



Sunset

Synopsis

Follow the path of three different men in three different cities as they deal with the end of civilization as we know it. In a matter of hours, ninety eight percent of the Earth's population was exterminated. Forty eight hours later, the dead have disappeared.

For the survivors, existence has become a massive struggle. However, survival becomes much more difficult after.....

Sunset

Chapter 1

Sunset: Survivors

Chad Grable Wichita, KS October 5th, 1991

I knew this was going to happen. Well, not this exactly but I knew *something* was going to happen. They all laughed at me and told me to move to Montana with those militia people. Who's laughing now? Those fucking militia guys are probably running the state up there. *They* were prepared. *They* knew something like this was going to happen. So did I. I could have been more prepared but it's not like I was totally unprepared. I have a gun. No one knew I had a gun but I do. I was afraid to tell anyone. I figured they would rat me out to my parents or someone.

It happened two days ago when I was walking home from work. Since graduating from high school two years ago, I have worked at Movie Time, the local movie rental store. It's a cool job when the jackass manager isn't yelling at me to get to work. I get to watch the newest movies before anyone else in town and they are free for employees to rent. I also don't have to do very much. I basically put tapes away and run the cash register.

Anyways, I was walking home from work like I do every day. I've been trying to save up for a car but my dad says I'll never be able to afford a car working at Movie Time. He says I better get my act together soon or he is going to kick me out on my ass. Fuck you very much, dad. My mom wants me to either go back to school or get a better job. She says I am wasting my life working there and hanging out with losers. The bitch is half right. I do hang out with a bunch of losers. Randy is my closest friend but he thinks he's so much smarter than everyone else. Sometimes I would talk about the end of the world and what it would be like when the government no longer ruled our lives with their taxes and laws. He would laugh at me and call me a dumb ass.

"You wouldn't last two minutes without the government telling you what to do.", he'd say. Well, I've lasted almost 3 days so far. You're the dead dumbass.

It was about 5:15 in the afternoon when I first noticed something was wrong. As I walked home I thought I heard some shouts from behind me. I turned to look and noticed that there was smoke coming from the parking lot of the grocery store across the street from where I work. I couldn't hear what the people were screaming about. I figured it was a traffic accident or something. I kept walking home. A few minutes later, I heard a loud crash and an explosion came from a couple blocks over. There is a gas station over there. Someone must have run into the gas tanks or something. Man, what the hell is going on?

When I got home the house was dark and empty. I called out that I was home but no one answered. Usually my mom beats me home. She works at the bank on the other side of town but she gets off at 4:30. Usually she is sitting at the kitchen table when I walk in. She then welcomes me home with some advice about my hair or my job or my life. No advice today. (Or ever.)

I went upstairs and got in the shower. I had plans to hang out with my girlfriend Sheila that night. We planned on hanging out at the bowling alley or something. She's not that good looking but at least she puts out. I showered and changed into some jeans and a Bart Simpson "Don't have a cow, man" t-shirt. When I went downstairs no one had gotten home. I went out the back door and cut through the alley to head to Sheila's house. I could still smell smoke.

Sheila has been my girlfriend for about six months. We get along pretty good when she's not being a pain in my ass. I would have dumped her a long time ago but I have come to the realization that fucking her is better than jacking off.

Sheila lives about three blocks away from my house so it is only about a ten minute walk. Thinking back on it now, it was odd to have not seen anyone on the walk over. But when you're twenty years old and have nothing on your mind but getting drunk and getting laid, not much else matters.

When I got to Sheila's house I knocked for five minutes but no one answered the door. The neighborhood was really quiet. As I stood there I realized that I hadn't seen anyone since I left the movie store. What's going on? I stood on Sheila's lawn and looked up and down the street. It was like being in a dream. There was no noise except for the wind swaying the trees. Not a person in sight. At first I started getting pissed off thinking Sheila had stood me up. The little guy in my head was whispering something else though. I couldn't make out what he was saying and I don't think I wanted to. I wasn't ready to admit that there was anything seriously wrong yet.

I decided to head over to the gas station to see what the explosion was about. I got about half way there when I noticed an old man laying in his yard. It looked like he had been gardening. He was laying face down in the flowers he had been tending to. It looked like he had been planting a new row of roses along the walk that led up to his house. I ran over and yelled at him to see if he was all right. The old fart didn't move. I shook him by the shoulder and he still didn't move. I felt his wrist like they do in the movies to see if he had a pulse. Nothing. He must have had a heart attack or something. Sucks for him.

