plane didn't catch fire, but I was more than a mile from my RV. Half-way into the walk Brandy came bounding out to meet me and when I tried to talk to him discovered that I had a fat lip. In addition to a bruised hip that made the walk more memorable, and some blood had matted in my hair. But was I going to give up on flying? Damn right I was! It wasn't as easy as it looked, and I didn't need any more ways to kill myself.

I was rummaging through the air base hospital looking for anti-biotics when it dawned on me that vulnerability was my new middle name. Medicines that required refrigeration had long ago been rendered impotent. Everything manufactured was beyond its expiration date. A chill ran down my spine when I realized that soon I'd be as vulnerable to infection as a civil war soldier. Even the simplest cut could get infected and end the life of the last human being... ..me. This realization was responsible for more bathing, more toothbrushing and a general cleanup of my recently acquired slovenly habits.

As the RV rolled away from the desert lands I decided to document my ordeal, both to give some purpose to my remaining existence and in the hope that some intelligence after or outside of humanity might be able to figure out what happened to us. For my own sanity this document will become my man Friday. I will do everything in my meager power to see that it is preserved in the hope that sometime, for some sentient being, it may add to their knowledge.

An earthquake must have happened when I was away from LA. We were rolling along a freeway near LA and came to a spot where a whole overpass had collapsed onto the freeway. I turned around and went back to the previous exit. A big truck dealer's lot right in front of the exit displayed a big 4x4 three quarter ton pickup truck with a big camper, so I switched to that.

It took me a couple of days to get it running. Most of the time was spent making sure there weren't critters on board, with mousetraps, but it took more than one day just to get it running right. I changed oil, swapped filters and moved essential gear. Most of that hadn't been in my repertoire

before. I overnighted in the RV until the mouse traps came out clear.

The camper didn't have the fuel capacity of the RV and it just wasn't worth the extra fueling hassle to run the AC all night. When night-time temperatures got uncomfortable, I figured it was time to take a road trip north.

I followed 101 out of LA toward Santa Barbara. Debris was piling up under the overpasses and it made me nervous whether I was beneath them or on top. Caution often took me off the freeway to follow surface streets where that was possible. Once or twice I decided to go overland rather than chance a falling chunk of concrete or falling truck.

Scavenging supplies from stores wasn't going to be a forever proposition. I wondered how long those supplies would remain edible, and took care to avoid any nasty looking or different looking or feeling cans. I subjected everything to the Brandy taste test before I ate it.

The Malibu coast was as gorgeous as ever. I watched Pelicans and Dolphins playing atop and in the waves while easing up the highway and almost ran down a small black bear that seemed as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

Deer popped their heads up out of backyard gardens in Carpinteria and Santa Barbara. It reminded me of the big mountain lion I'd run into on Cajon pass. They generally follow deer.

Feral cats in LA ate well on a burgeoning population of rats and mice, but farther away from city center I saw few cats. There were also fewer dogs than I'd encountered across the southwest. But while the ex-pet population seemed to be balancing itself, the numbers of wild animals seemed to be expanding.

Near Solvang flocks of small birds coated the skies like swarming bees. The big vineyards and farms dried up after irrigation stopped, but in hollows around the fields a few hardy vines had found water. These burgeoning little jungles were home to birds, insects, rabbits and likely more than a few predators. Hawks dominated the skies and coyotes were brazen daylight wanderers. If the bear in Malibu was any indication, larger predators would slowly begin to show up in greater numbers close to the cities.

I was watching hawks dive on the fields near Paso Robles one evening as the last rays of the sun slanted in from the low western hills onto some dried up crop. I'd taken to camping

on the freeways just to avoid flies. A small earthquake rolled the pavement for a few seconds. It reminded me that I was driving along the San Andreas fault. Not wanting to take a chance on the Golden Gate bridge, I turned east of the bay on the 680 freeway the next day and was near Pleasanton when a really big quake hit. At first I thought I had a flat tire, but big rollers kept swaying the highway after we rolled to a stop. I didn't feel too threatened as we were on a very open section of road, but the earth kept moving for quite a while. Afterward I had to ease around a section of overpass that had dropped onto my side of the highway. There was still dust in the air nearby.

