

AFTER THE BEFORE

I finally extracted from the newly rain-sodden earth the last remaining scarlet nantes carrots. The seeds we collected before the pitiless drought ended the last batch of flowers are so very priceless now. The poor radishes and beets, though usually hardy, also had no easy task battling the harsh conditions this year. Everything from Before, which is no more, can leave you feeling mournful and glum if you dare to remember too long. I do not. We do not. It is a paralyzing luxury few can afford, No, I'm focusing on the need to replant the tops of the carrots, celery, potatoes, and leeks tomorrow and probably set aside a few more slow-growing garlic heads to break up and recultivate as well. We've lost so many cherished things, faltering under the weight of so many hopeless battles. I'll be damned, however, if something I dearly love like garlic, as well as my favorite onions, shall be another cherished gastronomic staple I'll accept as lost to all but a few. I can let go of that which I must, but the lovely alliums and many other spices that give life to flavor, I'll fight hardily to preserve these tiny treasures. Perhaps that sounds trivial to some in the face of these dire times, but to me, it's the small, fortifying day to day pleasures that make life sustainable. The highly lauded grand pursuits may steal all the praise but in the end, much like the fairweather friend, they often let you down.

Since I am one of the primaries tasked with essential gardening and food production, I must think of the many large and little things once taken for granted when trucks teeming with seemingly endless goods swarmed our highways and filled our many supermarkets. A lone truck convoy with accompanying security came through a month ago which was cause for celebration.

Before that, two months had passed with only blowing dust, the occasional motorcycle, or calloused feet of weary travelers bravely banding together to tackle the unsparing asphalt road off in the distance. We'll be on that road soon, if only for a short while since we really need to find more seeds, staples, and other supplies we can attain through barter with some of the forward-thinking townsfolk below. If only I could find some nice sweet plump berries, to remember again their plush juicy taste bursting inside my mouth, oh, it's been so long. Nothing is wasted here in our small sanctuary from the Worries. All we have is recycled, handmade, shared, found, bartered or reappropriated. That's the way it is now, or you go without, your choice if that is one.

The former tourist-attraction oddity, which is the motel where we've made our home, is concealed high within a cliff having been built by an eccentric engineer with great effort and cost decades before. He'd hoped but eventually failed to make a tidy living seizing upon the unique experiencer's dollar. It had cost more to build than he could ever recover, leaving him in ruin and the cliff motel abandoned in default until it was picked up for a song by a new owner. Still, though resurrected and refurbished, it had again fallen upon lonely times when the end of abundant fuel ceased cross-country pleasure travel. One of the members of our group, a silver-tongued old school romantic named Sal, had befriended (most say seduced) the widowed owner Madeline years ago. He managed to strike up a deal with her to share and maintain the unique motel with the help of us all. This was how Skyborn Rock became our ideally situated new home, concealed within the rocks, yet with full visibility of the whole valley below.

Fifteen small motel room efficiencies, including the proprietor's suite and all the enclosed and fortified perimeters, now house 25 people, 8 cats (3 of which are mine), 4 dogs, 16 chickens with a coop, 6 goats, a pot-bellied pig, and a small fish aquaculture farm thankfully maintained by our resident knower-of-all-things, Professor Marvin. He's not a real professor I might add, but is as superbly close to the actual thing as one could hope for in the 50-mile radius surrounding Skyborn Rock. Now of course, practically speaking, that limited range might as well be our whole world. Without him and the help of a few others, we would also not be successfully off what was previously referred to as the grid. Not that there is reliably such a thing anymore, or anywhere, in times as toilsome as these.

The battered tour bus that brought our ragtag group into the safer confines of this rocky settlement has long been stripped of most of its innards, now reused for other essential purposes. It's been rendered an emergency use only transport, a last resort bug-out vehicle for the possibilities we prefer left unspoken though always near in the cold recesses of our thoughts. We'd all saved our individual fuel rations for eight months just to make the multiple trips back and forth to complete our relocation from the unraveling metropolis from which we'd fled. The strain of prolonged deprivation driven by the perpetual shortages--food, electricity, medicine, water, housing, fuel--you name it--drove us to our new home base where things are somewhat easier to bear. The larger cities now packed with those teetering on the wild-eyed edge of utter calamity have become even more hardened, brutal and ruthless over time. This reality offered no safe quarter for the vulnerable and alone, which comprised a sizeable number of our tattered collection of caring weary souls.