I kept moving toward the gas station. I had to find someone. I figured I would talk to a cop or a fireman and let them know about the old man. As I came around the corner to the main street at the end of my neighborhood, I could see the flames from the gas station two blocks away still burning out of control. The flames had to be at least fifty feet high. The smoke it was giving off was as black as severe storm clouds. It was rolling into the sky like a never ending waterfall but in reverse. There were no fire engines or police cars around either. There was no one around at all. All I could see was a mess of cars here and there. No one was moving. No one was doing anything. As I walked up the street, I looked into the cars as I passed. I didn't need to feel their wrists. They were dead. Everyone was dead. Some had blood coming from their eyes. Others had it running from their nose or mouth. A girl about my age was slumped over toward the driver side window with her hand hanging out of the car. She appeared to have been driving when she died. Her car smashed into a light pole and her head must have smashed against the steering wheel. She had an upside down U shaped dent on her forehead. It was almost like she had a bruise unibrow.

I thought I was going to be sick. It was like walking through some kind of weird graveyard where people were buried above ground in their cars. Almost all of them had their eyes open and most of them looked terrified.

The heat became unbearable as I drew near the gas station. The orange flames continued to churn upward toward the darkening sky. A van that takes the retards to and from school had run into the gas pumps. It was on fire and so was everything else around it. I couldn't get any closer if I wanted to. My face burned when I looked directly at the flames as if I had my head in an oven. There was nothing I could do anyway. There was no one to save. Everyone was gone.

After that I went home. It was starting to get dark and I didn't want to be outside when the sun went down. I was scared shitless. I did my best not to look at the bodies as I passed them but I couldn't help

myself. I was afraid they were going to move or I would turn around and find a group of them quietly following me.

When I got home I tried the T.V. but all I got was snow. The phones didn't work either. I sat on the couch in my dark and cold living room and waited. What I was waiting for I don't know. No one came home. They must all be dead.

That was 2 days ago. I have eaten almost all the food in the house. Most of the food went bad before I could eat it so I was forced to eat canned meals. Cold canned soup isn't so bad. Canned vegetables make me want to puke but I can't afford to be very picky at this point. The lunch meat and milk went bad almost immediately. The refrigerator smells horrible every time I open the door so I try not to. I need to go out for supplies but I am scared. I should have been more prepared.

Two Days Earlier

Stan Howard Las Vegas, NV October 3rd, 1991

I can't believe this is happening, Stan thought. I have never been an overly lucky guy but this is ridiculous.

Stanley Eugene Howard was the senior programmer at a prestigious software company located in Northern Phoenix. He had driven up to Las Vegas the night before. It was a long drive but Stan found it very relaxing. He could not relax at work. His boss was an asshole and was always on Stan's back. Stan could not possibly work any harder or any more hours than he already was. This vacation was a way to blow off some steam before returning to the rat race in a few days.

Now Stan stood at a crap table in one of the biggest casinos in Las Vegas. He had held the dice for almost an hour. Twelve passes in a row. He was up almost \$22,000. He could not lose. No matter where he put his money, the number would come up. \$50 hard four. Hit it. \$100 crap. Hit it. \$500 yo. Hit it. \$1,500 on the pass line. Needs a six. Rolls a thirty-three. The money was just pouring in.

Everyone at the table was going crazy. Finally, Stan was THE MAN! Women were actually talking to him. Touching his arm and asking his name. Why couldn't my parents have given me a manlier name, Stan thought? Something like Nick or Joe. Those were manly names. Those were names of men who took action. Those were names of men who got things done. Men who didn't take shit from anyone. Especially from programming managers.

Stan bought a round of drinks for the table. Every one cheered. He dreamed of being the big shot but had never lived it like this. The dice felt cool in his hand. The green felted table seemed to stretch out for a mile. The women were more beautiful than they had been an hour ago. His Pina Colada tasted better than it had five minutes ago. Everything was perfect.

With every win the pit boss glared at him. Stan didn't care. He wasn't cheating. In fact he had never won at craps in his life. He had just learned how to play a few months ago. Bill Felton, another programmer on his team invited him to tag along on a bachelor party. Bill taught Stan the basics of craps and that was all she wrote. Stan was hooked.

The stick man shoved the dice in Stan's direction. "Dice out!" he hollered.

Stan picked them up and asked the blonde to his left to blow on them for luck. The blonde obliged and winked at Stan. Stan turned the dice over and over in his right hand. The cubes felt smooth and perfect on the tips of his fingers. Stan wanted to savor this moment as long as he could. He drew back his arm and sent the dice spinning to the far end of the table. The dice seemed to tumble in slow motion. The ladies were screaming. The men were howling. Stan was having the time of his life.

“One more time!”, Stan screamed. The dice concluded their journey.

“Thirty four!” yelled the stick man.

Another winner. Stan raised his hands in triumph. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and let out a jubilant scream that shook the sparkling chandeliers. He stood basking in the moment, head thrust back, arms raised and gazing at the beautiful mural on the ceiling. Stan was on top of the world.

Silence.