Stockton was burned out. Burn scars from fires were fairly common but everything I could see for miles was just charred sticks. It hadn't been recent, as that greasy recently burnt smell wasn't hanging around, but the charred remains still lent their overcooked aroma to passing breezes. Grasses and vines had grown up for half a year and had a good start turning the whole place into another large thicket.

I stayed on the freeway through Sacramento. Stop to check each elevated section and bridge then advance onto it. Stop, slow. Stop, slow. Half-way across the downtown

elevated section I began to wonder about coming back and decided it just didn't make much difference where I lived.

The northern mountains lured me for their cooler summers, but standing on I-5 over the Sacramento River I realized that I could have just moved over to the beach instead. Oh well. As long as I was here I'd look around.

The marshes and flyways along I-5 were ripe with birds. Small freeway gas-marts made more comfortable stops for Brandy and me than big city stores or stations. There were fewer dogs and large predators hanging around. In big cities, Brandy stayed close to me or in the RV. Out on the freeway stops I felt more relaxed and Brandy ranged farther afield. I carried the rifle anyway.

There were more oases north of Sacramento. More ground water meant more of the fields survived without irrigation. Some rice plants looked like they might still be bearing, but on closer inspection they were crawling with weevils.

Seeing the rice got me to thinking about finding a small farm where I could grow some vegetables and fruits. The back roads paralleling the freeways were full of candidates so we cruised those heading north, casing places as we went past.

The first candidate we decided to look at had a nice house, large barn, a big vehicle shed with a tractor and lots of attachments, as well as a couple of big tanks or storage bins.

There were no livestock or carcasses in the barn, but plenty of skittering or slithering noises. Riding tack hung on the posts, but no evidence of animals remained. Or maybe I should say, no domestic animals.

A large hen house stood behind the barn, with a neatly fenced yard, but there was nothing there either. The gate was half off one hinge and ajar, but there was no way to tell if a predator got in or the chickens got out or there just weren't any to start with. I doubted chickens would last long on their own.

Oak thickets ran up the hill behind the place, along with a fence boasting a thick new growth of blackberry bushes with newly ripe berries. They made for good eating. A field that looked like it might have been planted was trimmed close to the ground by an unknown grazer. It could have been loose cows or rabbits. I just couldn't see myself handling the whole outfit without help, so I moved on.

Twenty miles further on was a just gorgeous looking little place. It was so good it gave me shivers. It even had a propane

powered generator. With a little gas, and jumper cables the generator started up and the farmhouse actually turned on. I could hear things humming inside, but I could also hear things leaving.

Slowly operating hinges that hadn't moved in a year or more, and glad of the incandescent lights, I looked over a desecrated kitchen. Something mid-sized had settled in there leaving crap all over. Maybe a racoon or possum, larger poop than rabbits. It raided all the soft-wrapped food supplies and what wasn't eaten was moldy. It hadn't got inside the fridge, but that was a solid mold farm inside too. There were jars of unidentifiable stuff stored in a pantry, but most of it looked pretty uninteresting. I did collect a couple of jars of Strawberry and Blackberry preserves though.

The living room ripped apart by whatever had lived there, and the bedrooms upstairs had been worked over too. Oddly, one bathroom had been completely ignored. Probably a closed door and lack of attractive odors.

The outside looked fine. An overgrown vegetable garden loomed near the house with new tomatoes sprouting from old vines. Peppers had started over too and probably some others,

but the garden was an eco-test site for weeds and bugs. Nearly every fruit had been penetrated by something or other.

The barn on this place was smaller, with small rototillers, a lawn tractor and one big animal carcass that had been picked fairly clean. One that hadn't got away.