The fragile nature of quietude and safety in this hard-scrabble world that has enveloped us all forced us to save just enough gas for a one-way trip out of Skyborn Rock if it too should become overrun by those intent on conquest or destruction. Also, we've got an electric-powered truck, but it's broken down more than it's operable and parts are nearly impossible to find. We have a moped too for occasional use of high importance since fuel is so precious. For the fit and agile, we have several old bicycles, but you'd have to squeeze out some keen determination to make it back up the mountain. Needless to say, my old bones would prefer the path of least resistance. Assuming that the old truck isn't working, and since it seldom is that's a prudent bet, the last acceptable option is the slow human pack mule method on foot where groaning and plodding eventually will get you there.

One of the truly special features of our area is the lovely waterfall that is not easily found unless you know the secret path to its hidden location in the diminishing patch of forest nearby. Partly because it was the result of a not long ago forked deviation in erosion patterns of the mountain stream's natural path, few know of its existence since leisure hiking in remote areas is rare these days. Eventually, it will be gone along with this special forest oasis, as the changing climate continues its tireless indiscriminate decimation of all we've known and taken for granted. But not today. Today this wellspring of beauty will be ours to appreciate.

My older friend Virginia and I plan to make our way over to take a swim and collect a small amount of the thinning numbers of wild chanterelle and morel mushrooms we've found in a nearby patch. It always takes us a long time to make our way there since Virginia uses a cane. However, it doesn't take as long as you'd maybe expect given that she, using her own words,

sees herself as a “stubbornly decrepit, handsome-pretty tub of cheezy crackers”, whatever in the hell that means. To be sure, that oddball word salad way of speaking is what makes Virginia, Virginia and everybody’s favorite storyteller. Two of her most devoted listeners, the only two youngsters that we count among our numbers, 13-year-old Leah, and her friend Spencer, age 12, will want to come along as well.

As the morning breeze disappeared from our backs, the early afternoon sun found us welcoming the sight of the waterfall. It’s cool mist gently covered our parched faces, bringing a pleasant tingling sensation. Soon, we quickly settled in for a small lunch of pine nuts, boiled eggs, herb encrusted crackers, and apricots collected from the prized community trees in our settlement. A shivery swim below the waterfall awaited the bravest souls among us. I opted for a short dip in the water once I offered my foot to test the temperature and found it shriek-worthy. Virginia, impervious to the water’s chill, floated around like a clapping sea otter without a care. Spencer chased after her, egging her on by making odd sounds purported to mimic a seal, but only if you’d never heard the true likes of one. Leah avoided the water altogether, preferring instead the potentially rewarding pay-off of foraging for fresh resources that hid in plain sight. It was only the knowledgeable eye that could suss out the unfound and overlooked valuable mushrooms, berries, nuts, wild greens, and other often missed blessings of nature. Like the rest of us, she’d learned to identify all that was safely edible through the shared wisdom we’d acquired and passed along, and through an extensive foray into botanical guides we’d found at the library. Watching everyone, I found it exhilarating for us to savor a brief moment away from

the exacting toll of day to day survival, and to relish in a touch of the carefree in this little oasis away. As is often the case, these moments, well, they just never seem to last.

Leah had just edged her way around a large tree after having found a nice batch of chickweed she had just finished harvesting. I suddenly saw her back up slowly, and head in our direction. The panicked look she brought with her raised the tiny hairs on the back of my neck.

Immediately, I signaled to the others to be silent. I also reached inside my backpack and found my gun and its bullets nearby. In times such as these, in a world often stripped of its reason, occasionally the hard cold unforgiving gun presented the singular advantage. “Olivia, there are three scary-looking men just down below on the other side. They had some dead animals they were skinning and a bunch of knives and guns. They look like they could bring some trouble”.

As Leah finished whispering her account of what she’d seen to me, the others still wet from swimming gathered even closer. Virginia having heard all she needed to decide the steadiest course, spoke next, “Let’s get then. Quietly cover up as much of our tracks as we’re able, kick some leaves over the remaining mooshies we can’t grubble up, and then us natchy hen and rooster folk best tipple on out of here” Everyone nodded in agreement as we quickly set into action our exit plan. Previous experience told us to be wary of strangers, especially those with weapons, ever since Old Joe, the tough former truck driver that lives with us barely survived being on the receiving end of a hatchet in his back after coming upon a lone canyon bound transient.

Determined not to fall prey to such a low handed maneuver, Virginia went everywhere outside our walls with her old rifle in a sling strapped across her back. She moved the rifle closer and

kept her eyes squinted on the hunt for anything suspicious. It irked us that our little foray was being cut short and that we'd lost sufficient time to peruse the area for even more foraged materials, but safety was our first concern and had to take precedence. Fortunately, Leah had made a good haul anyway, having found the chickweed, and the morel mushrooms, but only a few chanterelles since that was her next task. That would have to do but leaving those treasures behind was hard, especially with interlopers nearby unlikely to care if their selfish rapacious plundering destroyed future harvests for us all.