Silence void of human voices. The slot machines kept dinging and ringing. The piped in music kept playing. But the voices had stopped as though someone had turned off a channel in Stan’s brain. That channel was the one that allowed Stan to hear other peoples’ voices. That channel was no longer broadcasting.

Stan lowered his gaze from the ceiling. Half of the people at the table were lying on the floor. The other half looked as though someone were strangling them. They had blue faces and were unable to speak. The blonde to his left was on her knees and clutching at Stan’s pant leg. Her royal blue low cut dress was almost showing her nipples and her mouth was open in a noiseless scream.

“What’s wrong?” Stan half yelled and half whimpered.

He was scared shitless and could not figure out what was happening. Is this a joke, Stan thought? The blonde could not reply. She collapsed the rest of the way to the floor. Her head thumped on the bright, busy casino carpet. Blood started to trickle out of her nose.

Stan turned and scanned the rest of the casino. No one was left standing. Some people were slumped in their chairs and others half leaned on the tables they were at. The rest lied motionless on the ground. Drinks lay spilled on the floor and cigarettes burned in ash trays or smoldered on the carpet. Casino chips lay in piles of lively displays or were scattered like polka dots on a colorful summer dress. It was like being in a graveyard of fun with lights and sounds but all alone. He felt his knees go weak and his stomach felt ice cold.

Stan focused his attention on the chips he had won. He scooped them up and put them in his pants and coat pockets as quickly as he could. He then made his way across the casino to the elevators carefully stepping over the fallen bodies. He pushed the call button and waited patiently for the elevator to arrive.

When the doors opened, Stan saw two elderly ladies lying on the elevator floor. Both wore bright and flowery summer hats and dresses and both appeared to be dead. Blood flowed out of the mouth of one and the other thankfully lay face down. Stan didn’t want to see any more dead faces. He whispered excuse me to the fallen ladies and entered the elevator careful not to step on any body parts. He pushed the button for the sixth floor and stared straight ahead as the elevator doors closed.

Amir Baghira New York, NY October 3rd, 1991

My last day on Earth. Please let my last day on Earth please Allah. I have nothing left to live for. So I give my life for Allah and the al Qaeda. My family perished at the hands of a faceless and godless government. Now I am alone save for my new brothers.

Yesterday I received my final instructions. Drive the van to 26 Federal Plaza. Park as close as you can to the building. Wait for the end of the work day. (This way the streets will be full of cattle unaware of their imminent slaughter.) Detonate the explosives. Get busy with my 72 virgins. Man, they better be right about the virgins.

I leave our apartment in New Jersey. It is a filthy pitiful place but it meets our needs. It is cheap and isolated. We have spent the last three weeks collecting the needed supplies. Now we fill the van with the explosives we made out of various household products and cooking ingredients. The deadly packages fill most of the cargo space in the van. The detonator is made out of a car battery bought at a local hardware store. When the time comes, I will detonate the explosives by taking two ends of battery cables attached to the battery and close the circuit by touching them together. I should feel nothing.

The van is now loaded. I say good bye to my brothers. They look at me with awe and envy, wishing they were the ones to carry out this task. I have been chosen because of my years of loyalty and dedication to the cause. Right now they must move on to the next phase of our mission. They must drive North West to Chicago. Find another isolated location in the city and wait for instructions. Their opportunity to make the ultimate sacrifice will one day come.

As I drive it begins to rain. The cattle bring out their umbrellas. Will they melt if they get wet? In my homeland the rain is celebrated. People would be seen dancing in the rain and letting it drench their entire bodies.

The buildings seem to lean and tower over me like a school yard bully tormenting his victim. I still have not overcome the suffocating feeling I get when in the city. Sometimes I feel as if they are tilting over and will eclipse the sky. Eventually they will tumble down on top of me burying me in their steel and concrete rubble.

My claustrophobia intensifies as I traverse the Holland Tunnel. This is what it must feel like to be buried alive. I take deep breaths and focus my attention on the road. It takes all of my willpower to keep myself from passing out. My tension is relieved when I can see the end of the tunnel approaching. The tightness in my chest eases and I am able to breathe at a normal pace.

It grows near the end of the work day for the cattle. I must hurry. As I near my target I see nowhere to park the van. Double parking will draw unwanted attention from the authorities. This will not do. I circle the building until I find one close enough. I kill the engine and sit back while my eyes scan the streets. They are not nearly crowded enough. The cattle have not yet begun their death march. I must wait.

I see a woman hurrying a young child along, sheltering him with her umbrella. I feel no pity for them and I have no remorse for what I am about to do. Although I do not believe the child is any threat to me or my cause right now, there will come a time when he will be. The filthy cow headed Americans do not know what terrible things their government has brought upon my people. Nor do they care. They go to their prison cells for eight hours a day. They are chained there by telephone and computer wires. Then they go home and lock themselves into their suburban coffins. They are chained there by their television

sets and Internet. All they know is what the media tells them. They believe they are good because they are told they are good. They do not see what evil their mere existence causes others.