I looked at the generator adoringly. How would I refill that huge damn propane tank? I'd been picking full gas bottles out of hardware store racks as I needed them. Could I find a propane truck? What if it didn't have gas?

I'd have to clean the house too. Crap. What would I do for livestock?

My grandfather had shown me a trick once. I scrounged up a bucket and filled it with moldy hard corn from a bag hanging in the barn and walked out to the pasture gate. There, I whistled and shook the bucket and banged on it with the butt of my handgun.

Nothing.

Brandy was off chasing something in a field and came back exhausted so I made us a lunch in the truck, then sat in a chair on the front porch thinking about all the cons, and all the other cons, then decided that farming was probably as far out of my grasp as flying an airplane.

John Kelly

As I put the truck in gear and backed out of the drive, a cagey old cow came meandering out from behind the barn heading for the bucket of corn. Good luck to ya Bessie, I saluted, as I turned back toward the freeway.

I was at the edge of the northern mountains, near Red Bluff, when it started to rain, and rain hard. I holed up in a hardware store parking lot and tried to wait it out but the rain kept up for a week. Temperatures had been quite nice at night, but were now growing colder.

In the LA area if I got a hard rain for four days it probably totaled about an inch of water. Here a weeks worth of rain must have been a foot or more. Water washed the roads, ran from the hillsides thick with mud, tore through asphalt and undermined houses.

It amazed me how much damage running water can do if people aren't around to divert it or repair after it. It was a convincing demonstration of how good it is to live in Southern California.

I-5 was still good through Sacramento, but I thought I'd be better off staying on Highway 99 down the valley, because I'd be closer to towns with supplies. I don't know if it was a mistake or not because I never went back north again.

Highway 99 was hell. The road had a much worse bedding to begin with since it was established way before the freeways. As an improved farm service road it had never been improved to the same specifications for base as newer freeways.

The Stockton burn was the easiest part. South of that grasses and weeds had begun to root and dig in the cracks and unrepaired lesions in the roadway.

A few miles south of Merced the road had collapsed into what looked like a large irrigation ditch. Granted, I had the four-wheel drive for just such an instance, but the ditch looked too steep and deep. I followed it along a dike road through some fields for a ways but it never changed. Eventually I went back along the freeway to a heavy equipment yard and found a small bulldozer and a truck to carry it. It took me a couple of days to locate fuel, get it working, figure out how to use it, and get it on the truck, but it wasn't like the airplane fiasco, not life threatening to learn.

With the dozer loaded I went back to the ditch and began shoving dirt into it. I was able to push through some of the concrete sides and create down and up-ramps over the course of a day, packing it down well with the tracks of the dozer.

I left the dozer in place and drove the transport truck back to the equipment yard, not paying a lot of attention. It was empty. My truck wasn't there.

The disappointment of having my truck stolen was way overcompensated for by the thought that there was another human around here who could steal it. I celebrated and hollered for an hour. I walked up and down the highway yelling "I love you. Please come out." into the breeze until I walked past a similar equipment yard a quarter mile up the road and found my truck, right where I'd left it.

I was nuts for a long time after that and I don't remember much of it. When I got my mind back again I was really alone. Brandy was gone.

I have no idea whether I killed him, if he left on his own, if he died of old age, I just don't know. But I regret his absence. I miss him more than I miss the rest of the human race.

When I became rational again I was in piss poor shape. I couldn't pull my belt tight enough to hold up my pants and everything hung on me. I'd been losing weight, but had at least one notch to go in my belt tongue. Now I had almost two inches of belt beyond the last notch before it tightened up. I wasn't hungry, but I had no supplies, my truck was out of gas, I

had no propane and very little water. I had no idea where my portable generator was, but I was parked in front of a Walmart.

I packed my flashlight and gun and grabbed a shopping cart. The mens clothes provided a smaller pair of jeans and a T shirt that I changed into in the aisle. More clothes went in a shopping basket and I headed over toward the food section. Somebody had shot through all the television sets on display. Must have been me. Checking my automatic I found it empty, that didn't make me happy.

