

Eight and One

First came the footsteps on gravel; then like a crashing peal of thunder, a man's voice, "Alright you son of a bitch, get out here with your hands up!"

David froze. It had been a long time since he had heard a voice—the locusts left a long time ago. He held his breath waiting to hear the voice again.

"Hey asshole! Ya hear me? Come out now with your hands up!"

David eyed the yellow duffel bag that his dad had always called the "Twinkie pack." Growing up, David had always thought he called it that just because of its resemblance to a Twinkie. More recently, David found the bag was also living up to the iconic pastry's long lasting life.

It sat on the hood of his dad's dusty '66 Super Sport, open, and half full of canned food. He grabbed the Twinkie, zipped it up, and hid it down an open part of the wall where the drywall had been torn away.

David sidled past the front of the car and grasped the driver's side mirror. "A-Alright! Hold on, I'm coming." The words came from places he had forgot existed. How long had it been since he last used his voice? His voice was hoarse; as if he had choked on aluminum foil. He began to cough and as he hacked and hemmed, he pushed down on the mirror. It broke off with a crack.

"Ya better get the hell out here shit head, or we're coming in after ya!"

"I'm coming. It's not easy in here!" he shouted back. His voice was stronger but it sounded strange to him. As if he had swallowed someone else's voice and wrapped his words around it, then regurgitated them, and spit them out.

He spun on his heels and walked towards the side window of the garage. He raised the mirror up and was forced to squint as the mirror caught the evening sun. He positioned the mirror at an angle that allowed him to see the front of the garage. He could see two scrawny, malnourished men standing there. The taller one had a beat up baseball bat

resting on his shoulder, while the other had his arms crossed in front of his chest. They were ragged locusts. Their clothes were covered in the dirt of a dying world, and their shoes were worn through. Their skin was dark from either too much time in the Sun, or lack of washing—David couldn't tell.

The man with his arms crossed took a step forward, causing something furry to swing at his side—was that a Tabby or a Calico? He puffed his chest out, “Better hurry yer ass up there cowboy or I'll be forced to send my boys in there for you!”

Cowboy? David couldn't stop his brows from furrowing as he considered what the locust had called him.

David looked around the backyard. He couldn't see any other locusts and guessed that they were bluffing. No one roamed the new world in packs—it didn't work like that anymore. They only had a baseball bat, and what looked like a dead cat hanging from a grimy belt loop. David chuckled then as he remembered his dad's old adage: *Overuse that stick and the pussy will eventually kill you.*

David let out a sigh and put the mirror down on the window ledge. He'd play their game. He found himself trying to smile, but the unused muscles only managed to get a weird smirk to appear. *Alright cowboy, I'll see your bluff and raise you a full house.*

“No need for that!” he yelled back, “I'm coming out, but it's dark as Satan's shit in here.” He reached out and pushed over a box of canning jars. They exploded as they hit the floor, “Shit!”

He stepped around the broken jars and faced the old swing-out doors. He examined the door latches, ensuring that they were undone, then rested one hand against the old plank door. He mentally tracked Kitty and Stick's position based on what he had seen from the window.

He reached behind his back and grabbed his dad's service pistol from the waistband of his pants. The old Browning HP-35 was beat up, but it had saved his dad's life in Vietnam. David hadn't figured out if the gun would be his salvation yet; but he had decided that it was his friend—for now.

He closed his eyes, steadied his breathing, and calmly whispered, “Well dad, I might need to bump some uglies, so close your eyes.”

He kicked the doors outward, spraying splinters of wood everywhere. The crack sounded like a tree had been cleaved in half. Its echo was still bouncing off the nearby houses as David leveled the gun at Stick. Surprised, both men jumped back from the explosion of wood and the mad man at its center. For a split second, David thought both men were on the verge of crying once they saw the gun in his hands.

“Wa-wa-wa-whoa, hold up there cowboy,” the cat toting locust said. He waved his hands out in front of him, and gave David an ugly smile that revealed tobacco brown teeth that were long passed saving.

David glanced down at his own black Chuck Taylors and wondered where he had left his spurs—*maybe cowboys in the new world don't wear spurs.*

He snapped his fingers at Stick, “Put it down.”

Stick looked over at Kitty, who nodded. The bat dropped, smacking the gravel with a dull crunch. It rolled towards where the cat swung stiffly from its noose. Its dead mouth

hung open and David recognized it as Mrs. Bennett's grumpy faced Persian—Miss Jezebel.

