



Shifting Under Your Feet

By

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Shifting

Initially unnoticed by the trillions of inhabitants of the planet's surface, five thousand kilometers below ground a small fracture in the outer core moved after having been stable for millions of years. The small collapse allowed a shift in billions of metric tons of the inner Earth. The tremor caused by the shift of just a few millimeters was detected and recorded around the globe and thought of as a large but not overly dangerous quake. Had this shift occurred just a few days earlier or later it would have simply registered and been ignored. In a cosmic quirk of fate the movement of so much material at the precisely wrong time in geological terms caused the tilt of the earth on its axis to change to a less hospitable .5 degrees instead of its pleasant 23.4 degrees shift the orientation of the sphere. Like a perfectly planned shot by a pool shark the Earth moved to reposition itself with the center of the United States, Kansas, becoming the new North Pole as the globe's center axis became almost vertical with the plane of orbit around the Sun.

The axis would eventually return to its normal 7 degree tilt thanks to the orbiting moon, but for now there were no seasons. The return to a tilt would be quick on a planetary scale, but the hundreds of years to return to normal would be too long for the life on the planet to act as if it were unnoticed. The inhabitants of the globe having been used to the normal tilt and seasonal changes were suddenly faced with a world that was no longer behaving in the manner they expected. The Earth was far from stable in cosmological terms but the short lived denizens thought of it as an unchanging, nearly perfect, system. Most species would suffer greatly causing an extinction not seen since the dinosaurs ceased to walk the Earth. Many animals would alter their lives, adapt to the new planet, and thrive. Others would simply ignore the changes, and live on happily going about their daily routines never aware that the world had shifted under their feet.

Routine

The walk to work was as uneventful as any other day for Carl Johnson. His health benefited from the short walks, but his complete lack of any other form of exercise more than offset the small benefit of not owning a car. Living in the city, just four blocks from his store made owning a car a burden that he did not need. Since he owned the Comic Emporium he could simply open late if the weather were bad, or he could brave the rain and open on time. The option was his as owner and sole employee of the trendiest comic book store in Midtown Atlanta.

Though he had a work schedule with flexibility envied by any denizen of a cubicle farm, Carl never missed opening his store on time. When he twisted his ankle 8 months ago crossing the

street, he just gave himself extra time for the walk using the crutches rented from the pharmacy at his grocery store. No deviation from the schedule, even for injuries.

Mr. Johnson suffered from terminal pale, nerdy, white guy syndrome. He could dress in any clothes, drive any car, show any amount of cash, and it would be impossible to convince anyone seeing him that he was anything other than the owner of a comic book store who did not have a woman in his life other than his mother. In Carl's case his parents were both dead so that kept him from living in their basement. He was living off the money they left, but definitely not in their basement.

The streets were packed, but no one walked to work in the city, so Carl had the sidewalks to himself as usual at 9AM with the only exception being the blonde woman that ran everyday after her husband left for work. Carl knew her exercise schedule almost as well as she did. He was a creature of habit and she appeared to be cut from the same cloth. He wondered if she noticed him as she ran by, but assumed that she did not. Her passing him in the morning was the closest thing to a relationship with a woman in his life.

The Comic Emporium was located on the first floor of a small 3-story building nestled between a tobacco shop and dry cleaners. On a bad day, the combination of tobacco smoke and cleaning chemicals was overwhelming, but the rent was cheap for the area and the location was perfect. He had more than enough parking for the comic nerds who traveled from all over the metro area, and foot traffic from the nearby restaurants allowed him to find new customers and make a few extra sales. The crowds in the evening and at lunch allowed those that wished to keep their love of comics a secret enough cover to slip in and out unnoticed.

