

A Pause in Civility

“*Mikey*,” I shouted in desperation as loud as I dared. I had never called him that since childhood. I usually called him “Mike” or “Michael” when I was angry. He had been my best friend until the political trouble started happening. Now we had grown distant, but I still considered him my friend. I don’t know if he would feel the same way. “Where are you? Talk to me man. I can’t see shit out here.”

The power had been out for at least two weeks (with zero chance of coming back), and now Michael was somewhere outside our place, walking around with his shotgun—possibly drunk or on drugs. He was outside making noises, attracting unwanted attention (if there was any around, which I hoped to God was not the case). That was the important thing. We had lost the Internet a full four weeks earlier, but we had been able to keep connected via the satellite service until a few days ago, and we got power with the generators. Now, we were completely cut off from power, Internet, water, everything. We had a well, which we could run with our generator, but of course the gas was running out so fast, we might not last into next year without finding more.

“Michael, if you’re out there, tell me goddammit. We shouldn’t be out here doing this. They might find us out here. Don’t shoot anything please. If you fire your gun, someone will definitely hear it. This place isn’t that far from the road. Come on man. Think of Meg and the kids.”

Either because he heard me, or it was a random coincidence, a powerful blast echoed through the trees and out onto the lake.

I froze. It was the only thing I could think of. People would hear that for miles—freaking miles. I strained my ears to hear the sound of trees cracking, boots crunching on pine needles, anything, but of course most likely would be the sound of distant motors running—approaching vehicles belonging to people—dangerous people.

Everyone was dangerous now because no one trusted anyone.

“Jeff. What the hell’s going on out here.” The female voice came from the darkness. The sky had gone fully dark.

“Michael’s gone crazy,” I replied in a hushed voice. There was no reason to speak in a hushed voice of course. Anyone who was anywhere close would have already heard the gunshot.

“What do you mean,” Meg said, approaching me. “Jeff, tell me what the fuck is going on. We’ve got Evan and Suzie inside freaking the fuck out, OK? I need some answers here. We’ve got gunshots which we all know might bring the redcoats. We’re literally in the dark too.”

Without turning on the flashlight I had in my hand, I paused, considering what to tell her. Michael was probably on drugs. It would have been better for me to have kicked him out long ago, but two reasons prevented this: first, he was worried that Michael would attract attention and bring people to their location (as he was doing now of course). Second, Michael was using the drugs he somehow hid from me (I had searched his bags several times). Of course the most important reason was that our friendship had pretty much evaporated already. Inertia was the only thing from kicking Michael out now, but I wouldn’t let that stop it anymore.

I heard movement from a distance. It wasn’t Michael this time. It was the unmistakable sound of a vehicle moving through pine needles, leaves and bark. Someone was going along

the road nearby and possibly off road, but I knew I should have been able to see the headlights by now if it were anywhere near.

There were no lights.

I strained my eyes. Was it the redcoats finally catching up to them? He knew that Meg would be discovered as a former government official and promptly executed on the spot. He didn't know what would happen to the rest of them.

From Meg's direction, a light trained onto me. I covered my eyes in the cruel beam of light.

Meg grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the house.

"Tell me. *Now.*"

"I don't know," I said in a voice barely above a whisper. "I think he's lost it. But I also think I heard a vehicle."

"What?"

"Yes, out in the trees, south of here maybe a mile or two out." The sounds in the woods carried pretty far, pretty fast. We were along the lake too, and anything that happened across the lake, we could hear it.

"Shit. Oh shit," she said. "They're here aren't they."

"I don't know. Calm down. Maybe it's just some drifters."

"At this time of night? What the fuck are you talking about? They're going to kill me Jeff. Do you understand that? I was the mayor of our city. I was out there promoting the government—the old government—the one they all hate and finally managed to kill before we got the fuck out. There are no trials anymore. They'll just—"

"Yes, I know. Jesus." I was getting angry. Of course I knew the risks.

The cans made a clanging sound. It was a tripwire I had set. Someone was coming. They must have approached after parking the vehicle I had heard.

"Get in the house," I said to Meg. I cursed inwardly as I noticed the moon had come out again with enough light to illuminate the house.

"What's happening?"

"I think there's someone out there. Someone who is not Michael."

"Then come in with me. Don't stay out there by yourself."

"I can't avoid it now. Michael's out there somewhere, drunk or on drugs, and he's firing his gun. Sooner or later they'll find us. I've got to confront it."

"No, don't go. You don't have to do anything. Just come inside. If they find us, we'll just go around back."

I looked out into the straining darkness. I held the pistol I always carried at my side. I knew if it was the redcoats who were out there, they would have long guns. And there would be many of them. They never traveled in small numbers. Many sources had told me that.

"You're right," I said. "I'll come in. If Michael's out there, they'll go after him."

"Thank you Jeff. Oh god."

I followed her inside the house, covering the windows, locking the front door and the back, and then I went upstairs to where the kids were sleeping. They were both up in their beds, staring silently at me.

"Go to sleep," I said. But that had no effect. They just sat there watching me.

I quickly closed the windows as best I could, pulling down the curtains.

The moon was nearly full and stood above us like a curse.

I moved over to Suzie and stroked her head a bit. She pulled her head back and looked at me as if to say, "You aren't getting off that easy. I want an explanation." Her eyes were cauldrons of fear and recrimination. What's going on? Are you going to keep us safe here? Her eyes said.

