

## Fragile State

The news anchor ended the broadcast with a very somber “Stay safe, and may God have mercy on us all.” I snorted at this a little bit. Steven Jones of the Channel 12 Local Action News Team was no Walter Cronkite, no matter how dire the news. I looked over to Tommy to see how he was taking it but he had gotten up unnoticed at some point. I found him in the downstairs bath filling the tub.

“Are you alright son?” I asked.

“Sure Dad, just making sure we have water.”

In the last couple weeks my wife and I had read some articles on handling children in natural disasters and other emergencies. One of the consistent tips was to give kids something to do, both because it kept them busy but also so they felt like they were helping. I’d completely forgotten one of Tom’s assignments, as we called them, was to fill all the tubs with fresh water so we’d have some in case the water became unsafe or unavailable.

“You’re a good boy,” I said as I left him to it and went to find my wife.

Sarah was busying herself in the guest room.

“How is Tom?” Sarah asked as I came in.

“Alright, I guess,” I replied, sitting on the bed. “Better than I would have thought. He’s filling the baths.”

“Good,” she replied, “we need to keep him busy.”

We’d been getting warnings for the last month about the strong likelihood of a massive solar event and what the damage would be like in the aftermath. Sarah and I took it about as seriously as everyone else, which is to say we did some better safe than sorry preparations. Three days ago though, when we heard about the massive coronal mass ejection, we wished we had done more. Some reports were saying that most of the national power grid would be down for months but we’d also heard it could be years before things got back to how they were. Neither one of us could really get our minds around what years without power would mean.

“Do you still think we made the right choice, to stay?”

“I hope so,” she replied.

I watched her for a moment digging through the clothes in the dresser.

“What are you looking for?”

“My grandmother’s pearls. I could have sworn I hid them in here before we went out of town last month and now I can’t find them.”

Last month seemed like a lifetime ago. We’d gone down to the beach for a few days and things had been so normal. It was right after we’d gotten back that everything seemed to have changed.

I thought about questioning why the pearls were so important all the sudden but thought better of it. Best to let her deal with the stress in her own way. Coping with my own anxiety I headed down to the basement to check on their stockpile for the fourth time that day.

Two weeks ago we'd practically emptied the checking and savings accounts against canned beans, lentils, and ramen packets. Those three had turned out to be the best calorie per dollar we could find and we'd bought enough food to last the three of us for a couple months. I'd splurged on some other things like various flavors of soup and some canned meats but the bulk of what we'd be eating, if things got really bad, would be the legumes.

As I was rearrange some of the bulk stack I noticed the basement lights had begun to buzz. In unison the five or six bulbs that lit the basement got brighter and the buzzing intensified and then everything was plunged into blackness. There was a loud deep thunk noise, probably from the transformer near the house, and then complete silence.

I called up to Tom and Sarah, who were both fine, but surprised as I was. I heard some car alarms, but for the most part everything seemed quiet. It was already getting late before the power went out and we didn't really have much else to do so we all went to bed. That evening I caught myself checking my phone a couple times out of habit. It appeared to be working fine but there was no service.

The morning after the power went off we got out some of the frozen meat from the deep freeze and grilled it. I figured if we were careful the freezer would probably keep things at least cold for a couple more days. It hadn't been defrosted in ages and thick bands of ice had built up on the coils. This turned out to be a good thing, the meat kept cold longer than I thought it would. The extra tank of propane I'd picked up a couple weeks ago also came in handy.

The next couple days passed almost in a routine. We worked through all the left overs and things that weren't going to keep and Tom and I spent some time bottling up fresh water in empty mason jars and other containers we could find.

Outside of that, it was too stuffy to be inside the house all day. Obviously no one was able to go to work because of the power, and we finally met some of our neighbors. It was a little like being at a summer camp, or on vacation. We lived in a fairly nice neighborhood and we'd regularly see police patrolling up and down the streets. The prevailing vibe was that this would be over soon and we'd look back and laugh about it. Sarah and I were even invited to a barbeque but we declined to go.

After the first couple weeks though things began to change. At first I noticed I hadn't seen a patrol car for a while, and I knew there was no gas available. We still saw our neighbors outside but the atmosphere was much less congenial. It was around that time that for me, and for everyone else, the reality of the situation began to sink in a little bit. This wasn't going to blow over in a couple weeks or so like we'd all thought. The last report that we'd even heard had been from a friend of a friend who worked at the power company and the gist was things were way worse than we'd been told. It may be years till things could get under control was the warning but Sarah and I hadn't taken it too seriously then.

If it was really going to be years though, I thought to myself, there was no way we could survive for years on the lentils and ramen I'd bought. Months for sure, that was the point, but years. No way. Already we were doing the iodine tablets on the city water which had definitely become unsafe.

A month to the day that the power went off I decided I would walk over to the nearest grocery store and see if there was anything left over we could take. Sarah and I argued about me leaving until it got too late in the day but after numerous promises that I would be safe I set out first thing the next morning. The grocery store was only three miles away; I'd never walked it before but it only took an hour or so to get there.

From the outside the grocery didn't look that bad. There were some broken windows and I knew it would be pretty dark inside but I was still hopeful. Once I walked inside though, I began to get anxious. The outside sunlight only penetrated so far in to the building, and after that it became very dark. What was much worse though was the smell. Once inside I was assaulted with the putrid smell of what would turn out to be the rotten produce section. Most of the produce had been cleaned out but what was left had rotted pretty badly. I went up and down the aisles but it was just empty shelf after empty shelf. Clearly smarter people than me had cleaned this place out long ago, even down to the chewing gum at the cash register.