The door opened with a shove, the old wood expanded in the morning humidity making it harder to open. It was easier to open later in the day. Carl considered asking for the door to be repaired, but he enjoyed the charm of a door that stuck. It made people work to get inside. Stepping inside and Carl turned off the alarm, flipped the sign to open and started the morning ritual of making coffee and microwaving a frozen breakfast. This morning sausage and pancakes

made its appearance at the top of the frozen breakfast stack in the small freezer. Carl did his shopping once a week at the grocery store between his apartment and the store. Six breakfasts, 6 lunches, and 6 dinners, 6 2-liter bottles of Jolt Cola, and 1 package of Peanut Butter Cups comprised the items in the cart each week. The shopping trip had been the same for 4 years. Carl rejoiced in the fact that he did not have to put any thought into eating. His caloric intake was exactly the same every week. He could increase his caloric intake and gain 5 pounds or lower it, and lose 5 pounds without a great effort. Most people would envy him his control. The truth was that Carl knew no other way to live.

The only day of the week that he did not eat frozen meals 3 times a day was Sunday. He enjoyed brunch at the restaurant next to his apartment and pizza in the evening from the pizza place next to the brunch restaurant. To say he lived an orderly life would be an understatement. When people noticed his habits and questioned his ordered life, he would laugh and say it made things easy. Sometimes he mentioned that Albert Einstein owned 5 of the same suit so he never had to worry about what to wear when leaving the house each day. Carl had considered doing something similar with his clothing, but decided just ordering similar things on line when things wore out was close enough for him.

The microwave chirped that it had finished, just as Carl set out the envelopes for his weekly mailing to his regular customers who had standing orders for their comics scheduled to arrive later in the morning. Some comic nerds could wait for him to send their orders, because unlike ordering directly from the publisher Carl would only send mint or near mint issues to the customers, so they were willing to wait the extra 2 days and pay the shipping costs to guarantee their perfect collectables.

Just as he started to open the microwave a wave of dizziness came over Carl. He grabbed the table and held fast with his right hand. It passed quickly and he assumed that his blood sugar was low and hoped to himself that he was not getting sick, again. He hated doctors. Doctors asked annoying questions and wanted to give him drugs, but an infection in his sinuses, or ears

could not be ignored. The queasiness in his stomach along with the rumblings of passing trucks made him consider skipping breakfast, but he knew that would be a decision to regret all day. Cooling breakfast tray of food in hand, he clicked on the TV to watch CNN as he sat down at the small desk behind the counter. Instead of the usual morning anchor woman smiling at the camera he was greeted by a blue screen with white lettering, “All satellite channels are currently unavailable due to interference. Technicians are working to resolve the problem. Please stand by.”

Switching to a local channel, he noticed the morning national show was not on the air, but the morning WSB anchors looking flustered were taking turns saying, “We are not sure what is going on.” Alternating with, “Small earth quakes have been reported all over the south east.” Then the statement that scared him from the meteorologist, “Something is going on here that I don’t understand. In all my years of meteorology I have no explanation for this.”

At that point Carl put the pieces together in his mind that the small rumbling he had been feeling all morning were not large trucks on the nearby interstate, or cars driving by, but were actually small earthquakes. None quite large enough to be noticed without thinking about it, but they were constantly there nonetheless.

Then the local anchorman said, “Word we are getting from our Washington Bureau by phone is that we are experiencing some manner of sudden climate change.”

The frazzled meteorologist broke in, “That does not make sense. Look, the engineer says he can see the carrier signal from the satellites. It is just too low on the horizon for our dishes to aim at with the trees in the way.”

The anchorman losing all of his veneer of perfection asked, “So what are you saying?”

The meteorologist touched his chin, “I think the Earth has tilted on its axis. It has happened many times, it has just been a really long time.”

The anchorman with his perfect hair regained his news persona and said, “That is some interesting speculation, but right now we have no confirmation on that.”

The meteorologist who looked good enough for television, but was a certified meteorologist and not a weather caster said, “Stop the stupid shit, Earl. This is reality, not some nifty story you can package to run between commercials.”

The anchorman fired back, “Fred, you are losing it. We are on the air here.”