I didn't think they had ammunition here, and found nothing like guns near the fishing gear but I found an inch thick four foot long dowel and a big bowie knife, so I stuck them in the basket close to hand and continued prowling.

The food section had been raided of course. There were still plenty of canned meats, fruits and veggies. I tossed what I could use in the basket, added a dozen cans of dog food in case Brandy came back and moved on.

I picked up a battery charger from the automotive section and topped off my raid with case of water. I couldn't say if there were rats or not, they tend to be just part of the landscape these days.

After reloading the handgun and the rifle at the truck, I made a second raid and pulled out some siphon tubing, a portable generator and a couple of two-gallon gas cans.

Cars in the parking lot provided enough gas for the generator and the truck, at least enough to get me to a gas station. The generator powered the charger which brought the truck battery back to operating charge after an hour or so. A couple of Blue Rhino propane tanks and I was ready to get back on the road, once I figured out where I was.

Wherever it was, it was hot. It must have been late spring or summer again. I sat in the shade of the truck while the generator ran and ate chicken of the sea while I waited for the battery to charge up.

When the generator ran out of gas I looked past the end of the truck and saw a dog sitting there watching me. Not Brandy, not a pack, just one. She was medium size, just about the minimum to make it in a pack. Black with short shiny hair, she wasn't fat, but didn't look starved either. She lay almost unnoticeable in the shade of a parking lot tree and watched me. Here's an animal that's been wild for a year or more, but she's still human focused.

I opened a can of dog food and emptied it on the ground in the shade of a parked car about half-way between us. She waited until I walked back to my truck, then got up, ambled over to the food and ate it. After she'd licked the last scent of it off the pavement, she stood there and looked at me with what I took to be hope.

I'd been disappointed enough that I didn't want to pass it on to any other thing so I climbed into the camper and got Brandy's water dish, filled it and brought it out, setting it down in the shade at the front of the truck. She waited until I sat down again, then eased over and drank her fill, eyes on me.

"C'mer", I said. "C'mon." I offered my hand.

She carefully stepped closer, sniffing the air for my intentions, always watching. She sniffed my hand and licked at where there was a drop of dog food gunk. I scratched under her chin and she practically mauled me getting closer, her body wiggling side to side almost as fast as her tail could wag. It looked like I'd found a new friend.

I invited her inside the camper, stepping up first and urging her to "C'mon in."

There's not a lot of floor space to explore in a truck camper. She sniffed around and spent some time smelling

where Brandy had slept before, eventually settling down in just that spot. Telling me she was ready to go with me.

I finished filling the refrigerator with water bottles and stocking my supplies, then went back out. She was right on my heels. No trapping her in there.

I'd put about three gallons into the truck tank and it took a couple of cranks to get enough gas up the lines to restart the engine, but it came to life with a roar. The dog jumped right up into the passenger seat when I opened the door, sniffing around the cab and eventually settling in the passenger seat, on the blanket that Brandy used to sit on.

When I reached across her to close the passenger door she licked my cheek. I was in love again. I wondered if she'd survived the last year alone or if she'd been with a pack and left it. Whatever, I was glad she'd come. I decided she was sweet enough to name Candy.

The civic signs on the streets suggested I was in the community of Palmdale. Wasn't this the place where Lockheed built their super-secret spy planes? Curiosity drove me to check it out.

I drove a grid through the streets and eventually found the Lockheed airfield. It was a lot smaller than Edwards had been, but still had a bunch of different areas. I found drones, transports, odds and ends that I couldn't recognize, and in one area in the middle, found something I'd never seen or heard of before: It was sleek and pointy, didn't have a cockpit, but it didn't have any tail either. Maybe it was a secret drone.

Here I am, looking at maybe one of the newest things the human race created, and it makes not one whit of difference to me. Two minds in me fought for dominance. The old one marveled at the shiny pointy-ness of the new thing while the new one reminded me it was absolutely useless to me. A ridiculous reminder of a time when the human race had a future.

