

The State of General DK

It was a crisp and bright September morning and retired army general **David Kingston** (always known as DK to his military peer group) was up early - he had body parts to clear up from his back garden. The previous day's events had not brought any undue restlessness for him overnight. He had slept soundly and felt thoroughly rested and recharged.

Just like his military operations in the good old days, the general had planned such an eventuality with precision and executed the plan with determined purpose. After all, the three men who had been intent on stripping his precious apple trees of their bountiful wares were fair game in this current state of runaway anarchy that was in effect.

The disbandment of all law enforcement agencies as a result of a total and global economic collapse was inevitable, as no one in their right mind was prepared to be the arbiters of policing with the certainty of receiving no wage in return for an increasingly dangerous and thankless career. The Armed forces were a pale shadow of their former selves as a result of savage budget cuts. What was left of them were too thinly stretched

fighting pointless extended overseas wars, for the government of the day to turn to their services in the name of civil order - at least for the time being. The government or what remained of it had largely become a token gesture of organization, with no meaningful powers to speak of (other than to send the military off to fight increasingly pointless overseas wars). It had become a desperate, selfless society with protection and survival left totally to the individual. The notion of 'the survival of the fittest' was now very much the order of the day, and on a daily basis.

The wily general was certainly one of the fittest despite his retired status. He had kept himself super physically fit and mentally fine-tuned and with his connections, had been able to accrue a substantial arsenal of 'personal protection' devices, a couple of which had dispatched his fruit-minded intruders the previous afternoon. Sure, it had made a mess of his perfectly manicured lawn, but the general considered this to be a price worth paying to maintain his burgeoning crop of blast-proof, lead-shielded Cox's Orange Pippin. The only disappointment he felt was that his security system had been breached and that the doomed trio had made it as far as his garden. Once the mess had been cleared, he would need to reprogramme and repair things to ensure such an infringement could not be repeated.

That he had to resort to such extreme measures to protect his property and possessions was a source of rueful regret to this proud patriot and strict disciplinarian. The decline in moral and social standards precipitated by the apocalyptic financial collapse appalled Kingston deeply, but there was no way back now - it was a case of do or die. He would do whatever was required to thwart those who threatened his own survival. If the men had knocked on his front door and politely asked for some of the apples, the general would have been happily disposed to have obliged their request. However, such a scenario in such desperate times was a pipe dream.

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After a lifetime of faithful military service for his country, the general had somewhat reluctantly retired to a fairly sizeable, yet modest house in a leafy and secluded cul-de-sac. Kingston had generally answered to no one in his armed forces career, but to his wife Serena, he was more compliant, and so the choice of location was very much of her volition. From the outset he had barely tolerated his neighbours who were a grim assortment of bankers and accountants, and with some success had managed to avoid the rounds of dinner parties, house-warming get-togethers and other enforced social events arranged by one or two of the more eager couples. On those occasions when his wife had got her way on these matters, the

evening had generally finished with Kingston upsetting or insulting the host or hostess, thereby ensuring a repeat invite would not be forthcoming. Since the unexpected death of his wife just a year or so into his retirement (rumour in the cul-de-sac was that he had driven her to an early death since he had joined her at home full time), Kingston had become increasingly self-sufficient and isolated from those around him. With an estranged son living abroad who he had not spoken to for a decade or more, and no other immediate family to concern himself with, the general was fully focused on staying alive and getting through to the other side of this anarchic state of affairs - if there was another side.

The neighbours were well aware of what the no-nonsense general was capable of in terms of his own protection. Through twitching curtains, they had seen the heavily armoured vehicles arrive periodically outside Kingston's house over the preceding months and then unload their cargo of undisguised, past their sell-by-date military hardware. With no one in authority to stop him now, there was no point in being subtle or understated in such operations. In fact, Kingston made the spectacle as deliberate and public as possible to ensure that none of his neighbours should even consider any attempt on his property. The three hapless intruders of the day before were from beyond the local environs and, blinded by the juicy pickings seemingly on

offer and painfully unaware of the capabilities of the man whose land they had encroached upon, were totally oblivious to what fate was in store for them once they had accessed the heavily-mined lawned area of number 22 Brick Kiln Gardens. The grave (and messy) price they paid for their indiscretion provided further warning to nosey neighbours that number 22 and its owner were not to be messed with.