The debate ended a few minutes later, but by then Carl had finished his breakfast and had begun organizing the shipping envelopes. Since he could not change the channel to the Cartoon Network as usual, he left it on the local news. The hysteria died down as the local channel managed to make a connection to national news via the internet and was getting national experts who explained what they thought was occurring.

By late afternoon, 50 percent of the experts were convinced that the earth had started tilting on its axis and North America was shifting toward the North Pole. Since it was late spring, the shift was being seen slowly, but they were certain that it was about to get very cold in North America. Magnetic compasses were already useless, but global positioning satellites were still helpful, if no longer accurate. The earth was not in the place they expected it to be underneath their orbits.

The remaining 50 percent of the experts were divided evenly between those that thought this was global warming and those that thought this was a massive terrorist attack. Carl watched the whole thing unfold with a sense of detachment. The world was moving, but that had little effect on his life as long as the shop was there and food was in the grocery store. He gave up listening to the television banter and put on a DVD of Star Wars, The Clone Wars. It was his favorite of the new movies. Lots of action and Anakin was still a good guy.

His disinterest lasted until mid-afternoon when the weekly shipment did not arrive. As the minutes turned into hours, he grew more and more impatient. The day the UPS strike started and his shipment was 4 hours late almost caused a nervous breakdown. He was determined not to let that happen again. Crying and throwing things was not an acceptable way for an adult to act, and he knew that even while he was losing his temper on that horrible day of the strike.

He went on-line to check his order tracking status and he found that his shipment was marked 'out for delivery,' but red letters below the status read, "Due to the unfolding natural disaster delivery times can not be guaranteed."

Carl closed the browser and considered calling UPS but realized he was doing what Dr. Martinez, his therapist, called, "obsessing," though he considered it being thorough. He pondered for a moment what Dr. Martinez would think of his success in not calling. He would probably congratulate him but would find some manner of fault. For \$200 an hour, they always had to find something to criticize so you would have to come back to work on it with them next time.

Customers arrived all afternoon looking for their orders and Carl had to tell those at least as obsessed as he was that no new comics had arrived. Sales were slow and the weather was bad. Carl considered closing the shop early, but in the end he waited until the usual 7PM closing time and he went home. To his surprise, it was not getting dark as expected. The air was cooler than usual but the sun did not seem to want to set. As he walked home, Carl pondered that maybe that meteorologist was correct. Maybe the Earth changed its mind about how it wanted to tilt and they were all going to have to live with the changes.

The Farm

The morning was warm and the air was calm when the girls got on the well used school bus taking them from their mother's custody to the school. Melissa walked from the dirt road back up the long drive to her farm house. Her husband Dan had long since started his rounds on the farm and was no where to be seen, her Mother-In-Law waited on the porch with a stern look

she said, “You coddle those girls too much. You live on a farm, city girl, they have to be independent.”

“Martha...” She said as she walked by her.

Calling after the young wife of her son Martha said, “You will realize I am right one day.”

“Not gonna be ta day.” Melissa said just above a whisper.

When Dan announced they were selling the trailer and buying a house after Carla, their youngest was born, Melissa had assumed it would not be his parents home, which came with his aging parents. The sale of the trailer helped them pay off their truck, but buying the house from Dan’s parents for a dollar and her agreeing to take care of the family was a deal with the devil. Secretly Melissa thought that Martha would not last long, but 6 years later, the mother-in-law was as frail and feisty as the day they had moved into the farmhouse.

The morning dishes needed to be cleaned and then it was time to prepare lunch. Dan and Melvin, her father-in-law would be at the house at 11 and if food were not ready they would be behind. Martha sat on the front porch avoiding anything that looked like work while Melissa did the woman’s job for the entire family.

At half past 8 while drying the last of the dishes, it suddenly started to become dark. Thinking at first that a sudden storm was rolling in Melissa absentmindedly flipped the light switch turning on the main kitchen lights. As she put away the cast Iron pan on its holder above the stove she heard Martha shuffling in from the front porch.

“Melissa, something weird is going on out there.” Martha said with some real concern. The young mother could not recall the sounds of actually concern ever emanating from her mother-in-law so she was taken aback.