I found my way over to highway 14 and drove south, connecting with I-5. Near San Fernando the Ronald Reagan freeway had collapsed onto I-5. I went back up the freeway and got onto the 405 to continue south. Rocks and dirt pushed out onto the roads more often now, the four-wheel drive made those an easy pass, but other places simply had great chunks of concrete that had dropped off overpasses.

If I couldn't drive around these blockages or move them I'd either have to go around or go find some heavy construction equipment to do the job. One or more earthquakes could have begun the deterioration.

A large chunk of town near LAX was burnt out and I began to wonder how long I could go without being involved in a fire. On the one hand, with no one to stop them they'd just go until they got trapped out by terrain or cement. On the other hand, there was no one but nature to start them. Well, nature and whatever volatiles people left lying around.

I was thinking I'd find a pretty hilltop in Laguna Beach, scrape it clear for a couple hundred feet for fire protection and start building for my own future.

Why? Because I was still here. The one clear image out of my time of madness is of Mel Gibson in "Lethal Weapon" staring into the bore of his own loaded automatic as he pointed it at himself. ...or was that me? I knew that even if something else could disappear me I couldn't do it to myself.

As I made my way south along the Pacific Coast Highway it became clear that my traveling days were going to be numbered. Crumbling overpasses were an issue whether I was

under them or on top. Staying aware of the condition of the highway beneath me required slow and careful movement.

When I finally reached Dana Point it felt so good I went a couple of miles south on I-5. The beaches were gorgeous and the temperatures mild. It could have been any season here.

I was looking for an easy place to turn around when I saw them. The white twin domes of the San Onofre nuclear power facility. It took me a few seconds to understand.

Oh yeah, I thought, the nuclear power plant. I wonder if it still has power?

Power!?! It's got more goddamn power than I ever thought about and it's right next door to Laguna Beach! Who's minding the store? NO ONE!

I have no memory of the highway condition for the next sixty miles. However fast the truck would go was how fast I was going until I passed old town San Diego.

I had to stop for gas and grub, so I found a map and checked the distance. How far away did they remove humans from Chernobyl? Three mile Island? I figured a hundred miles ought to be safe, but San Diego was only 60.

What the hell, guess I don't need a passport anymore. I stocked up and pushed on south, through Tijuana and along

the coast at a little more relaxed pace until I hit Ensenada. That put me a little over a hundred miles away from the nukes and I felt huge relief knowing that. If there was anything else dangerous nearby I'd just as soon not know about it.

I found my stores, my heavy equipment and my hilltop and went about scraping it bare. A couple of other high-end homes went off the hillside in the process. The place I picked was nice, one level, relatively clean and had simple roof lines. It would be easier to maintain.

One of the first things I did in my new house was start marking an analema, a sun track, so I'd know what season it was. I even built a sun dial. Ehh, to be truthful I stole it from the local library.

I found and hauled a couple of large plastic water tanks up the hill so I had storage for about a thousand gallons of water. It took a week to find the closest well, then I spent a month installing a generator to power the pump and hooking up enough PVC pipe to stretch up to my hilltop. I laid the pipe along the street so I could repair it easier if a fire came through.

Eventually the tanks filled up and I got them hooked into the house's water supply so I had running water. It was

amazing how civilized I felt when I had my first shower in over a year and was able to flush the toilet again and have it automatically refill. I felt like a genius.

After a few months I got tired of going down to turn on the pump every week so I setup a shedful of batteries to power the pump and scavenged solar cells to keep the batteries charged through a controller. Working out the operation of the solar cells and batteries inspired me to do the same for the house, which I did over a few more months. The local library was my new best friend. I finished that just about the same time my analema was complete, so I'd been there a year at that point. I marked it every time it passed that point afterward.

There weren't many dog packs around, but Candy managed to find a male somewhere at the right time and delivered a litter of pups that gave our home some unexpected life. They were all sturdy little copies of their mom and probably their dad too. I guessed they had a lot of pit-bull in them.