"Keep your hands up and tell me what you're doing here," David said.

Kitty, gaunt as he was, managed to puff out his chest, "Man, we're just looking for food. We've been walking for days and can't find anything to eat."

David eyed Jezebel. Kitty followed his gaze and grabbed the cat—holding it up by the neck as if it were unsubstantial. Kitty gave Jezebel a couple of rough shakes. "This old thing don't have much to it," he said.

"How did you know I was in there?"

"We saw you go in when we were over at that house," Stick said as he pointed to the neighboring house. It had been Old Jessup's place before the locusts killed him. Stick's voice could have been nice to listen to before the world had ended. He had that smooth, Johnny Cash sound. David was about to ask him to sing *The Ring of Fire*; but given their current situation, he decided against it. Plus, he didn't want to see Kitty trying to play any trumpets.

"We watched you from the kitchen window, thought you might have something to eat," Kitty added.

David rolled his eyes, "No one has food anymore."

"You look like you eat," Stick said as he sized David up.

This was true. He had been able to eat consistently for over two years now, and he was in the best shape of his life.

"I do from time to time." He nodded towards Old Jessup's window, "Who do you think cleaned that kitchen out?"

Both locusts looked around at the other houses with a glint of greedy hope in their eyes.

David shook his head. *God damned locusts.*

"All the houses around here are empty now," David said. "I came through here with a large group a couple of weeks ago. They cleared 'em out. We were all heading to Boise so they took everything."

Kitty's face scrunched up like a disgusted child, "What's in Boise?"

"There's supposed to be a food train that runs to Boise once a week, or some shit like that," David said. He felt a pang of guilt for lying to them. There had been rumors about sanctuaries that had food far to the south; but that news was almost two years old by now.

"How do they run the train if there's no fuel?" Stick asked, noticeably relaxing as his hands dropped lower.

"Someone back in Missouri got an old steam engine to work again. Pulled it from some museum and filled the bitch up" David said. The sun cast long shadows on the ground, and for a second, David felt like he was shooting shit with the guys again. Talking about pointless bullshit, and using cuss words like they could tell a story just by saying them.

"Well shit," Kitty said, "ain't that somethin'?"

"Why didn't you go with em?" Stick asked with a squint of suspicion.

"I am looking for some friends that were supposed to meet me here," David said. He

masked the lie by running one of his hands through his greasy hair. It had grown out and become shaggy and unkempt.

“Pick up your bat, and head to Boise,” David said as he put the gun down at his side.

Stick bent down and grabbed his bat, sliding it into his shoestring belt.

“We don’t really know how to get to Boise,” Kitty said.

David couldn’t help but hear a bit of, *Can-we-stay-with-you-and-wait-for-your-friends?* in his voice.

David pointed east towards Old Jessup’s long dead garden. “If you go that way, you’ll run into I-84. It’ll get you there, just follow the signs.”

Both men looked in that direction, then turned back to face David.

“How far is it from here?” Stick asked.

“Shit I dunno. Probably 270 miles or so,” David said. Both men visibly slumped at the idea of walking that far.

“Hold on,” David said as he walked back to the garage.

This better get rid of them.

He edged along the side of the car, kicking broken fragments of glass under the car as he went.

Kitty stepped closer to the garage, “Yee-Haw!”

David looked back at him and finally understood that to this locust, everyone was a cowboy, spurs or not.

“Is that a ’67?” Kitty asked.

“’66,” David said. He reached through the busted out driver’s side window, and pulled the trunk lever.

“I’m a Ford man,” Stick said as he watched the trunk pop open.

“Ah hell,” Kitty said, “Ford or Chevy, who gives a shit. Give me a Pinto and I’ll drive it like hell. I’d stick my head out the window like a dog just ta feel the wind on my face again.” He leaned back and pantomimed stomping the pedal down while hanging his head out the window of his imaginary Pinto—David couldn’t help but imagine the Pinto exploding in their typical coup de grâce.

David walked toward the open trunk and pulled out his dad’s folded up wheel chair.

“It isn’t the easiest way to travel, but I figure if you both take turns pushing each other...well, maybe it won’t be so bad,” he said. He unfolded the chair, showing them that it worked like new. The locusts looked at him like he had just explained quantum field theory to them. David rolled the chair toward them, “Share it and you’ll only have to walk half the distance.”