“Turn on the TV.” Melissa yelled up the hallway as she looked out of the window the sky was clear and she could see a few stars in the horizon. Most of the sky was just a murky gray.

Martha's reply from the living room was unnerving, "Nothing on. The new channels are just static."

Melissa walked into the room and looked at the TV then to her mother-in-law, and said, "I will call the cable company."

"You don't think the Russians have attacked, do you?"

"I would doubt it. Terrorists maybe, but if they can make the sky dark we are in trouble." Melissa said.

Getting the number to call for cable problems took a few seconds as Melissa hunted for the channel guide which had the number in small print on the bottom. In that minute all of the phone lines in town were put in use. When she picked up the phone she got a fast busy signal and that scared the mother of two.

"The phone is out."

"I wonder if this is the end."

"If you are talking about Revelation, I have yet to hear any horns."

"You never paid attention in church."

"Is this really the time for this?"

Martha thought for a few seconds and said, "Maybe."

Melissa did not give her time to continue arguing about her lack of attention in church on Sundays. She started for the door saying, "Stay here. I have to go get the girls." Grabbing the keys to the truck she rushed down the front steps and broke into a full run as she rounded the corner of the barn. Where the truck should be was just a bare patch of land. Before she had time to ponder, she noticed headlights coming up from well out into the field. Thinking it was Dan driving the family truck across the rough terrain she made a mental note to chew him out for doing that again, when she realized that the headlights were not that bright and were too high off the ground. It was the 2-ton flat bed used to take hay to the cows to stupid to come to the barn to feed.

As she waited for the truck to clear the gate, Melissa watched and knew that it was Melvin who got out from the drivers seat and then had to get out again once he cleared the gate to close it behind him. Moving a truck through a gate was a 2-man job. Livestock had a way of escaping if one did it as a solo exercise.

The her clothing suddenly seemed inadequate as she noticed it was no longer a warm 80 plus degree, but was fast approaching 50 degrees and falling. Her worn t-shirt and jeans were not going to be adequate much longer if the temperature kept falling. The heavy, worn, farm truck rolled to a stop just in front of her.

Before he could say anything Melissa asked, "Where is Dan?"

"Said he had to go to town. Any idea what is going on?"

"No, and I need to get to the school to get the girls. Can you drive me in that thing?"

She asked while nodding toward the truck.

"I think I have enough gas. Let me check on Martha."

"She is fine. She thinks the Russians have attacked or it is the 'End Times.' Either way, I want to go get my girls."

Melvin looked toward the house and instead of arguing he got back in the truck. Melissa climbed up into the passenger side and just stared straight ahead. As they headed toward town and the school Melvin tried to make conversation to cover his nervousness, "Maybe we will pass Dan."

Melissa shot back, "We won't. He is too busy to notice anything is going on."

Melvin knew that his daughter-in-law was not stupid. He did not insult her by trying to cover for his son any longer. He said without looking at her, "I'm sorry. I told him to straighten up. He did for a while."

"I don't want to talk about it."

They drove without speaking but not in silence as the heavy truck strained to maintain 45 miles per hour on the paved road. Melvin slowed to a stop as the line of cars at the school

stretched out onto the main road. Melissa said, "Get turned around somehow and wait for us on the road." With that, she jumped from the truck and ran toward the school.

The crowd outside the school was thin. Most parents just sitting in their cars going through a line but a few like Melissa had rushed up on foot. As she approached the main entrance, the gym teacher held up a hand and she said, "Ma'am, everything is going to be okay. Just be calm for the kids." Melissa at that moment realized that she had not bothered to put on a bra that day and must have looked a sight. The gym teacher whom all suspected for preferring woman to men took notice of the oversight and it brought an uncontrolled laugh to the terrified mother of two. The world might be ending and people were still thinking with their hormones.