Leah and Virginia prepared to start heading back home, while young Spencer and I suddenly decided to remain behind a knotty bramble a safe distance away, but still close enough to observe and speculate on the intruder's next move. Spencer, a golden-maned boy-lion with considerable nerve, insisted on knowing where the hunters were headed so as to avoid an ugly surprise. He also quickly availed himself of the rifle when Virginia and I exchanged guns since we wanted the longer-range weapon and the sight. I couldn't argue with his foresight, and since he was better with the rifle than I was after much practice, I figured he'd earned the right to carry it. The days of coddling kids had left us long ago. It happened about the time they had no choice but to abandon their avatar's fervent quest to reach new levels in imaginary computer game role-play and instead were plunged headlong into the spine stiffening real-time battle for their actual survival.

We watched as Virginia slowly tackled the path back to Skyborn Rock, with Leah quietly on her heels carrying the backpacks to lighten Virginia's load and aid in quickening their pace. I saw them both impart one final survey of our surroundings, inspecting every rock, crevice, and

cranny for movement. Soon after, they continued on with worried looks that carried their concern like a burdensome weight dogging each and every step. Once they'd vanished from sight, I returned my attention to the three below who had never once escaped the committed focus of Spencer. For a good long while, we observed them prepping, then cooking their prey over a campfire while drinking what looked like some sort of foul home-brewed rock gut liquor if their grimaces and guttural grunts of displeasure were indicators. Spencer, though tired and restless from crouching unnaturally behind the scratchy bushes, maintained his station like the young budding vanquisher of peril he sought to become.

I'd begun to consider our option to slip away and head for home, sure that Spencer would not go quietly. Suddenly, however, the men started to pack up their greasy remnants for later use while discarding their trash into the woods, unfazed by their desecration of the pristine. They also abandoned the fire fully blazing, recklessly unconcerned. One of the grime coated drunkards stumbled into the woods ready to take a leak as his hands fumbled inartfully with his zipper before he stopped out of sight. I felt a sudden stir when I saw him look our way as he blundered from his spot, and headed toward the others. He then pointed in our general direction, or more likely from his spot, toward the inviting sound of moving water. They seemed to be discussing their next move with sloppily waving arms and loud slurred words indicative of dissent or more likely their abject, full-throttled surrender into the sorry state of booze-stupid. Spencer and I remained motionless and slumped low to the ground, hoping to avoid their detection. We waited and watched, trying hard not to move, hoping their dulled senses would keep us safe from discovery.

A small indistinguishable creature that picked that particular inopportune moment to run across the path not far from them, was soon met with an explosion of imprecise drunken scattershot.

Several small trees struggling for light under the forest canopy, one with the remnants of a recently used bird's nest, bore the brunt of their handiwork. This action did offer the distraction needed to turn their attention away and better yet, to matters on down the path in the opposite direction. We saw them shamble away falling over each other, kicking over seedlings, crushing everything in their path, while taking the threat they carried with them. At least for now.

In their wake, we found the creature that had jumped across their path, a young rabbit they'd wounded and left to die, forgotten. I cupped it gently in my hands, smoothed its fur and offered some words as it took its last painful breath. I couldn't help but think of the destruction humans seem so often to mete out without a thought and it saddened me deeply. Perhaps, just maybe, it was our greatest human failing to often act without care or reverence for the living world that enables our very perpetuation. Given our ways, I guess it really shouldn't be a surprise we've pummeled and thrashed our way to where we are--watching the world burn and slowly turn to dust.

As dusk grew near, we rushed to put out the growing fire, imagining the devastation an unchecked blazing forest would bring with no fire trucks to come and tackle the flaming incursion. We also quickly picked the chanterelle mushrooms we thought we'd have to forfeit, and to our pleasant surprise, we made an excellent find of wild spinach. We never took too much, not wanting to leave it unsustainable in its chosen habitat. We'd replant the gingerly

extracted plants, harvest only the tops, then with the kiss of luck, maybe we'd have our own delicious lamb's quarter at home as a plentiful resource later.

After finishing, we started to make the return trip to Starborn Rock. We'd just made it around the first bend past the waterfall when we came across Old Joe and his brother Finn. Concerned that we'd not returned yet, they'd come to check on our status and to see if their help was needed.