Kitty ran around to the front and sat down, smashing Miss Jezebel between his thigh and the seat. David couldn’t help but think that all Kitty needed to do now was to begin purring, and all would be right in the new world.

Stick assumed his assigned duty and grabbed the handles of the wheelchair. David held his breath, struggling not to show his apprehension. His fears of them wanting to stick around had him sweating, and the tension in his neck was starting to give him a headache.

With a grunt, Stick turned and wheeled Kitty toward the alleyway. David stood at the

corner of the garage, watching them leave. His stomach lurched as Stick stopped and twisted around, leaving one hand on the wheelchair to make sure Kitty didn't get away from him. "What are you going to do?"

"Head northwest, to Pendleton," David said, "Try to find my friends."

Stick stared at him for a second, then nodded.

"What's your name?" Kitty asked as Stick began to push him down the alleyway. "In case we run into your friends," he added as he looked back over his shoulder and saw David frowning at him—having names in a world like this was as pointless as a drivers license.

"David."

Kitty nodded, and they were gone.

David stood there for a few minutes listening for the locusts. He wasn't a murderer; but if they would have stayed, he might have had to do something drastic. He glanced over at the mound of dirt in the back corner of the yard where his dad was buried, and reiterated his dad's wisdom. "Once you give a locust a single grain from your crop, they'll want the whole damn lot. So don't be givin' out charity."

It had been over two years now. The human race had exhausted its resources, and could no longer support its perpetual need for growth. It plunged the world into a complete standstill. Oil ran dry and set off a chain reaction as supply trucks ran out of fuel, and people began to go hungry.

Soon after that, people became locusts. Pillaging and taking anything they could find. There were no more laws, and morality was dead. The locusts began to migrate to nearby towns, searching in vain for food. Death and murder was everywhere as people fought to defend what they had. Riots in major cities devastated everything. The world had become savage—inhabitable.

David stuffed the gun back into the waist band of his pants and walked backed to the car. He closed the trunk softly with a click, then walked to the back of the garage to retrieve the Twinkie pack from the wall. He finished loading the final two cans of food his dad had hid behind the drywall, and slung the pack onto his shoulder. He looked around the garage, and sighed; that was the last section of wall—he would need to start foraging after this.

He put his hands on the hood of his dad's burgundy baby, and for the first time, in a long time, thought about the day he lost everything.

His dad had called him early that morning.

"David?"

"Yeah dad?" David said, half awake.

"You need to get up and get over to the house," his dad said. His voice had that frantic "the-aliens-are-over-the-White-House" tone. This had been his tone for everything—spilt milk, mismatched socks, even a fuzzy channel on the TV. It had all started when he lost his job with the government. Everyone dismissed his frenzied episodes, but David always worried that his dad really did know something. Something so bad that it scared the shit out of his dad.

"What's going on Dad?" he asked.

“It’s started,” he whispered.

David sat up then, “What are you talking about?”

“I can’t get into that on the phone, you need to get over here! It might already be too late!” he said as his whisper faltered and became a frantic plea.

“Dad, come on. You need to start making some goddamn sense,” David said. He slid out of bed and started pacing the room.

Lisa sat up, a mess of blond hair and bare shoulders. She gave him a confused look as she brushed her hair from her face with her fingers. He waved his hand at her, signaling that all was well. She yawned and fell back into the bed.

“Damn it David! What have I been telling you about locusts?”

“That they are eating machines and sex fiends that multiply really fast,” David said, “and if left unchecked, they will ruin the world.” He sat down at the end of the bed and tickled Lisa’s foot through the comforter. She jerked away and grumbled from underneath a pillow.

“Exactly, now that we have exhausted the oil reserves, we are getting thrown back to the 1800’s David,” his dad explained in a harsh whisper. “These people don’t know how to live like that. We built this nation on oil. We need oil to transport the food to people. Laboratory studies have shown us what people do when they are desperate to survive. They turn into savages. They turn into freaking locusts!”

“Dad, stop. Just hold on,” David said.

“Don’t tell me to stop David!” his dad said angrily. “You know where I worked! I know things David! When they begin to run out of food, the expansive population won’t be able to support itself. They will turn into locusts. They will kill each other for food!” David heard something crash to the floor in the background, and David knew his dad had thrown whatever he had been holding.

“Dad, calm down—”

“Don’t tell me to calm down! It’s time I tell you everything, but I can’t talk about it over the damn phone! Get the hell over here!”

“Alright! Alright! I’ll come over when I can.”