Melissa drew her arms across her chest uncomfortably and the gym teacher looked away, hiding embarrassment. Walking in the main entrance Debra and Carla noticed their mother and rushed toward her only to be admonished by a teacher not to run in the hallways. The icy stare from the relieved mother stopped further talking from the perpetually angry woman with her hair in a bun more suited for teaching in the 1950s.

Instead of stopping and hugging her girls Melissa took them each by the hand and walked them quickly across the entrance area and across the street to the waiting farm truck. Once inside Carla asked, "What's happening mommy?"

"I have no idea, but we are headed home."

The little one asked, "Where is Daddy?"

Melissa started to reply with an angry remark and then remembered how good Dan was with the girls and despite his stupidity he was their father. She settled on, "He better be at home when we get there."

She looked at Marvin who was happy that she did not bring the girls into the damaged marriage. The ride home was longer with traffic building on the roads, and halfway Marvin turned on the heater saying, "My old bones are getting cold. I know you ladies have to be cold."

"At least the heater works on this thing." Melissa said.

“It is a good truck, but it is just for farm work. It can’t handle the roads all that well.”

The old but reliable truck returned them safely to the farm where the new truck sat on the road in front of the house. As the old farm truck rattled up the driveway Dan rush out of the door and opened the door as the heavy vehicle came to a stop. He lowered the girls to the ground and offered an hand to his wife.

Deciding that today was not the day to start a fight Melissa took his hand but avoided him when he tried to hug her. She asked, “Where were you?”

“I had business to attend to in town.”

“I am sure.”

The woman who ran the family walked with her girls into the farm house and was met by Martha at the door. The matriarch of the family said, “The radio says something has happened to the Earth.”

“An asteroid?” Melissa asked.

“Kansas is now the North Pole.”

“Huh?” was the best Melissa could muster.

“We are 50 miles from the top of the world now.”

Dan and Melvin made it in the door and as the story was repeated it became apparent that they didn’t grasp the depth of the problem as Dan said, “We need to prepare the Cattle for winter.”

Melissa looked at her husband with her jaw slightly open and could not form words for several seconds. Then Melvin said, “I will start rounding them up in the barn.”

Melissa looked at her mother-in-law who seemed to grasp the situation. The older woman’s pained expression showed that she was going to be of no help. Melissa told her girls to go to their room and be sure the windows were closed and find some warmer clothes.

Looking at her husband once the girls were out of the room she asked, “Are you stupid?”

“No.”

“You can’t raise cattle at the North Pole.”

“It will be winter.”

“It will be deadly. We need to get out of here.” She said.

Dan shook his head and then said, “We aren’t going to abandon the farm. We can save the livestock.”

“You are insane.”

“Just have dinner ready and find me my jacket.” He said as he walked out.

Melissa followed him in the gloom of midday and stopped him on the porch with a tug on his shirt. She said, “I know where you were. I thought it was over.”

“You don’t know...”

“Don’t lie to me. Have enough respect for me to tell me the truth.”

“I...”

“Look, you did the right thing and married me and have been good to the girls, I know you loved her, but you promised me it was over.”

“It was. It just happened.”

“I doubt her husband would be as forgiving as I have been.” She glared.

“I’m sorry I was not here when you needed me.”

“At least you are smart enough to know when you screwed up.”

She walked back inside as Dan headed toward the field to start gathering in the cattle with his father. Once inside the girls were sitting with Martha listening to the local radio station explain that satellites were too low on the horizon for the cable companies to bring in satellite channels. Melissa told her oldest daughter, Debra, “listen to the radio and tell us if they have any important warnings. Take notes like in school. I need to talk to your grandmother.”

The two women walked into the kitchen. Through the window, they could see the headlights of the farm truck moving in the field gathering in the cattle. Martha took her usual seat at the dinner table and said, “Dan loves you...”

“I don’t need you making excuses for my husband fucking around.”

“Language.”

“This is my house, and you have said far worse over far less.”

Melissa looked through the pantry and started to gather the makings of chicken and dumplings. It would be a hearty meal after a long day. As she pulled the frozen chicken from the freezer she said, “Martha, it is going to be like this freezer outside soon.”