The evening of the day I got back from the grocery store was when we noticed the first fire. It was far in the distance but the soft orange glow was unmistakable.

"Maybe we need to rethink staying." I'd been mulling the idea of how to broach this with Sarah for the last couple days or so, mostly making my own mind up.

"What are you talking about?" My comment seemed to have broken her out of an internal dialogue she'd been having while looking out at the back yard. She'd been doing that a lot lately, just seemed really lost in thought. Tom was down the street playing with some of his friends he'd met. Kids he probably wouldn't have ever met if it hadn't been for the power outage.

"I don't think things are going to get better any time soon and we're running out of food. I think we have maybe, and I do mean maybe, two weeks worth of food and then after that I don't know what we're going to do."

It was actually a relief for me to say those words out loud. They'd been gnawing on me for a while and I didn't think Sara really knew how bad things were getting.

"But where would we go?"

"I don't know. Out of town though. Maybe up in to the mountains a little bit. My grandparents cabin maybe if no one is already there."

"Your grandparent's cabin?" Her tone was half amusement and half incredulity. "Your grandparent's cabin is a two room shack in the middle of the woods two hours out of town."

"I know but there's some water nearby, maybe food. We used to fish in that stream when we were kids."

"And you want to leave this and go play mountain man?"

"I don't think there's anything left here. When was the last time you saw any police? The Kinley's left two nights ago, saw them packing up their car in the middle of the night."

"Bob and Kim are gone? Why didn't you tell me?"

“Didn’t want to upset you but the more I think about it the more I think this was a mistake not getting out when we could. If we run out of food what’s next? We could start breaking in to other people’s homes I guess. Some people might already be doing that.”

“Could we leave, just like that? What about our home, what about everything?”

“You mean our stuff? I don’t know, I really don’t.”

We left it like that but the next morning Sarah came to me and we talked about it some more. There was quite a bit more back and forth after that but eventually she acquiesced and we started packing. Tom was a lot more excited than I thought he’d be and I envied him. This was still an adventure for him. We agreed it would be best if we packed up in the middle of the night. Less risky that way. We’d be vulnerable, loading everything of value we had in a car that was sitting outside in the drive way. We’d have to be quiet.

“Is that everything?” I asked. I’d made four trips out to the car so far and things were really tight.

“Not really, should we bring more water?” Sarah asked.

“We have ten gallons. That should be enough for us for a few days. What do you think?”

Without a word Sarah went back inside to get a couple more gallons, even though I had no idea where we’d cram them. The car was already completely jammed.

It was several hours later and getting very late when we were finally able to pull out from the house. Even I had a couple things in my lap as we eased out of the driveway.

Our house was towards the back of a fairly large neighborhood and as we got closer to the main road that connected to the highway things got worse and worse.

Less than a mile from the house we turned a corner and found the remains of a community center completely burned out. It looked pretty recent too. Further we saw houses that had obviously been ransacked. Broken doors with contents spilled out on the lawn were common as were more burned out houses. I was filled with anxiety realizing how close this was going on to our own home.

In addition to the burned out houses the streets became hard to navigate. Debris was all over the road at that point as well as burned out cars.

It took a while, and some backtracking through the neighborhood, but eventually the three of us made it to the interstate that would get us out of town.

On both sides of the freeway, all six lanes were packed with cars. It was like a five o’clock rush hour traffic jam except it was six in the morning and all of the cars were abandoned. Sarah and I just stared in disbelief while Tom slept blissfully unaware in the back.

“What are we going to do,” Sarah asked, breaking the silence.

I thought about this for a bit. The easy answer would be to go back home, and if things hadn't been such a disaster through the neighborhood it would have been the obvious choice, but we probably only had a matter of days till things got rough near the house.

"I think we should keep going. We'll have to walk but I don't know what else to do."

I looked over to Sarah and there was an almost imperceptible shift in her demeanor. It was if this inner resolve and strength finally manifested itself and she simply replied "Alright, let's do it."

Dividing up what we could reasonable carry from what wasn't worth the weight went quickly, and rousing Tom we started on our journey.

We'd been smart to start as early as we had. We'd undoubtedly avoided trouble getting out of the neighborhood but I knew as we made our way out into the country there'd be trouble. Between Sarah and I though, I thought our chances were good.

The snow was falling gently all around, big thick snowflakes that stuck to everything. It was the first snow of winter and soon this whole area would be under a couple feet. I'd been out an hour before sunrise patiently waiting and I'd found a good spot where I could nestle down to keep warm while I waited.

It was two hours before the buck ambled through the clearing. I slowly readied my bow as I waited for the deer to turn broadside. I squeezed the pull while exhaling and the arrow flew true, impacting just behind the shoulder.

It didn't take long to dress the deer and I headed back to the cabin with a pack full of fresh meat. Even though it was getting cooler we'd need to smoke it soon.

As I made my way up the trail I heard something I hadn't heard in years. I squinted against the bright morning sun and there, way off in the distance was a jet. It was flying low and very fast, and I could just make out the roar as it passed to the south. I was filled with hope again, so much hope for the future. I followed the jet as long as I could make it out, trying to discern where it had come from and where it was going. I probably stood there over an hour just watching, willing it to come make another pass.