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Having spent a couple of hours or so out in his partially crated garden, calmly collecting splintered limbs and chunks of torso into a wheelbarrow, the general emptied the bloodied contents of the barrow into the large composting area further back from the apple trees and adjacent to his extensive and impressively varied vegetable plot. He proceeded to fork the body parts amongst old grass cuttings, leaves and other garden detritus. Nothing could be wasted in times such as these. The heavy shields encircling the apple trees had done their job admirably with only very superficial damage to the facing surfaces. The satisfied general then dug over the damaged lawn area ready for new grass to be laid at some point in the future, spread sand onto the pools of blood to soak up the crimson fluid, and made his way back into the house for a spot of lunch. Such was his nerve and composure that his appetite had not been spoiled by his latest activities.

As he walked through the back door into the kitchen, the telephone rang, and Kingston made his way into the sitting room where the handset was located. Picking up the old fashioned receiver, the general cleared his throat and barked out "745538, who's calling please?"

"Hello general, this is Mr. Hardcastle at number 40. Just wondering what all the commotion was about yesterday?"

"Oh, just a spot of neighbourhood watch put into practice," the usually humourless general crisply replied. "Nothing to concern yourself about for the moment, but word to the wise - the bastards are starting to get interested in our leafy little piece of England. I suggest you spread it on the grapevine and prepare yourself for action."

The other end of the line went quiet for a few seconds before an audibly shocked Mr. Hardcastle squeaked out a pathetic thank you and ended the brief but informative conversation.

"The ignorant fools," Kingston muttered as he made his way back to the kitchen. He considered his neighbours' almost total ignorance of the impending threat to their quiet existences as a damning indictment of the cloistered and suffocating smallness of their everyday lives. Certainly they could see on the TV the mounting discord and violence now prevalent in the major cities, but their detachment out here in the countryside gave them a ludicrous and thoroughly misplaced sense of safety.

"It won't be long before their neat little houses and gardens become victim to the spreading disorder and desperation," the general mused as he prepared a sandwich for his lunch. Once consumed, Kingston carried two of the intruders' heads at arms' length down the path at the front of his house, and placed them on metal spikes attached to his security gate. He had decided to take a lesson from medieval history and use this gory display as a stern warning for others not to make the same mistake. No one, especially in times of desperation, took any notice of written warning signage, whereas this show of intent would surely dissuade any would-be aggressors. The neighbours would of course be appalled at the dreadful affront to the tone of the cul-de-sac, but Kingston cared not a jot and knew full well that they had no one left in authority that they could call upon for help.

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By Christmas time, fresh food supplies other than those produced individually were all but exhausted. The general had harvested a fine quantity of Cox's orange pippin which was now safely stored in the cool corners of his underground bunker, along with vegetables grown in his, by now extremely well composted plot. Numerous shelves were copiously stocked with tinned food and bottled water. Electricity supplies were patchy at best, but again the general had planned for such an

eventuality with a number of large batteries and stand-alone generators which would provide for his needs for a considerable time to come. All-in-all, the secure bunkered area he had constructed by hand and sweat over the preceding decade or so underneath his house, would ensure as good a sanctuary from the madness taking place in the outside world as it was humanly possible to devise. The general's military training and innate sense of where the world was heading to, had given him as good a chance of pulling through the ensuing social cataclysm as anyone. Down in the depths of his concrete and steel underground fortress, this would be his own territory, his own autonomous and private state of existence. All rules would be of his devising for his benefit and survival until the situation 'up top' had improved. It was a very real 'bunker mentality' that fixed itself in the mind of the former military man - he could see no other means of salvation.

As the outside situation deteriorated with an ever more bloody predictability, Kingston sat at his study desk one night with just the glow of two candles for company, listening closely to the radio to what news updates were being put out on the airwaves by the remaining brave/stupid journalists and independent news organizations who still thought such a service was their duty to perform. He was no admirer of such do-gooders in normal times, but found their efforts invaluable now in

deciding on a date when the house and grounds would have to be permanently abandoned for the impenetrability of his underground hideaway. As the yellow candle light flickered off the peeling paintwork of his study wall, the general sighed in acceptance that this part of his survival plan would have to be put into operation before the month end. Brick Kiln Gardens, as with every former affluent and reasonably remote area of the country, was now being increasingly targeted by the desperate evacuees of the major towns and cities which had largely been ransacked and raised to the ground. Mr. Hardcastle at number 40 had suffered a sticky end just the previous week as he returned from a trip out on his bicycle looking for supplies. His return was unluckily timed as a group of maybe five or six men looking for supplies of their own were waiting in ambush. After forcing Kingston's hapless neighbour to give them access to his home and then taking what provisions they could find, they had dispatched Mr. Hardcastle and his wife with a ruthless lack of compassion. The whole spectacle had been afforded to the general via his still functioning CCTV system on the perimeter of his property. The, by now rotting and bird-pecked spectacle of the spiked heads at his own gateway, had for the time being been sufficient deterrent against attack on his heavily fortified property. However, he knew that it was only a matter of time before a combination of electrical failure and intruder determination

would force his hand and drive him below into the bunker. That time was imminent.