I must focus. The streets are becoming more crowded. The time draws near. I watch the cattle pour out of their prison towers and fill the streets. They open their umbrellas or pull their collars close around their necks. Despite the rain and cold they are overjoyed to be released from their prisons for another evening. It will be a pleasure to end their miserable existence.

It is time. I get up out of the driver's seat and start moving to the back of the van. I am jolted off of my feet and I land on the floor between the driver and passenger seats. Someone has run into the van with their vehicle. I sit up and look to the rear windows. I can see a red sport utility vehicle pressed up against the back doors of my van. The idiot must have been going too fast and slid on the wet streets. I curse him under my breath. I must detonate the explosives before the police come to investigate.

I pull the tarp off of the battery and find the cables which will act as the detonator. I have wrapped the metal ends of the cables with towels and taped them in place to avoid an accidental closing of the circuit. I did not want the explosives to detonate prematurely before I was anywhere near my target. I pull off the tape and remove the towels. The time has come. I say my final prayer and hope that the gift of my life pleases Allah. I close my eyes, bow my head and bring the battery cables together.

Nothing happens. I sit there for a few seconds with my eyes closed and listen. I can still hear the large rain drops explode as they impact the roof of the van. I look up at the cables in my hands. The metal ends are in fact touching each other. I pull them apart and say my prayer again. Once more I close my eyes, bow my head and bring the battery cables together.

Still, nothing happens. A cold streak of fear rises in my stomach and fills my entire chest. Soon I will hear a rap on the window. A police officer will be asking me to get out of the vehicle. He will be concerned about my safety and insist that I get out. Once I am out he will notice the tarps in back and inquire about the objects beneath them. Spending the rest of my days in an American prison is a shame that I cannot bear. I must flee.

I move to the front of the van and try to look out of the front windshield. The rain blurs my vision. There does not appear to be any movement at all. I can see a glow from what appears to be a fire from up the street. Nothing else appears to move.

I roll down my window and look out as the rain assaults my face. My eyes must deceive me because what is happening cannot be a reality. The sidewalks are lined with fallen cattle. No one moves. It is as though everyone on the street fell asleep at the exact same moment. Cars are scattered everywhere. Some have smashed into other cars and some have just rolled to a stop. Others have made their way onto the sidewalks and plowed through groups of people. I can see the tire tracks on the coats and suits of the people who were crushed under the wheels. I hear car alarms and a horn being continually sounded. I hear an engine racing somewhere behind me. Smoke and flames pour from a delivery truck that smashed head first into a building a block ahead of me. I am in a state of shock and confusion.

I am afraid to get out of the van. I stare at the bodies that seem to surround me. Will what happened to them happen to me? If so, what is the delay? Why has it not happened already? I appear to be in the center of a mass suicide.

My fear subsides slightly and I am able to get out of the van. I look up and down the street as the rain continues to pour. I am quickly drenched and water pours down my face and blurs my vision. Lighting

strikes and I flinch from the resounding thunder clap. There is no movement for as far as I can see. The cattle have all fallen and lie motionless on the cold wet concrete. My mind feels like a cyclone of water swirling down a giant drain. Each thought that comes into my mind is quickly replaced by a question or wiped away by a horrific scene. I cannot think straight. There are no answers to any question that my mind produces.

Is this an act of Allah? Have I done my deed and moved on? Is this my heaven? Or hell?

Stan Howard Las Vegas, NV October 4th, 1991

After Stan made it back to his dark room, he sat on his bed and stared at the wall for six straight hours. The shock of what he had seen overwhelmed him. Stan drifted in and out of a conscious state for those hours. Occasionally he was aware of where he was. When in a deeper state of shock or denial, Stan's mind went to his home town of Clear Creek, Wisconsin in the south eastern part of the state.

Clear Creek was a town of about twenty two thousand people. Stan grew up there with his brother and parents in a middle class house in a middle class neighborhood. For the first thirteen years of his life, Stan had a pretty normal childhood. On one cold Saturday in January, normal became the last word Stan would use to describe his childhood.

In the winter months, Stan and his younger brother Charlie would go down to the reservoir to sled. It was the biggest hill around and all the kids would go there after a fresh snow had fallen.

On this particular Saturday morning, Stan's brother came running into his room to wake him up. A fresh six inches of snow had fallen the night before and it was still coming down. Stan got up and made himself and Charlie a couple bowls of Captain Crunch and sat in front of the television watching cartoons while they ate. Their parents were still asleep and there was no need to wake them.