They hung around the house while they were very young, but Mom preferred to show them the ropes out in the town as they grew and I didn't care. I loved them all, but they'd be a lot

better off if they could take care of themselves when my day came.

With water on my hill I thought I'd try farming so I scraped another high-end home over the hillside and found a tractor with a plow attachment I could use to break up the soil. It broke up in little rocks and big rocks and I thought about going someplace else to farm, but then I'd have to go there to protect it too. I didn't want to do that.

Instead I took a dump truck out to a farm and used the farm equipment to fill it with soil and carried it back to my hill, where I lowered a section with the bulldozer so water wouldn't run off the top of the hill, and filled it with about four truckloads of soil. It grew weeds quickly.

Farm stores in town provided seed, and after a successful corn harvest I pushed another house off the hill, scraped another lot out and filled it with dirt, planting spinach and cauliflower for greens. A bean crop put some nitrogen back into the soil in the first lot, but it was a long time between harvests and I knew jack-shit about preserving food.

I expanded my home power system to let me bring up some freezers and refrigerators from an appliance store, but at this point I didn't have anything in them, except frozen corn.

With freezers I began thinking about meat. The dogs kept the fields clean of rodents and ground pests, but a lot of flies were breeding in the dog crap around the house. I scraped it off with the dozer and tried to train the dogs to crap further afield. They took the training well, and the flies reduced in number. There were plenty of birds to help keep the flies down and planting sunflowers to grow seeds to bring the birds around helped too.

It was probably around two years after the event that I took a pack of five dogs and went hunting out where I'd seen cattle on a hillside back up the coast. I shot a cow and went with the dogs up into the field, dragging a couple of plastic bins with me. I'd gutted and field dressed deer before so starting the job wasn't difficult.

The dogs ate well off the scraps I tossed them while I sawed large chunks to carry home and loaded them into the bins. I had probably sixty pounds of meat in the bins when I decided to haul what I had back to the truck, about two hundred yards away. I'd just loaded the bins on the truck and was ready to off load a few more when the dogs alerted and

snarled. Their hackles were raised, but they gathered in toward me rather than moving out toward an enemy.

I looked up toward my kill and it was easy to see why. A pack of Grey wolves had surrounded the carcass and staked their claim. Some were tearing away at the carcass and some were easing our direction.

What the heck. I had enough for now. I let off two rifle rounds and that stopped the animals moving toward us long enough to get the dogs back into the truck. The animals on the carcass didn't give an inch.

The dogs were only too happy to jump in with me and bark their discontent and dogliness at the wolves merrily chomping our kill as we drove away. I wondered how the dogs perceived our retreat.

Back home I tossed the meat into the freezer and let the cold do its work overnight. I went down into town and bought a band-saw on credit so I could easily cut the frozen beef.

Once my meat hunting pattern was set I did it elsewhere. I went north of town a ways, killed a cow, field stripped and dressed it and loaded up the truck. This time we got two loads aboard before a pair of cougars claimed the carcass.

I could've killed them, but there was enough to go around. And I didn't want to lose any dogs over a few pounds of beef. Not only was I becoming attached to them, they were damn helpful.

One new pup in Candy's third litter was different. Most of my dogs were black like mom. This one, I called him Sam, was a total reversal of their pattern. Almost all white, he had a larger head, black feet and a black star on his chest.

Sam was different in other ways too. He'd follow me around as much as any of 'em, but instead of nosing in for more scratches or treats, he'd just watch me. Watched everything I did: watched where the food came from, how I fixed it, what I did with the scraps.

He was an insatiably curious dog, and a fast learner too. One day I was searching about, having misplaced the truck keys and I said to Sam, "Where the hell did I put the truck keys, Sam?" and he took off, coming back in about two minutes with my keys. I tested him more and found he understood just about everything I could say to him. Hell of a smart dog.