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It happened to be February and it happened to be a leap year, and so Kingston's preparations for his 'underground year zero' were geared towards the 29th of the month, by which time all his possessions worth saving would have been moved below. With snow on the ground in his beloved garden and a house increasingly devoid of its former contents and character, as the appointed day approached, Kingston steeled himself against the isolation to come. Would it be months? Would it be years? Would it be longer and therefore a question of when his food and water ran out? He had shown the presence of mind in previous years of spending weeks on end down in his bunker even when the world was still financially stable. The threat of a nuclear Armageddon had always been lurking in the background - this is what drove the general to construct his bunker in the first place. Even though the weapons-induced cataclysm had failed to materialize, his foresightedness had been rewarded with a secure refuge now in the time of the financially induced apocalypse.

On the morning of the 29th, the general rose early, took one last tour of his garden and decided to do a final reccy of the house to make sure he hadn't missed anything worth saving down below. As he made the final inspection of the bedrooms on

the upper floor, the front security gate buzzer sounded downstairs. He certainly wasn't expecting company. He briefly considered ignoring it but his curiosity got the better of him and lured him down the stairs into his study where the security monitors were housed. Stood at the gates were a bedraggled man and woman who was holding a young child in her arms, whilst carefully shielding its eyes from the grisly spiked head display.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Kingston barked out in the direction of the microphone grill.

"Straight to the jist as ever," the man replied. "It's Stephen, your son, and I'd be grateful if you could see your way to letting me, the wife and your grandkid inside, away from this madness out here?"

"Jesus, I have a grandchild?" the general replied in indignation.

"I assure you, we haven't just kidnapped a kid off the streets," his son countered.

The two men had been estranged ever since DK's son had pointedly refused to follow in the military footsteps of his father and service in the name of his country, and pursue a life of leisure abroad.

"How do I know this is not a trap and you are the bait?" the suspicious general enquired.

"For fuck's sake father, give me some measure of credit that I wouldn't be prepared to commit such a trick."

"Hmm, maybe but with the way things are, I'm sure you would expect me to take no silly risks with security. Stay where you are and I'll come to the gate to make sure there's no funny business afoot. Please refrain from using language of that nature in front of my grandchild."

"That's very gracious of you," his son remarked sarcastically. "I apologise for swearing but it seems a pretty tame failing compared to putting heads on spikes!"

His wife punched his arm hard, realizing the delicacy of their situation and the consequences of her husband pissing her father-in-law off.

After an awkward confrontation and introduction to his newly discovered daughter-in-law (Megan) and grandson (Kyle) at the front gate, the general's unexpected visitors were eventually granted an entrance onto the property. By now, the cul-de-sac was largely empty and trashed. Kingston suspected that he was the lone remaining inhabitant now and that everything of any value or use had probably been pilfered already. After a cursory scan round the former leafy glade, Kingston and visitors made their way up the path to the house.

A couple of minutes of frosty silence hung in the air before Stephen Kingston made his pitch; "I won't beat around the

bush. We've not exactly been best buddies but knowing your infamous organizational skills, I reckoned you would probably be the best person to seek out for some sanctuary for myself and family at this dangerous time."

"How long have you been back in the country?" his father coolly enquired.

"A couple of years now. We decided to move back for the birth of Kyle, figuring that good old England would be sheltered from the growing economic problems in Europe. Unfortunately, I thought Greece would offer up a life of sun-drenched tranquility but things were first to go tits up there as I'm sure you know."

"You never did make sensible decisions," the general replied with clinical ease.

"True enough, but let's face it, I was never going to be a lifetime army recruit. I may have cocked up in my geographical choice but have no regrets on my career path."

