

## The Protection

We thought the apocalypse would begin with nuclear or chemical warfare, terrorism, or religious fanaticism. We even half-heartedly suggested it might arise from an alien attack. But it didn't. It was the result of ordinary people whose daily lives centered on kill or be killed.

After a year of mass shootings, the world fell apart.

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Athena blew out the eight candles symbolizing her eightieth birthday. She wondered how she'd survived into her ninth decade, halfway through the year 2085, when rarely did one make it past age sixty. Her village was fortunate to have a medic, a young man whose skills kept her and her village healthier than most, or so she'd heard.

Though Athena held the status of great-grandmother, no one, not even members of her family, wanted Athena to wake up breathing each morning. An elderly person drained resources.

She still considered herself a useful member of her village, tending crops and livestock, preparing meals, displaying the flags, readying the ammunition. True, she could no longer act as lookout; her eyes failed to see into the distance anymore, even with the telescope, but what she did contribute freed up someone else to keep an eye out for strangers and marauders coming their way. And, she was there at the start, witnessing the eruption of madness.

“Great Athena,” a ten-year-old child tugged at her pants, “tell us about what it was like before.”

Athena hesitated, looked off into the distance, and then smiled down at the child. “You mean before The Protection? When I was a girl?”

“No, what it was like when it happened.”

“Oh, child, you don’t want to hear that again, do you?” While many of Athena’s memories of the last sixty years had blurred or faded, those first years etched into her brain like detailed illustrations. She often wished she could forget them but, other times, she wanted to speak of their horror. Someday, maybe soon, Athena would tell the full story, including how far the world had gone in the wrong direction.

Everyone knew the story of The Protection, even the children; it was part of the school’s curriculum. Athena was the only one, at least in her village, who was witness to the truth, who faced the horror of kill or be killed. That version of the story was buried, along with all those who had been murdered or cast out.

“I was in college, a school where you went to learn a profession. Mine was going to be ecology. I wanted to help make the rivers and lakes clean again. But I never got to do that.”

The past rushed up at Athena, despite her having told the story any number of times; it still caught her by surprise, an unexpected twist in the plot of the last sixty years.

“The Protection began in 2015, though it didn’t have a name then, when there were more mass shootings in the United States than there were days in the year.

Athena was twenty that year, ready to take the world by storm. Instead, it took her, and many other people, into a future of lunacy.

One of the children stood and extended his hand, thumb up, first finger pointed out, mimicking a gun. “Ka-pow, ka-pow, ka-pow.” He rotated from one child to the next, aiming his

pretend pistol at their heads. Two of the adults laughed at his antics, but everyone else ignored him.

Athena continued. “At first the shootings were horrifying but, after a while, we got used to them. It was simply the way things were. The next year, there were even more mass shootings, mostly at schools and movie theaters.”

“Did you get to do any mass shootings?” a five-year-old girl asked Athena.

“No, child,” Athena replied, not surprised by the question. Somehow, over the years, the shootings had become romanticized, as if it were an honor to be a part of them. Athena, like many, had reacted in horror at the initial shootings, and she’d been dismayed, then distraught, when the country’s solution to the killings was to arm its citizens.

Athena sat silently, recalling a long ago conversation.

“Athena,” her parents phoned and said. “We think you should get a gun.”

“A gun? Are you crazy? I don’t want a gun.”

“We each bought one,” her parents admitted. “And you need to protect yourself.”

“Mom, Dad, studies show that owning a gun doesn’t protect you. By the time you get it out, it’s too late. I can’t believe you have guns. Are they loaded?”

The silence on the other end affirmed the answer. Athena’s stomach clenched and her temples tensed. Someone would get hurt. In the end, it was her dad.

Athena snapped out the reverie and continued her story to the children.

“Every year, there were more shootings. More people bought guns and carried them everywhere. Some people called the United States the Wild West, which was a time in history when people settled things with guns.”

A boy raised his hand, waving it back and forth to get Athena’s attention. “Just like we do now,” he blurted.

“Yes,” Athena sighed. “Just like we do now.”

“The mass shootings continued, and a new kind of shooting started. People who were mad at someone, or who didn’t get what they wanted, shot the person they thought was responsible. More people bought guns to protect themselves.”

A second child waved her hand in the air. “That’s when we started calling it The Protection, right?”

Athena managed a weak smile.

The Protection. Athena remembered people petitioning the government, lining the street in protest, and writing letter after letter to demand gun control, to make guns less accessible, not more. But those people were often gunned down themselves until they became too afraid to speak up at all. Athena agreed with them, but held back, not wanting to get involved.

Eventually, the news stopped reporting daily shootings; no day was without them. Schools surrounded themselves with double, bullet-proofed glass entries, admitting only students and staff; parents no longer set foot in their child’s school building. Industry was next, closing itself to all but employees. Business and sales meetings took place virtually, as did most shopping.

The entire United States population avoided face-to-face involvement as much as possible.

“After a while,” Athena continued, “everyone had a gun. It was the easiest way to settle an argument or to get rid of a person you didn’t like.”

“Great Athena, did you ever get to kill someone?”

Athena flinched at the question. *Get to?* She wanted to take the children by their shoulders, stare into their eyes and tell them killing was not a privilege, but a crime. Instead, Athena only shook her head.

“How come you didn’t kill the person who killed your dad?”