He went out with Candy for street training too, and by his second year, I noticed Candy didn't take the dogs out any

more, Sam did. They'd follow him whenever he wanted them to and didn't when he wanted privacy. I couldn't even make them do that.

One evening the dogs seemed particularly loud about something, but I was doing something else when Sam came in and barked to get my attention. He never barked at me before. When I looked he swung his head to the side like I'd jerk mine to get dogs to go one direction or another. I went with him and he stopped at my rifle rack, nodding up at the guns, so I picked off the 30-06 and followed him out to the yard.

The pack was racketing over by the corn patch and he led that way, impatient with my slower pace. He stopped and I could see a large dark object where most of the dogs were howling and barking and running around. I pointed my headlamp in that direction and saw a really large black bear that didn't pay much attention to the dogs.

The bear reared up large under my light. I snapped the rifle up and aimed at the middle of his chest and let go. The gun was zeroed out to two hundred yards, so at eighty feet the bullet was already rising over the bore line.

I missed the chest, but got the bear right in the snout and he dropped in his tracks. Sam trotted over, checking it out

before the other dogs would close in. He looked back at me as if to say, thanks, that'll be all. Then he and the dogs did their own field dressing while I went back inside.

I figured they could have the bear. I was thinking about fencing the place what with wolves, pumas and bears on the loose, when Sam came trotting back inside and yipped at me to follow. When I went back out there was a stack of bear meat sitting next to a freezer with a pack of slavering dogs hanging out watching it. I packed it in big baggies, wrapped bigger chunks in plastic and stuck it in the freezer.

I had twenty-odd dogs hanging around at that point so I figured what the heck and brought another freezer up from town, rigged up a pulley and weight system and ramps to let Sam open and close it when he wanted to, chopped up the bear into dog serving sizes and packaged it for them in the dog freezer. I even put a little platform in it so they could get in and out entirely on their own. At first Sam was the only one who could or would do it, but he nagged some of the others and taught them how to do it too.

Sam also increased our hunting take. He'd keep half the dogs up at the carcass and watching on the hillside while a smaller group helped me drag the bins to the truck. When I

was done cutting, all the dogs would have a share of what was left, but we made a practice of leaving the guts and a good portion of meat on the bones for the other scavengers. So now instead of fifty to a hundred pounds of meat per cow we were easily bringing home two hundred. I didn't have any trouble keeping any of the freezers full, especially the dog freezer.

They took over their own feeding after I set up the dog freezer and Sam taught them how to use it. I was amazed that they were disciplined enough to not just tear through everything in that freezer, but they'd only take a meal at a time per dog. I didn't have enough bowls to water them all at the house, but put low troughs in near each of the fields as part of the irrigation system.

One day Sam and five other dogs didn't come back in the evening. Candy didn't seem upset and none of the other dogs were complaining either, but I was a little concerned, I'd gotten to enjoying Sam a lot.

Sam didn't come back the next day either and I was beginning to think I'd lost the smartest animal I'd ever known. But the morning after that he and his partners were back in the

grounds. He seemed perfectly okay and I shrugged my shoulders and let go of it. The next night he was gone again, with a different set of dogs. They were back in two days also so I figured Sam must be learning something new.

I found out what on the next hunt. When I spotted a cow and sighted in on it Sam gave me a little snarl.

I looked at him in surprise and he actually shook his head “no” at me. Then he took his home boys that he'd schooled out into the meadow.

They disappeared in the longish grass, but pretty soon there was a bark at the top of the meadow and another on a different side and the cow started running down the meadow, then a dog popped up and it turned and moved downhill, another dog turned it back across the hill and it tried to go up again, but there was a dog there. In about three minutes those dogs herded that cow down the hill toward me.

I tried to be still, but the cow knew I was there. It tried to turn, but one dog after another got onto its neck and they tore its throat out. The cow died not twenty feet from the truck, bled out, with ten dogs sitting around with smug looks on their faces.