After breakfast, he and Charlie got dressed in their warmest clothes. They both wore a t-shirt and sweater, two pairs of socks and thermal underwear beneath their jeans. Then they went out to the garage to put on their winter coats, snow pants and snow boots. They topped themselves off with wool caps and mittens.

Now they were ready to brave the bitter Wisconsin temperatures. As they were grabbing their sleds and heading outside, their mother stuck her head in the garage from the kitchen door.

"Keep an eye on your brother, Stanley. And don't stay out too long. You'll get frost bite." his mother warned.

"Okay mom." Stan replied.

Stan and Charlie exited the garage and started the short walk to the reservoir. They immediately could feel the crisp and icy air nipping at their faces. The reservoir was about three blocks away and only took about ten minutes to walk there. When they reached the hill, there were already a few kids breaking up the fresh powder. Once the snow was packed nice and firm, the hill would become ten times faster. Stan and Charlie rode the hill for the next hour racing down the slope in seconds and trudging back up the hill only to turn around and do it again. When their faces and toes could take no more cold, they decided to head home.

The last time they dug snow in the front door, their mom gave them the business. Ever since then, they knew to take off their boots and snow pants in the garage. They entered the garage by the same door they had exited earlier. Even though the garage was not heated, it was much warmer than the frigid temperatures outdoors. The boys welcomed the warmth and they could feel their cheeks and noses begin to thaw.

Charlie shut the garage door behind them and leaned his sled on the wall. There was a spot for their sleds next to the snow thrower and shovel their dad would be using later this morning. Charlie sat down on the floor and started to remove his frozen snow boots. He looked up and noticed Stan was not doing the same. He was just standing there staring straight ahead. Just then Stan went tearing off into the kitchen through the garage door. He was screaming for their dad. Charlie could not figure out what had gotten into Stan. Then he saw what had made his brother run so wildly into the house and he started to cry.

Stan's father had been sitting on the couch drinking his coffee and reading the sports page. He was particularly interested in an article about his beloved Badgers football team and who would be their head coach next year. Stan raced into the living room screaming and crying. He could not form any intelligible words but kept looking back at the kitchen.

Stan's father jumped up from the couch and quickly walked into the kitchen. He could feel the cold air coming in and noticed the door that led to the garage was open. He could hear Charlie crying. He ran to the door and looked out. In the garage next to their nineteen sixty Chevrolet Impala hung his wife. Her feet were about a foot off of the floor. She had tied an extension cord to the rails that the garage door ran on. She then stood on a five gallon bucket and tied the other end around her neck. That was all she needed.

Stan sat on the bed in his hotel room and stared at the beige pattern-less wall paper. Although his eyes were open, he was not really seeing anything. His mind was two thousand miles away in Clear Creek. Why these thoughts came back now he had no idea. He honestly had not thought of his mother in a couple years. The sight of the woman gripping at his pant leg had jarred something. The helpless feeling Stan felt right now was eerily similar to the feeling he had back on that Saturday in January thirty years ago.

Stan stood up and walked into the closet closing the mirrored door behind him. He lay down on the colorful carpeted floor, curled up in a ball and cried himself to sleep.

Amir Baghira New York, NY October 4th, 1991

After *it* happened I walked the streets for hours in a daze. The cold rain continued into the evening. I was frozen and chilled to the bone. Smoke poured from some buildings while others appeared untouched by the disaster. I can't help but think of it that way, a disaster. If I would have been responsible for the deaths of all these useless sheep it would have been a glorious triumph. Since it was some freak act of nature it is a disaster.

The city lights were still on but nothing moved. The twisted metal of automobile crashes lay in huge dripping heaps. Some smoked, some burned and others sat in silence showered by the rain and streetlights. Of course there were bodies literally everywhere. Thousands of them. I had to weave and

jump to avoid them. Occasionally I had to walk on top of parked cars for half a block to avoid stepping on them.

I tried to pretend they weren't there. They weren't even people to me before so why should they be now? I could not even bear to look at them. Thankfully the majority of them lay face down. The ones that didn't had their eyes open. I could not meet their cold stare with my own eyes. I had to look away. Why did I all of a sudden care what happened to these useless people. This is what I wanted wasn't it?

I came out of my trance long enough to realize where I was. As I looked out across the calm black water I could see her standing motionless in the bay. The light from her torch was standing out against the rain and darkness like a beacon calling me to my homeland. Tears started welling up in my eyes and I had to stifle a surprising whimper that rose in my chest. I grew up hating what she stood for. But now she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

When my disgusting display of emotion ended, I walked back the way I had come. I needed to get out of the rain and think. I went into the first building I came upon that didn't have too many bodies blocking the entrance. It was a large concrete shrine where the sheep had come to worship their true god: money. Once inside, I found a black leather couch in the lobby and collapsed onto it. As I sat I contemplated suicide but without any of them to take with me, martyrdom seems out of reach. I closed my eyes and was asleep within minutes.