“Now David! You need to get over here now! Avoid the major roads, and pack anything you can carry!”

There was no way to calm him down. His dad had seen the aliens blow up the White House, and there was no way to fix it over the phone. He looked over at the alarm clock on the side table—7:24 am. He put his hand over his eyes, “Alright, I’ll be over soon.”

He hung up the phone and returned to Lisa.

“What was that about? Lisa asked as she nuzzled closer to him.

He brushed his hands through her hair and let out a long sigh, “My dad. He thinks the world is ending today.” He rolled her onto her back and held himself above her with one arm.

She smirked and kissed him. “Are you going to go over there?” She kissed his cheek, letting her lips amble over to his ear, making their way to his neck.

“I should. I mean, this was different than his usual freak outs. Don’t you work today?” he asked.

“Yeah, at nine,” she said as she nestled further under him.

“Well then, we still have some time.”

He kissed her, and began to caress her body. She giggled and pulled the blankets over them.

She died that day.

A riot had started in the city center when the banks closed their doors. If he had only turned the TV on that morning he would have known about the stock market folding over on itself. The oil reserves were gone, and businesses had finally collapsed from the failure to run without it. Global distribution was dead, and so was America. All he had to do was turn the TV on and he could have saved her. If he had taken his dad’s warnings more seriously, he could have saved him as well.

Gun shots and small explosions were everywhere. The city center had become a war zone. By the time he made it to Lisa’s work, the store was already ransacked, and he found her body smashed under a large shelving unit. He tried to lift the shelving unit; but in the end, he couldn’t get it to lift more than an inch. He slid under it just far enough to reach her hand—it was cold. He lay there crying as gun fire went off right outside the store front. Understanding that he was completely useless buried itself deep inside his chest.

A nearby explosion jolted the building, cracking the ceiling and walls. He looked at Lisa one last time, willing himself to forget her mangled body, and envisioned her smiling at him as she had done when she had left that morning. He gave her hand a final squeeze, “I love you.”

He ran. Passing dead bodies, burning buildings, and rioters as if they were all figments of his imagination. He had switched to auto-pilot and was running for his life—or running away from death.

By the time he got to his dad’s neighborhood, the house on the corner was in flames, and the nearby houses were being looted. He ran back to the alley-way in hopes of getting to his dad’s house unseen.

Gunshots rang out by Old Jessup’s garage, and David ducked behind a garbage can. He inched forward until he got to the corner of his dad’s garage, then looked around. He saw his dad, and his heart fell from his chest. His dad was dressed in his typical grey slacks and sweater vest—but something was wrong. He was lying in a puddle of blood near the back porch.

“Dad!” he howled as he ran to him.

He fell to his knees, and took him into his arms—cradling him and rocking him gently. His tongue bobbed around, trying to find words as his mouth filled with blood.

“Da-David?”

“I’m here Dad,” David whimpered. He was disoriented and lost as he watched himself, 35 years older, die in front of him. His face was his dad’s face. His crisp blue eyes were his dad’s eyes. Unlike his own, his dad’s eyes were tearless and unfocused. They were searching for something—anything that looked familiar. David shifted his dad’s head in his hands so he could look right at him. His dad’s eyes searched his face. Their eyes met and locked on to each other. His dad’s pupils constricted to sharp pin

points, as if they could drill their way into David's soul and hide from death.

His dad's breathing was shallow, "Go..."

David struggled and fought against his delusion, "Go where Dad?"

"At...ic," his dad whispered.

His dad's eyes closed, and his body began to convulse. David clung to him, forgetting to breathe as he willed his dad's body to stop. The convulsions eased as his dad's life left his body, and David broke down; crying as he held his dad's lifeless body.

He didn't remember digging the grave. He had turned himself off. He tuned out the gun fire and screams as he dug. By the time he had finished, the sun was a sliver on the horizon and bathed everything in an fiery red and orange glow—the world was on fire.

He managed to walk through the busted house. Passing the things the looters found useless. He stepped around his mother's broken tchotchkes—little figurines of gnomes, angels, and barnyard animals. They had shattered on the floor, and frantic foot steps had ground the Plaster of Paris fragments to a powdery dust where it collected in the grain of the hardwood floors. He stepped over his dad's old Elton radio that had been knocked to the floor. He past the old family pictures that had fallen from their place on the walls, and made his way to attic hatch.