Spencer made it known that he felt a bit insulted, feeling he had things clearly under control and most certainly didn't need rescuing from a guy who managed to get a hatchet in his back. Old Joe, a man of few but potent words, held a decidedly different point of view about this, "Overconfidence and a smart mouth will get you dead sooner rather than later, kid". He had a good point. Hopefully, Spencer would listen and sometimes he actually did. A young person's leeway for avoiding fatal errors was minuscule in a dangerous world, a fact hopefully he'd come to realize.

After we got back to Skyborn Rock, we held a group meeting to discuss taking extra precautions. The three well-armed men wandering the area, plus some other sketchy free-roamers Madeline had sighted nosing around in the valley nearby while on watch earlier had fostered concern. It felt like it was always there hounding us, the overshadowing menace, waiting in the recesses for the chance to pounce.

It was also decided that there would be an expedition to the village in the morning. There could be no further delay in our trip after a full inventory of our stock brought only somber news. We gathered some items with which to barter--several chicks, highly prized packages we'd prepared of fresh tilapia coated with herb crackers made from our own homemade nut and barnyard grass

flour, carrots, and other items which we could barely spare. We hoped it would suffice to procure our bare necessities. It was a struggle letting go of anything, but resources had to be prioritized and some more important needs required sacrifice.

Finn, Madeline, Professor Marvin, and I headed out in the old truck now packed full of items for trade early the next day. Several of our mechanically inclined gearheads did all they could do to get it up and running, hopefully at least long enough for a round trip. Given the delicate nature of transporting the chicks and the perishable foods, we needed to make good time to get there and have the highest quality for the best bartering. I quietly offered a little prayer to whatever deity protects trucks and their cargo, asking for a little mercy along the way.

Madeline was key to negotiating the best deals. She was familiar with most of the locals since she'd lived here the longest, and she knew who would treat us fairly and offer the best items for trade. Professor Marvin wanted to go to the old bookstore and then pick up a few parts at the hardware store. We hoped the paltry selection that remained would accommodate his needs. It was getting harder and harder to replace what was broken no matter how resourceful or innovative you were. Eventually, there just weren't enough raw materials from which to breathe life into miraculous marvels of ingenuity or even ho-hum half-assed easily forgotten crapola.

When we finally do exhaust all the resources available in our area, it will be time for some tough decisions about much riskier longer range travel.

I was dropped off at the small local flea market in search of items to trade using my homemade herbal medicinal salves, soaps and teas I'd created from the precious herb garden I managed by the chicken coop. We needed some fabrics and new clothing, shoes too if possible. We always

needed paper goods as well. The market was alive and vibrant, though limited to a smaller range of choices in merchandise for sale than I had hoped. It was becoming clear the whole village and surrounding areas were running low on most everything and the talk everyone shared was the same--when would any trucks come through again from afar to ease the strain with needed resources. But the greatest fear that permeated the air like a thick suffocating fog was the barely concealed panic of what would happen if they did not come back at all.

Raindrops began to fall lightly as I finished what trades I was able to make. Nothing remarkable for sure, but I did get two pairs of lightly used men's sneakers and a pair of women's sandals that would tick off some of our needs list. I also got some dried nutmeg, sugar, aspirin, peppercorns, bags of mixed fabric, a bit of detergent, and toilet paper. No jackets, jeans, or sturdy shoes for women, but a few necessities for sure. The rain began to intensify and started pounding the temporary market folding tables and tarps causing a rapid exit of most all vendors and customers. I, of course, was stuck there but managed to find partial shelter under a boarded-up bank's awning.

As I waited for the others to come and pick me up, I noticed a black sedan in the distance with shaded windows, just idling its engine. Few vehicles were seen these days. You could go all day and you might count all of them passing by on less than one hand in a city. The sedan made two trips around the block. This immediately struck me as unusual since the few who did travel by car never wasted even a block's worth of fuel, nor would most consider just sitting there idling. I figured they must have a surplus of gas somewhere and if so, they should consider themselves mightily blessed.

Before long, Professor Marvin had made his way to me carrying his cache of goodies, none of which were likely to excite anyone but him. I discovered that he had made one acquisition which I knew would please the many--a nice standing fan with only a small problem that he said he could fix without a doubt. We could never have enough cooling breezes in Skyborn Rock when the summer heat stifled us without relent most days. He seemed overall pleased with his finds, so his trip had proven to be productive.

