

## Prologue

### Foreplay/Long Time

The world stopped on a Tuesday morning, at about 5:45 am, MST. Obviously, for a lot of the rest of the planet, that timestamp is different, but I'm the one writing this down, so there you go.

When I say the world stopped, I'm being a little disingenuous, because there was still air, sunlight, gravity. You know, natural constants from time immemorial, I guess. It was the more recent constants that stopped. All of them, all at once. Power, basically, and everything generating it, and everything that depended on it.

As you can imagine, what any one person was doing and where at that moment could matter a great deal.

If you were sitting at your kitchen table, drinking morning coffee, and checking email on your phone before heading to work, then that's one scenario. Not mine, but had to be for a lot of people, I'm sure. I'm using my imagination here, but I don't think it's a stretch. Phone dies. Sound from the refrigerator stops. Lights go out. Brows furrow in annoyance, maybe. How many people would immediately realize that their phone wasn't dependent on the power grid in the same way as the other stuff that quit around them. I don't know. Probably not me, either.

Next scenario. You're on a plane bound for wherever, when that ever-present dull roar from the engines ceases. The air vent above you so carefully positioned to blow directly on your nose because the person next to you smells like distilled lilac stops. Your stomach begins to move upward, like in an elevator. Lights out here, too. Maybe a few seconds of annoyance, but abject terror buffering behind it.

See what I mean?

My experience was somewhere in between. I was on a bus on my way to work, one of those with the seats just benches facing the middle. I was stuck between a huge guy that must've gone 350 easy on my right, and a skinny dude in fatigues on my left. This one was probably a soldier, or at least a wannabe, considering the big military duffel wedged between us. I was the second in on the side opposite the driver right at the front. Sorry to belabor the set-up here, but you'll see why in a sec.

We were on a two-lane section between the smaller town where my apartment was, and my crappy job in a larger one a few miles away. I'd guess the bus was doing 45 or so, and so was the semi heading in the opposite direction when everything quit. Quit, but didn't stop moving.

I'd guess the timing was just right. For the drivers, the surprise, the loss of power steering, and proximity caused just enough drift to intersect. It wasn't a full head-on, there wasn't enough drift for that, but it did the trick, for sure.

The driver and everyone sitting on that side were obliterated at least a third of the way back. I slammed against the big guy, and his mass and mine were enough to punch through the metal partition and hand-rail leading to the door, all the way to the windshield. The duffel cushioned me from the little guy, but also shunted him toward where driver used to be, now all just jagged wreckage. He didn't make it.

Neither did the big guy. I could feel things breaking and collapsing in him as he took the impact with me pressed up against him. He didn't actively make a choice to save me, but I'm grateful to him just the same.

I think a few people at the back of the bus survived the collision, but I was the only one up front who did. I didn't break anything, which in itself is sort of miraculous, but I don't think I've ever had that sort of whole-body trauma before. It made getting through the first week of the apocalypse that much more painful. And what a week it was.

Ok, the temptation here is to lay out my narrative as it happened those first days, because I mean, c'mon, that's where you get to know your protagonist. The introduction of chaos, and the response. If you were a fan of this shit before it all really happened, I get it.

But it was too much of a mess, and even if you'd already pre-explored the possibilities, it didn't play out like any one of those. At least, not one I'd read, and that was pretty much my jam from adolescence. I think, instead, I'll just sum up the outcome a lot of us reached, before everybody jettisoned confusion for action. I will also assume you get life is a bell-curve, and a few got to horrific while another few got to angelic before the rest of us.

There was no power. I can't stress this enough. Hydro-electric turbines would still turn. Solar panels still faced the sun. No electricity was produced.

Gasoline, diesel, jet fuel. Natural gas, propane. Coal. Nothing that could generate power would burn, combust, or explode anymore. You might want to take a second to explore the ramifications of that. Or maybe that's your normal, now, and it's no big deal. I don't know. I have no idea who's going to read this, or when.

There was an exception. Specifics do come up later on, so I'm not going into the weeds here about it. Suffice to say, wood and dried vegetation would burn. But the resulting flames would only put out about 200 degrees Fahrenheit. Not even enough to boil water, so, no steam, so no steam power. Any green vegetation would not burn. It would have been a real boon for the fire-fighting industry I imagine, but *all* industry ceased, so...yeah. Plus, cooking became a protracted process, let me tell you.

Also, the planet's core still produced all that heat, but any established or even new attempt to harness it met the same result. The instant the heat hit the conversion mechanism, it dropped to a temperature just below what it would take to complete the power generation process.

I think by now you get that this was no CME or EMP event that fried the grid. Nothing was spared. No hardened tech, nothing kept in a Faraday box, or cage, or whatever. It was something much more fundamental. Physical laws were changed, by something that no one could identify or quantify, and the ability to generate power in all its forms was subtracted from human life. Those survivors that cared enough to evaluate the new status quo, and who could spare the mental real estate to think about it came to the conclusion pretty quick there was intent inherent in it.

I wasn't one of those. I met them later, but there was too much too fast at first, and I was scrambling like everyone else to stay alive.

I wonder about you, reader. That is, if this is ever read by anybody. Is it the same now, now that I'm gone? I assume I'm gone, but what do I know? We're nowhere near the end of my tale, so maybe "now that I'm gone" is a little dramatic.

Were you able to fix it?

Sorry, stupid question. Not least I'll never get an answer.

Imagine that the bulk of your daily world exists in an intangible space that you access through various electronic portals. Even your relationships with other people occupy a significant portion of it. You can interact across the physical distance between you, share opinions on the constructs already

here, and access information about almost anything instantly. We had that. Then it disappeared in a moment. A planetary hive mind silenced. As if that wasn't enough, a technological rewind to the dark ages.

This may sound like I'm whining a bit, but it was even worse than that, because at least in the dark ages, you could cook a steak pretty quick.

I made it through the first couple of weeks by staying as far away from other people as possible, and moving as fast as I could away from anything resembling a city. Textbook, pretty much, if you read as much as I did. Did I do things I'm not proud of? Maybe. Did I hurt anyone else? No. Well, not at first, but we'll get to that.

One thing apocalyptic authors did get right was how fast things fall apart, though, and there were a number of occasions during that time where I thought, yeah, this is it.

But, it wasn't.

I think the story really starts when I met Dave. Well, and his daughter, but let's start with Dave.