I awoke to the sound a voice calling my name. The voice was sweet and songlike and definitely female. I opened my eyes and gazed upon one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. She had auburn hair, green eyes and had an attractive hourglass shaped figure. She wore sheer and lacy see through garments which barely covered her breasts and mid section. The woman was sitting cross legged on a pillow in front of me. She was smiling. I could not help but smile back at her.

"Hello, Amir." she said.

"Hello." I answered.

There was another voice to my left. "Hello, Amir."

I looked to my left and sitting next to me on the huge bed I lay upon were four more beautiful women dressed very much like the first. I looked to my right and saw that there were more amazingly beautiful women sitting there also. "My seventy two virgins!" I thought. Thank you, Allah!

The ladies leaned in toward me and started massaging my back and shoulders. Some rubbed my feet and ankles. Others caressed my stomach and legs. Soon hands found my manhood and made me erect in seconds. I closed my eyes and relaxed while enjoying my reward for being a martyr to my cause.

Then I smelled it. It was something foul and rotting. I quickly opened my eyes and looked to my left. The skull of one of my virgins grinned back at me through rotting teeth. I looked around and the others were in a much similar state. Some had gray, rotting skin and sunken eyes that looked like black holes. Still others had open sores and bleeding eyes and noses.

I try to get up to flee but the hands hold me down. My erection quickly shrinks and for a moment I think I am going to urinate in my pants. I scream loudly as the virgins tear at my clothes and pull my hair. I can

feel their fingernails digging into my skin and drawing blood. When I think I will go insane and can no longer endure the pain I wake up.

I sit up on the couch I fell asleep on screaming. I am drenched in sweat and the pressure on my bladder is unbearable. I am breathing heavily and I feel like I could have a heart attack. I try to calm myself and my breathing grows slower.

I walk over to one of the potted plants that flank the couch and relieve myself. I can see through the glass doors which I entered by that it is now light out. I look to my left and notice a security guard still sits at his assigned post. He wears a blue uniform and cap and his head leans to one side. I realize that he watches me urinate but can do nothing to stop me. This brings a small grin to my face. I grasp the fact that I am finally free. I have no oppressors and I have no responsibilities. There are no authorities to tell me where I can drive, where I can sit and where I can go. There are no more speakers who bring forth information and instructions from the homeland. I can go anywhere and do anything I please. I am FREE!

In all the excitement my stomach has been forgotten and is now telling me that I have not eaten in many hours. If I wish to survive I must find food. I walk to the glass doors at the front of the building and look out. It continues to rain. Everything seems to be as it was twenty four hours earlier. Bodies lie everywhere. Huge masses of twisted metal still smoke like iron volcanoes.

I exit the building and stop on the steps that lead down to the street. Rain still pours from the skies. I look to the heavens and let the rain wash over my body. It is cold but it feels good to feel something again. I look up and down the street searching for somewhere I can get something to eat. I see a sign for a Starbuck's Coffee across the street and ahead of me about a block. I pick up an umbrella that one of the cattle has dropped. I use it to shield me from the rain as I make my way toward my destination for breakfast. The head of a police officer sits perched perfectly on the curb. I take two quick steps toward it and kick it as hard as I can. The sound of thunder rolls in the distance as I raise my hands to the sky and laugh like I haven't laughed since childhood.

FREE

Chad Grable Wichita, KS October 5th, 1991

I made up my mind that I would go today before it gets dark. It took awhile to convince myself but I finally found the courage. I went out to the garage and set up the step ladder in the center of the floor. Above the ladder was the opening to the storage in the rafters. I climbed up to the cubby hole in the ceiling and pushed open the plywood that covered the entrance. Dust bunnies and mouse droppings fell down in my hair and on my shoulders. I did the nervous gross me out dance and shook my head and arms to get the filthy things off of me.

I climbed another rung and stuck my head up into the hole. The attic was dusty and full of cobwebs and it made me want to sneeze constantly. I felt around for the pistol I had hidden up there when we got back from camping last year.

Just about every summer my cousins and I went camping with our dads at Tuttle Creek State Park. It was a masculine thing and the women were not allowed to come along.

"We'll make a man out of you yet." my dad would say. "Just us against the Mother Nature."

Now I wished I had paid more attention to the things he tried to teach me but at the time it seemed stupid and unimportant. Now I could use all the help I could get because it was just me against Mother Nature.

Before sundown our dad's sent me and my cousins into the forest. It was our job to gather firewood for the evening fires. One night while my cousins and I were performing our duties, we had to cross a field to get to another wooded area. While we walked I noticed something metallic on the ground a few feet up ahead of me. My cousins were jacking around trying to knock each other down. They didn't notice as I crouched down and picked up the gun. I turned it over in my hands and was surprised at how much it weighed. I could tell by the stamp on the side that it was a Smith & Wesson model 60. It had five chambers and each had a bullet inside. I quickly shoved the gun into my deep shorts pocket and kept walking. My cousins didn't see me and I never told them what I had found. They were cool enough but I know they would have squealed on me to my dad.