On tippy-toes, he managed to pull the latch and flip the ladder down. He crawled up the ladder, feeling as though he were pulling himself from Hell. When he finally reached the top, he used up the last of his strength and will power to pull the ladder up after him.

He was on his hands and knees, gasping for air, and staring at the closed hatch. It was then that he noticed the hatch had been modified. It had been drilled to allow large doweling rods to be fitted into the floor joist—effectively barring the hatch from being opened. He looked towards the back side of the hatch and saw two long doweling rods waiting for him on the floor. He grabbed them and slid them into place, and then rolled over onto his back, completely exhausted.

He stared into the darkness as visions of Lisa's lifeless hand, outstretched for help, swam in front of him. He could smell his dad's blood on his hands, shirt, and face. He could see Lisa smiling at him as she laid next to him in bed. He watched his dad die in his arms, over and over again, in an endless loop. The reality of it all hit him like a seizure. He writhed in unbearable pain as he sobbed for all he had lost.

Time moved slow as he struggled on the floor. Eventually, the visions subsided and his eyes began to adjust to the dim attic. The final shards of sunlight spilt through the attic vents, casting an eerie glow through out the space. He looked over at the other end of the attic and noticed a small bed that sat next to a wooden desk in the corner. He clambered up to his feet as his body protested.

The desk was small and cluttered. His mother's picture was leaning up against his dad's favorite books that were piled at the edges of the desk. A large notebook was in the middle of the desk. It was cracked open with a pen resting on the open page. Bending down to look closer, he could see his dad's hand writing.

David,

I don't know if you will make it here to have me tell you this in person, but this letter

is a backup for if I am not. I have been planning for this ever since I lost my job. They swore me to secrecy, and watched me like a common criminal. But I need to tell you now or you might never find out.

The Government has been unable to solve the oil crisis for years now. There is too much greed and corruption out there to allow us to succeed. As a last ditch effort, they have been planning what has been named The E.N.D. Project (The Entirely New Democracy Project). The idea is to gather the most intelligent and capable people in the world together, then cryogenically freeze them so that they will wake up after the collapse. They are supposed to help rebuild the country and give mankind a restart. I was part of the team that went out and selected the candidates for it. Originally, I had you down as one of them, just as all the other member's children were.

But as things progressed, I lost faith in the success of the program. I realized that the person that will lead this country after it has fallen apart needs to have someone that has been a part of it. Someone that has survived in it. This person will have seen the horrors of the new world. They will be able to help the leaders lead. Help them bring order to the chaos. This person will know what the E.N.D Project doesn't. I have positioned you to be able to survive. You don't have to be the leader, but you need to survive...and help the E.N.D. Project succeed. Utilize the E.N.D. Project to help you rebuild a better world. I have left you all I know about the project here. Hopefully it will help.

In the drawer of this desk, there is a crowbar. Use it to pry up the floor boards of the attic. You will find canned food hidden there. There should be enough to last you a year if you eat it wisely—don't be a fat ass. There are more cans hidden in the walls of the basement and the garage. Those should last you another year. Stay hidden, and never leave the attic door open. Don't use any lights at night, or the locusts will know you're here. Essentially, don't be a dumb ass.

You are my hope for the future, and I am sorry I didn't tell you any of this sooner.

Love,

Dad

The sun shifted in the window, casting a golden-amber glare on the hood of the car, jolting David from his memories. He looked at the horizon and guessed that he had an hour of sunlight left. He brushed away the tears that had formed in the corners of his eyes as he walked back to the house. He scanned the back yard and the neighboring houses. There was always the chance the two locusts had hung around to see what he would do.

His dad's house was much the same as the day he had went to the attic for the first time; but now, a thick layer of dust coated the rumble of his dad's old life. He walked slowly through the living room and looked through the front window. Satisfied that no locusts were hanging around, he made his way to the attic hatch.

He lit the candle at the top of the ladder and gave one last backwards glance at the golden, sun-drenched wall below, then pulled the ladder up, and closed the hatch.

He walked to the desk and put the "Twinkie" pack down on his bed. He grabbed the gun from his waistband, undid the clip, and pushed the last bullet out. He looked at the

bullet as the candlelight danced on the little 9mm shell, “Almost lost you today.”

He kissed the bullet, then placed both the gun, and the bullet next to the notebook. Pulling the chair out, he sat and began to write his daily journal. He had eight cans of food left, and one bullet in his gun. It had been over two years now, and the E.N.D hadn't come.