We left the same proportion of meat on the carcass as usual but getting it to the truck was a lot easier. I had to talk to Sam on the way home, “Sam, you are something special.”

I don't know who was breeding with whom, but there were five heavily white puppies in the next pair of litters. Candy wasn't in on this breeding, but two of her daughters were. I have no way of knowing if Sam fathered these or if they were out of the same genes that he came from, but these were smart pups too. Sometimes they'd watch me by themselves and sometimes Sam would be with them.

I didn't see the wolves again, nor any bears nor any more cougars. Sam was sometimes in and sometimes not and his forays may have had something to do with that, but for some odd reason I saw more cats. Feral housecats, Bobcats or Lynx, but nothing larger. And the dogs paid no attention to the cats now. As a result, there were fewer rats, mice and rabbits to harass the crops. I have not a clue as to how that happened but I'd be willing to wager a couple of cities that Sam had something to do with it. If I had anyone to wager with.

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“The text ends here. We don't know if there's more, but this is a complete transcript of what was found.”

“And it was found at site one?”

“Yes, the island. It confirms Sam as the first intelligent canine!”

“If it wasn't planted there by someone supporting that theory.”

“It has been authenticated as first millenium, AND as the Human language dominant in that area at their termination.”

“It's nothing a smart con-dog couldn't trick up. We've seen this sort of thing before.”

“But none that actually described the human termination event AND the genesis of canine intelligence in the same document!”

“Many legends say that Sam was a Wolf.”

“We're essentially all wolf lines. This just puts Sam in the house of wolf-breeds that adapted to co-operate with humans. I'm sorry sir, but I have to insist that this document is palpable evidence of what has only been lore prior to now.”

“It may prove so when tested. And it WILL be tested further. It was a long time from sentience to dexterity and

from dexterity to written language. And the only record of that pre-dextrous period is in lore.”

“But we know that humans were capable of recording language and exercising science...”

“We assume they progressed through a similar cycle, yes. We've studied their libraries for some time.”

“This document also confirms Sanofrey, the writer sees it as a danger and purposely moves far away from it. According to lore, Sanofrey claimed the lives of Sam and the firstborn. How would our lore have the specific name Sanofrey long before this document turned up. That could only happen if the human who wrote this taught it to the second tier or later!”

“Or conversely, it could prove that the document was written AFTER the lore by some con-dog. No offense, what you say has some merit Rover, if the document proves out. But I find it suspicious that whoever wrote it glossed over the termination. Didn't even try to explain it. And why would just one human be left? What happened to all the others. Don't you think a document of this import would attempt to record those things?”

“Not even the human who wrote this knew. Lore tells us that the human thought he was crazy and that he invented the canine world out of his own insanity.”

“Hmm. So you and I are the umpteenth generation of sentient canine created inside an insane human's mind. One who has been dead for thousands of years. Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha *Ralph!* Damn Rover, you had me going there for a minute.”

“So you see Galurg, it was this particular stasi-quantum event that created the necessity.”

“It's staggering Sim. I can barely conceive of the sequences involved.”

“They can really only be computed.”

“So the dog's conclusions were correct?”

“Yes. They and consequently we are the product of this initiating event. The evidence is conclusive.”

“Then it's unequivocal? WE create the initiating event?”

“Absolutely. If we do not, our race will not exist beyond the indicated time.”

“How can we do that to an entire race?”

“WE are an entire race, Galurg. If we do not perform the initiating act, our race will cease to exist! Don't worry, There

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will be no pain involved. We'll simply redistribute the resources into an inconsequential side dimension."

"Then it must be done. Wait! The implication is that you and I must ourselves be cancelled!"

"Yes. We cannot take this knowledge beyond the indicated time."

"I see that. So it must be. Thank you Sim, for the honor of becoming one of our own race's creators."

"They'll never know. Here is the command we'll use."

"Thank you. I'll know for while. Shall we do it together?"

"Yes. Ready?"

"Okay."

"Let there be light!"