After I got the gun I went back into the house and put on my Chiefs jacket. It was pretty chilly for this time of year. Before I went outside, I peeked out the front windows. I could see no movement. I felt myself starting to lose my nerve so I hurried up and went out on the porch. I quietly closed the screen door behind me and walked to the steps that led down to the front walk. The old boards creaked under my feet and I could hear the wind slapping an open gate back and forth from somewhere up the street. I looked up and down my block and other than some blowing papers and leaves the street was deserted.

I started walking down to the grocery store across the street from where I (used to) work. It was creepy being outside after two days of staying in the house. The wind was cold on my face and it was hard to hear anything through the gusts. I felt like I was being watched but I knew it was just me being jittery.

As I neared the shopping center, I noticed there were a lot of cars in the parking lot. People must have been stopping at the store after work. It looked like some weird scene out of a movie but there was no way for me to get up and leave half way through. Some people were sitting in their cars just staring straight ahead. Others were lying on the concrete of the parking lot. Still others looked as if they knew what was happening. Their faces distorted with pain and fear. I tried not to look but they scared the shit out of me. I had to make sure I always knew where they were. I know it sounds crazy but I couldn't help myself. My neck was starting to hurt from looking behind me so many times.

I walked up to the front doors of the grocery store and could see my reflection in the tinted windows. The wind blew my light brown, messy and matted hair around and my face looked horribly pale. I quickly walked closer to the window to avoid looking at myself and tried to look inside. It was pretty sunny out still so I had to cup my hands around my face to be able to see anything. The tint on the windows made it appear that everything inside was floating in a giant bottle of whiskey. I could see a few lifeless bodies and some shopping carts that had sunk to the bottom but nothing moved.

When I was sure it was safe, I walked over to the electric sliding doors and tried to pry them open with my hands. They were stuck shut. I needed something to wedge them open with. I turned and scanned the parking lot. In the row nearest to me sat a green nineteen eighty eight Taurus. I walked over and reached in to get the keys, trying as hard as possible to hold my breath and look away from the lady who sat in the front seat. Her body was bloated from sitting out in the sun and her skin was an awful shade of cloud gray. The white shirt she wore was splattered with tiny blood stains and a thin line of blood ran from her nose. I could smell urine and rotting flesh and did my best not to breathe. After retrieving the keys, I went around to the trunk and opened it. Inside was the spare tire, some windshield wiper fluid, a

blanket, two folding lawn chairs and some motor oil. I lifted up the spare tire and found the tire iron I was looking for.

I went back to the doors and shoved the tire iron in between them and pulled. The doors opened a few inches which was enough to get my hands in between them. I dropped the crow bar and pulled the doors apart with my hands. Once they were open far enough, I reached inside and grabbed a shopping cart while holding the doors open with my free arm and my foot. I wedged the shopping cart in between the doors as a temporary door stop.

The electricity had been out for days and the horrible odor hit me immediately. It smelled like rotten eggs and meat gone bad. It was very dark inside but luckily the grocery store had installed skylights. This allowed just enough light inside to see on even a cloudy day.

I walked past the checkout counters and noticed that many of them were still full of items no one would ever pay for. I walked up to the express lane and grabbed a pack of Mountain Cherry Blast Bubble Yum off the conveyor belt. While I opened the wrapper I noticed a tiny pink sneaker peeking out at me from around the corner of the counter. I leaned around to get a better view and realized the sneaker had a foot in it. My mind said not to look but I couldn't help it. It's just like a train wreck. You don't want to look but something in our foolish human nature doesn't allow us to leave it alone. We have to look. We **NEED** to look. Our minds will not let us forget if we ever did just walk away. I am no different. I looked.

I slowly adjusted my view around the corner of the checkout stand until an entire leg was visible. The body wore white socks with rainbows on the ankles and new looking blue jeans. The belt was bright and multi-colored with a unicorn on the buckle. Pee Wee Herman stared back at me from the white t-shirt the child wore. "I know you are, but what am I?" inquired Pee Wee. I leaned a little farther until I could see the face.

It was a little girl. She couldn't have been more than five or six years old. Her long blond hair was tied back in two pig tails with yellow hair bands. She was lying next to a woman I assumed was her mother. I choked back a whimper and dropped the gum. She reminded me of my little sister when we were children.