A while later, the old truck arrived full of new things and pleased passengers. Madeline apologized for making us wait, "That ole coot we got the feed from just wouldn't close his trap. Somebody needs to find that man a dog, uh, or maybe a parrot that'll answer back". She explained that since his loud-talking skinny wife had died, he'd grown sick of the silence and craved chit-chat. I reminded her if Sal hadn't come along when he did, someone might be saying the same thing about her. We all enjoyed a laugh while driving home, as I excitedly inspected every inch of Madeline and Finn's, in their words, masterfully bartered haul. I'd just picked up the sack of cooking provisions, and was running my fingers over the fresh supplies starting to imagine the birthday cake I'd been planning for Old Joe. It was then that my eyes were torn away by the sight of the black sedan racing toward us clearly not intending to stop.

Instant alarm clouded everyone's once smiling face as Madeline and the Professor both reached for their rifles. A large gun was thrust out of the black sedan's passenger side window attached to a freakishly long lanky arm with pulsing biceps. Not long after the deployment of the carnival show worthy limb came the hairless giant head. It bore a giant X mark from ear to ear and a full spread of snarling gold teeth to complete the look of a Mad Max movie extra. He started beating

his other clenched fist on the inside roof of the car and yelling while waving the gun sideways toward the steep road's edge. He actually believed we'd just pull over. Instead, Finn started speeding up, pushing the old truck beyond any wise measure in normal times unlike these. The engine started to groan and shudder, causing our fear to rise with each jarring new sound. If we stopped out here now, we knew they'd likely strip us of everything and leave our carcasses to rot in the sun. Men like these gave no second chances.

The black sedan, impatient with our non-compliance, started ramming us from behind, almost knocking the Professor over the side. As I grabbed him to keep him in the truck, his gun fell over the edge and hit the ground, leaving us with only Madeline's rifle. I knew if we didn't find a way to incapacitate them soon, they'd start shooting next, which caused a fiery explosion of adrenaline to rush through my veins. Madeline, realizing the same thing, quickly plunged forward through the open cab window, "I'm going for the tires if I can or if I can't hit 'em, I'm aiming where X marks the spot!" she yelled. Too late. They had begun shooting, narrowly missing Finn and me. I scrambled down below the traded goods piled beside us, bracing with dread for the burning hot pain of a bullet lodged in flesh. Madeline immediately went straight to firing right before we all fell to the side of the truck on an abrupt curve in the road. Next thing we knew everything had changed.

Like one of Professor Marvin's perfect equations, everything fell into place. One bullet shattered tire equaled one overturned car taking flight off a hard curve. Two semi-conscious, mangled-up shit stains equaled them both doubly screwed, Three-time champion of the local skeet shooting competition equaled Madelines's three precise shots. It was over before the less Mad Max, now

more a deflated Uncle Fester and his creepy driver Lurch could uncross their bug-like bulging eyes from beneath their ride's sputtering tailpipe,

What to do with the rotten human refuse piled by the side of the road, was our final concern.

While we weighed our options, young Spencer who had watched the whole thing from his look-out at Skyborn Rock, arrived on the moped disgusted he'd missed the whole affair. "I'd have got 'em in one shot! Two at the most" was his pronouncement. Madeline snorted, adding "You'd a been crying for your momma mostly". "I sure was" added Professor Marvin, with a look that said he meant it.

We stacked up and took the salvageable remains of the wrecked car, potentially adding to our needed parts collection, and siphoned off what amounted to about 14 gallons of fuel, a true godsend that actually had more value than anything else we'd gotten in a while. Also, there was a nice collection of weapons and ammo in the tangled up trunk, which we liberated as well. Bill paid in full, shit heads, for the terror you rendered. At least that was the group consensus.

Finally, we did what seemed like mostly the right thing. We contacted the remaining authorities on our short wave radio and told them where to make a pick-up, then gave the tied up hellions some water to slurp from our old blue tick hound's dog bowl, and left them in the shade of their wrecked car.

Choosing to live as citizens within a society rather than as outlaws in the badlands untethered to conscience or reason, was our choice that day. We could've buried them in a hole, something better than what they would've done to us, but in that hole would also have been lost a part of us. A good part, at least a better part. Selecting this path we know may not always be open to us

given the changing forces we cannot control, but for at least one more day, we could. This we do know: A person had better know the strength of their mettle in desperate times like these.

Eventually, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but as sure as the unending assault upon the land which we depend on to survive will challenge our every step, one day the dark-hearted and the deadened soul eaters will come for us again. Mercy is a language they do not speak and nothing will stand between them and their drive to satiate an endless appetite for destruction in the service of short term satisfaction. Your only choice is to be prepared. Or not.

In the meantime, we take care as we must. Protect ourselves and all that is vulnerable from what we can. Fight for those and for what we love and carry on until we cannot.

Or as Virginia likes to say “ just keep the hensies on the roost, out the greenie things, an off the tin tin hut.” Yeah, I know, but we love her anyway.

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