“I wasn’t there,” Athena replied, not wanted to elaborate. Even now, all these years later, she shivered from the memory. “My father ran a construction company and some of the materials for a house he was building didn’t come in on time, so my father met the home owners at the house to talk about it.”

The children whispered among themselves. This section of the story bored them.

“We know that part already. The people got mad and shot your dad. Tell us about when the fires started.”

Athena closed her eyes, reliving the phone call from her mother that her dad had been killed. No one was arrested; a single killing was considered an agitated dispute, nothing with which to involve the police. A friend’s mother, a physician was shot because she informed a patient of their terminal illness. Athena was walking alongside her best friend when the friend’s dog pooped in someone’s yard; the friend had a bag in her hand, ready to clean up.

“Hey,” a man came roaring out of a house. “Your dog is shitting in my yard.”

“I’m cleaning it up now,” her best friend said, stooping to do so as she spoke.

“You won’t be doing it again.” Four shots rang out, three for her friend and one for the dog. If Athena bent to check her friend, the next shot would be for her, so Athena slinked away. She held in the tears until she was home.

Athena breathed deeply, opened her eyes, and continued her story. “People got angrier and angrier. In addition to shooting, sometimes shooting crowds of people they didn’t even know, they started burning down places where they’d had a bad experience, or churches they didn’t like.”

Women centered health clinics were the first to be torched. Synagogues and mosques went next, along with churches with predominately non-white members. In the years that followed, government buildings were burned, then businesses that appeared too successful. University campuses went up in flames.

“People were afraid to go out, especially to places that were considered dangerous, like schools and factories. No one would work in those places, so it became harder to get food, clothing, and things you needed for daily living. It spread to other parts of the world. Europe fell to religious fanatics with a well-armed militia. Asia closed its doors and we still don’t know what’s happening in that part of the world.”

“But you can’t live without guns, right Athena?”

“That’s the way we think now, but a long time ago, people thought they could. They knew they could.”

The children laughed at the absurdity.

The laughter echoed in Athena's ears, sounding, for a moment, like the retort from automatic weapons or explosions from bombs. It echoed the screams of students and teachers trapped in the burning science building where Athena's boyfriend died. Athena raced home that day, but for her, the screams continued in nightmares and flashbacks.

After the schools closed, slamming their doors shut in fear, the country came to a standstill. People hunkered down in their homes, terrified to go anywhere. Truckers, easy targets for highway pirates, refused to haul goods. For a while, the army attempted to quell the disorder, but, in the end, they became the disorder, following no one's orders, raiding what they required for their own survival.

After a decade, people re-banded into small groups, claiming territory. They posted guards, often erected some kind of barrier, and stole or grew food. At the time, Athena lived with her husband in an apartment building, a ten-story structure with attack dogs, a metal surround, and an alarm system.

The groups became villages, separated along ethnic and racial lines. Muslim and Hispanic villages suffered frequent attacks; though not necessarily outnumbered, they were outgunned by those with white skin and Christian values. People who didn't meet the white Christian qualification were cast out, shuttled off to reservations in the less inhabitable parts of the country. Anyone could be cast out, regardless of race or religion, if they went against what was considered normal.

"Athena, did you know anybody who was cast out?"

Athena stared into the child's eyes, wondering how to answer. Jaw tense, Athena squared her shoulders. For all these years, when asked, she offered a negative response to the question. Admitting friendship with anyone cast out was akin to being a victim yourself. But Athena was old now, and not afraid of what came next.

“Yes, I did. By the time we began casting people out, I'd lost touch with anyone who fit the category, and,” Athena closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, still catching a whiff of the blown-out candles, “I wish I hadn't. They suffered for no reason other than being who they were born to be.” She opened her eyes.

“Mother!” Athena's daughter shrieked. “Shut-up.”

“It was wrong.” Athena looked hard into the eyes of each of the children. “We cleansed women who loved other women, men who loved other men; we cleansed people who couldn't walk or couldn't think. There were people who were cleansed because they weighed too much or couldn't see or couldn't hear. And it was wrong, all of it.”

The room's silence seemed the loudest sound Athena had ever heard. To her, the birds had ceased singing, the wind stopped blowing. But she would speak, then she would die. Perhaps one child, just one, would take her words inside themselves and realize how different the world could be and maybe that child, or that child's son or daughter, would be the one to refashion the way the world thought.

“I knew people like all of those. I knew people who weren't Christian or white. Some were my friends; some were people I went to school with or worked with or who simply lived near me. They weren't bad or evil people, any more than you or me. All people simply wanted to live their lives in peace.”



Athena raised her gaze to the adults. “No one should be sent away or isolated. No one.”

Athena took a shuddering breath and a tear dripped hot on her face. Her daughter’s countenance displayed disgust and horror. Athena looked again at the children. “One of you has to grow up and change all this. We’re monsters, all of us, and we need to be turned back into human beings.”

She stood. “I’ll wait on the front porch.”

Someone would call the police. Within the hour, Athena would be on her way north, likely to what had been the state of Maine. There, her clothes would be taken and she’d be left by the side of the road. Perhaps others who were cast out would find her and take her in. Perhaps she would die within a day. But perhaps, just perhaps, a child would take her words to heart, would toss them back and forth until adulthood, and would act on them. And no one would need protection.

The End