I moved back towards the window when the first shot came through the window near the bed. It had been fully covered, so it was impossible for them to have seen me. I had the feeling they had found us somehow. Whoever "they" were, I knew they were testing us—seeing how we would respond.

I froze and looked at Evan and then Suzie. Meg was pulling the children down towards the floor and the second and third shots rang out.

"We know you're in there," the voice said. "We just want to talk." It was a male voice, deep throated like someone who was big and burly. The voice sounded harsh and authoritative. There had been some snickers after the man said the word "talk". I knew it was probably the redcoats after all.

How the hell had redcoats found them? No one had access to computers with Internet access anymore, did they? And tracking devices from the past wouldn't be working now without a connection to the Internet. The shots of course. Michael (damn him!) was out there firing shots and someone had heard driving by. That was the most likely explanation.

Meg looked at me expectantly. She was in front of Evan's bed and already had Suzie in her lap. Suzie was looking directly at me.

"What do we do?" she said through her tears. I somehow knew then that we would all be killed because they knew who she was, even our two children who had done nothing to anyone. There would be no trial given. The redcoats had a brutal history with women and girls as well. This made me determined not to give up.

I put my index finger to my lips. She got the message and nodded, probably assuming I had a plan which I did not—at least not yet.

Then I heard the sounds of someone banging against the door. Then the window. There was a sound of glass shattering as the first window broke. It was probably the window in the living room, a great big panel of glass that would allow anyone inside once the glass was gone. It was close to the entrance we had walked through earlier.

Meg sobbed. I held the gun in my hand and tested its weight before pointing it at the only door to the bedroom we were in. Then I walked towards it and closed it as quietly as I could, locking it with a slow twist of my hand.

More smashing glass. And then footsteps. Another gunshot. This time I aimed up at the second floor, hitting the wall in the hallway. Had they known we were up here? Probably not or they would have rushed for the stairs already.

"They're upstairs," I heard one of the voices say. Then my heart sank.

I kicked off my shoes to avoid making loud footsteps, quietly stood up and directed Meg to bring Suzie while I grabbed Evan's hand and led them all into the closet. It was the only place to hide. The space under the two beds was too tight of a space which even Evan couldn't fit through.

I closed the closet door of the bedroom once all four of us were inside, cursing as the door made a squeaking noise (as it had always done).

Eeeeeereehhhh.

"I heard something from upstairs," one of them said. They all started moving at once. Judging by their sounds, there were at least four of them. I estimated they would approach the closed door to the bedroom in about ten seconds, maybe less.

There were loud thumps on the door. Then the first shot cracked through the wood of the door, then the second shot. The gun sounded loud, like a shotgun or a high-powered rifle.

Evan and Suzie were getting scared. They knew what was going on. Suzie put her hands around her ears as Meg sat in the corner of the cramped closet and cried silently. Evan had his left hand on my shoulder, as if I was some kind of safety in one of his tag-and-peek games.

There was movement in the bedroom. It wouldn't be long. I trained the gun to the door of the closet, listening carefully where they were at. Despite the moonlight, it was fairly dark in the room. There was a chance they wouldn't see the closet door.

My heart sank when I saw the reflection of the flashlight. They moved towards the closet door and pulled on it. There was no lock on it of course. It flew right open.

I came face to face with a bearded man who was probably a foot taller than I was. He had his long rifle trained straight at my chest. But he seemed surprised to see me as if he were expecting treasure or just a few kids.

I breathed a deep breath and pulled the trigger of the pistol. One shot. Two shots. The man hadn't pulled the trigger first and he fell down backward. Next I heard another noise from a distance. Someone else was coming inside the house—perhaps more of the redcoats. I pulled the trigger of the gun two more times, hoping I had hit one of the people in the room.

I pushed Evan back behind me. My body wouldn't stop the bullet completely but at least it would slow it down, firing two more shots. I was in a panic. One of them had pointed his flashlight directly at my eyes so as to blind me and I couldn't shoot it out of him.

I felt the first bullet hit my shoulder. The next one sliced through my neck. Both shots felt like someone shoving a pool cue into my skin.

From farther away, several shots were fired but this time it caught my assailants by surprise and they turned toward the door. The flashlight had left my eyes and I pulled the gun up to fire but my hand would not move. More shots. Then silence.

I had slumped against the closet wall and could no longer protect Meg and the children. I couldn't even check on them to see if they were OK. My body simply wouldn't respond.

After a few moments, I was aware dimly that I was being cradled by Meg and that I was bleeding heavily.

Then the light shone on me once more, but this time it focused on my body, especially my wounds.

"I got those sons of bitches," Michael said, breathing heavily. "I got all of them. Shit you're bleeding. Are you all right?"

I tried to speak. "Despite being shot two times, I'm rather dandy."

I stopped being aware of what was going on. Right before I drifted off for the final time, I heard Michael say, "You were right all along. These woods aren't safe anymore. Even this lake is going to be monitored by someone eventually. Don't worry buddy. I'll help you recover and take care of them. We'll get out of here."

But to where, I thought. I could see his eyes. They were deranged by drugs—fentanyl probably—it was the most common.

“You’re going to be—” then his lips moved, but I heard no sound.

Silence. I could see Meg’s face, now Evan’s, now Michael’s. And I realized then and there, that I wasn’t going to be alright. It was Michael who would have to lead them now. He would have to be the one to take them north from Wisconsin towards the lake and then the border.

We had tried to make things work after the disaster that had happened, but it wasn’t enough. Would we carry on? I would never find out. I knew one thing: I wished I could last a little longer, and then my eyes closed.