Bouncing Kyle on her bare and dirty knee, Megan Kingston felt the need to defend her husband in the perceived onslaught to come from the crusty old general; "Stephen is a wonderful father and husband. Whether you believe me or not, and I appreciate we have only just made each others' acquaintance, you should be very proud of your son," she interjected. "I regret, if Stephen doesn't, not speaking to you before about Kyle."

"It would have been the decent thing to have done, but all things considered right now, there are more pressing matters to worry over," the general replied. "First, by the state of you all, a damn good scrub up is a priority. While you do that, I'll prepare some food and then we can discuss a way forward that is beneficial for everyone involved."

With that typically cool and clinical assessment of the situation, Kingston proceeded to boil up a large bottle of water using the last gas cylinder he had above ground. The new arrivals gratefully accepted the proposition put to them and relaxed on the general's rather tatty old sofa.

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DK had certainly never envisaged having company down in his bunker. Despite the necessities of close daily contact with his men in the army days, he was by nature a solitary man, in need of only his own company and thoughts for long periods of time. In this regard, his wife had been considerate and accommodating - it was pointless to try and change the man she had decided at an early stage of their relationship.

Kingston, somewhat perversely had been looking forward to his enforced period of subterranean isolation, but now he was faced with a dilemma of a heart versus head nature. Should he, could he cast his son and young family back out into the maelstrom of uncertainty that lie beyond his fortress, or do

what he was sure any 'reasonable person' in such a position would do and allow them to share his space and provisions. The general mulled over this while the recent arrivals cleaned up and enjoyed some welcome tinned beans and fruit which the general had fetched from his underground supplies. Finally, as a hazy dusk began to settle and acquiesce into a frosty night, having weighed up pros and cons, DK announced his decision to his expectant guests.

"I've done some calculations and it seems that 4, well 3 and a half could survive down in the bunker for 18 months at most," Kingston said with a glance and a wink of affection at his now sleeping grandson. "So, provisions are not the issue. Whether we could go for that long a time without strangling each other in a confined area probably is," he continued.

"I'm willing to make the effort, and we have a lot of catching up to do," Stephen replied with a sigh of deep gratitude.

"You also have myself and Kyle to get to know, so I think we can be good tenants for you," Megan added with an affectionate smile.

Later that night, the four made their way down into the bunker and the general locked tight the entrance/exit hatch behind him. As the steel lock clicked into place, Kingston

wondered if they would ever have the opportunity to make the return journey.

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Over the preceding months, apart from the occasional and inevitable infraction, the original verbal contract of tolerance and forbearance was adhered to with admirable effort on all parts. The bunker offered enough private areas for time to be spent apart when required by any of its occupants. As for Kyle, although not the ideal and healthy environment for a child to pass some formative time separated from the stimulations of others of his age, the labyrinthine corridors and voluminous open spaces of the bunker lit either by candle light or battery powered headlamps, provided an exciting and stimulating playground, in which he was free to explore with no subsequent dangers. Clocks and radios were kept going via the large stock of batteries which the general had acquired. Evenings were generally spent in each others' company, reading, playing cards, talking or listening to the patchy but still available radio news updates.

This curious but peaceful haven kept its incumbents alive and secure for a further eight months, at which time the news from above became ever more encouraging. Remaining military and government agencies had managed to cooperate sufficiently to restore some degree of civil order and kick start food and

energy availability and distribution. Financial measures were put in place to revive some putative economic re-genesis.

The day came when Stephen Kingston made the decision to seek a new life above ground with his family. The damaged relationship he had with his father had been revived as a result of their shared incarceration in the bunker, and his wife and son had built up new relationships with the man they had previously not known. Bidding them farewell from the reopened hatch, DK seemed unusually emotional.

"It seems ridiculous that it required a social and economic collapse to bring us all together, but let's not wait for the next one to come along before seeing each other again," Kingston regretfully reflected.

"As soon as we get settled, we will get in touch and you can come and share our space and food," Stephen replied with a wry smile. "I'm going to start work on a bunker of our own as soon as I can."

As his son and family walked down the path to the open front gate, General Kingston began to mull over plans for the next mission. The idiots in charge were sure to cock things up again in the future and the next cycle of collapse and disorder were inevitable. The same mistakes, accidental or otherwise were sure to make this episode just one of more to come. He would begin to re-stock the bunker and re-fortify his property. The

garden was in urgent need of attention but his beloved apple trees had miraculously survived and were once again heavy with fruit.

The state of his own providing had kept him alive and ready for whatever was to come next.

THE END