I ran outside and collapsed on the sidewalk that ran along the front of the store. I could not hold it in any more. I bawled like a baby. I missed my family and had somehow repressed it until now. I thought of my sister and mom and dad and how I would never see them ever again. I cried until my throat was sore and my eyes burned from wiping at them. I don't know how long I sat there for, but I felt relieved and somehow lighter once I was done. Mourning was a very odd process.

When I was done grieving, I went back inside and quickly found the aisle with kitchen supplies making sure I avoided the express checkout aisle. I grabbed a red long handled broom and went back to the front doors. After struggling for fifteen minutes trying to get the doors open wide enough I finally managed to wedge the broom up high between the doors. This allowed me to walk in and out of the grocery store without worrying about opening the doors each time. It also allowed fresh air into the muggy and awful smelling gases that inhabited the store.

I found a grocery cart with a squeaky wheel and started rounding up food to take home with me. I grabbed a lot of chips, snacks and soda. I also figured I should probably get some flashlights and batteries for light. The cart filled up pretty fast.

When I couldn't fit anything else in the cart I pushed it to the front of the store. I was trying to maneuver the cart outside when I heard a noise come from the back of the building. It was a scuffling noise like someone moving around but I couldn't be sure. I called out but no one answered. I decided to investigate so I set the cart outside the door and opened a black flashlight package. I then unscrewed the end and installed the four D batteries it required then I pulled the gun from my pocket and went back inside. As I walked along the cash registers shining my flashlight down each aisle my breathing grew faster and I could feel my heart thumping loudly in my chest. I thought I could see shadowy movement at the back of the store but I wasn't sure. It could have been the flashlight and my fear playing tricks on my eyes.

The smell and my fear were making me nauseas. I had to get out of the store. If I was braver maybe I would have tried harder to find the source of the noise. Maybe it was a survivor. Maybe it was a rat. I decided I didn't care either way. I walked outside and pushed the cart home.

Stan Howard Las Vegas, NV October 5th, 1991

The last two days had been a living hell. When Stan finally came out of his trance he hid in the dark and tiny closet. When he wasn't hiding he slept. Now his hunger was overpowering his fear and he needed to eat.

The lights had gone out sometime early this afternoon. Stan opened the shades slightly to allow some daylight into the room. He had not looked outside since locking himself in his room. He was terrified of what he would see.

Stan summoned up his courage gripped the yellow vinyl shades in his two fists. He closed his eyes then yanked open the shades with one swift jerky nervous motion. Stan stood there for a few seconds, afraid to open his eyes. Slowly he opened them and squinted as the bright sunshine filled the room. The sun reflected off of the hotel across the street. It was nearly blinding after being inside the dimly lit room for the last two days. It was hard to see much. There was a lot of smoke coming from different buildings and vehicle pile ups and he could barely see the mountains in the distance. Stan could see nothing moving. It was as if the entire population of Las Vegas had disappeared. Stan knew this was not true. He knew where the population was. They were all dead except for him.

Stan turned away from the window and sat on the edge of the bed. His stomach grumbled. He needed to find something to eat. Stan walked to his door and stood there with his ear up against the door frame. He listened for about a minute and convinced himself the hall would be empty. Stan removed the security latch and unlocked the dead bolt. He then slowly opened the door and peeked into the hallway. It was pretty dark with only the security lights on and the smell was awful. There must be hundreds of rotting bodies on this floor alone Stan thought. He was terrified but he knew he would have to go out. It was either find food or starve to death.

Stan tip toed out into the hallway and looked both ways. He remembered seeing a vending machine near the elevator. The hallway was very dim but Stan could see just enough to make it to the elevator. Just a couple of days ago this hallway was bright and colorful. The carpet was a busy red and purple swirling mass. The walls had been a beige color with fancy and ornate light fixtures hanging from them. Now it was dark and dingy and smelled like death.

Stan walked with his hand on the wall and kept moving toward the elevators. He eventually found the vending machines in a room just off the elevator passage. He stood there for a moment drooling at the potato chips and candy bars on the other side of the glass. Stan fumbled in his pockets looking for loose change or bills. All he had was casino chips.

Stan looked around for something heavy. He grabbed a fire extinguisher off the wall and smashed the glass in the front case. He then stuffed his pockets full of candy bars and chips. There was a pop machine in the vending room also. Stan picked up the fire extinguisher again and smashed the lock until it fell off. He then opened the pop machine and gathered as many cans of soda as he could carry.

Stan walked back to the hallway that led to his room. He looked down the passage way that led away from his room and thought he could see something on the floor. He took a few steps in that direction and realized what it was. Clad in black shoes and stockings, a pair of legs stuck out into the hallway. The rest of the body lay in the room and out of view. Stan couldn't be sure in the dim light but he assumed this was a maid who died while doing her rounds. He shuddered and backed away from the body. He almost tripped over a room service tray that lay on the floor against a wall. He recovered his balance and briskly walked back to his room, glancing over his shoulder every so often.