“I know.”

“We need to leave.”

“I know.”

“The men won’t leave.”

“I know.”

“You and I need to leave with the girls.”

“I know. “

Melissa dropped the frozen chicken in the water that was not yet boiling. She looked back at Martha who was staring at the floor and asked, “Will you go with me?”

Without looking up she said, “Yes.”

Cooking occupied the next few minutes and then Martha said, “We should wait a day or two. The roads will be clogged. The radio said the government will be sending help.”

Melissa started to mix the flour and water for the dumplings and said, “That will give us time to prepare. If the men won’t go with us we will have to be strong.” Both knew their husbands would not leave. They also knew that they would not put up a fight when the women said they were going to take the girls to safety.

A Day in the Office

George Walters walked into the office as the sky got dark. Traffic was horrible and he again pondering selling the house and moving closer to the office, but the schools near his house were the best in the metro area. He would suffer the drive so that his kids could go to good schools and his wife could stay home. Thanks to his service in the Army his degree was paid for, and the reserve obligation paid for his MBA.

A sense of unease overcame him as he tried to walk down the long hallway. He thought for a moment that he had another ear infection; everyone in Atlanta had allergy and sinus problems. The sensation passed. He looked down the hallway to notice that one of the women from accounting was leaning on the wall and appeared to be dizzy.

George walked up and asked, "You okay?"

"Just dizzy."

"Me too... just now. That was weird."

"Do you think it was an earth quake." The bean counter said with a look of severe concern then added, "I left L.A. to get away from earthquakes."

"If it was then it was small. We get little ones here, usually in the Dacula area."

"Really?"

"You don't think Stone Mountain fell from the sky do you?" He said with a smile, then added,

"It is pushing out of the ground."

"I think I am okay... Have a good day."

"I hope I will... with the new road map, I am not sure my projects will exist much longer."

George said as he walked toward his office.

The accountant did not respond giving him a real sense of unease. The accountants knew the budget better than anyone. Her silence spoke volumes. George realized it was a good thing he started his job search yesterday. The signs were everywhere at the company, the smell of change was in the air ducts.

Walking into his office he turned on the lights. This time of the morning the sun was usually strong enough but it was slightly darker than usually, but there was not a cloud in the sky.

Before George could sit down at his desk the cell phone on his hip started to vibrate. Glancing at the screen he saw the words home. Pressing the send button with his thumb he raised the phone to his ear and said, "Hello, my wife."

"Hey... the cables out and the boys are fit to be tied."

"Weird, what happened?"

"Well the local channels are up, but the satellite channels are just static."

"Take them to the play ground."

"The sky looks like it is going to rain."

"Put on a DVD. "

"Yeah, I don't know why I didn't just do that. I just love sharing my world with you."

George smiled as he said, "I have abandoned my woman to a 3 and a 4 year old. You can call me anytime to share."

"I will. Love you."

"Love you too."

George hit end, and slipped the phone back into the case on his side. Unlocking his workstation, he noticed that he had 37 unread emails and a full calendar. He had already missed one meeting, and would be late for another in about 10 minutes. Scanning the email subject lines, they were all about projects that could wait. He grabbed his coffee cup and his day planner to head out to the break room to get some caffeine up before his upcoming meeting.

One meeting turned into a break out session and then another meeting started. George made notes hoping to have time to create all of the documents he had been tasked to do in one meeting after another. It was going to be another long night of creating documents justifying one project and stating why another should be cancelled.

It occurred to George that he may actually be working against himself in more than one case. He laughed as he walked into his office considering just running to lunch, but he knew that he needed to check messages. The voice mail button was flashing on his phone and he thought about the boys. His cell phone was on but his wife often chose to leave messages on his voice mail rather than call him out of a meeting.

There was just one message. George relaxed thinking that he would have a chance to go to lunch after all. Then his world fell apart as he listened, "Lieutenant Walters, this is Captain Burns. We have been ordered to an immediate activation. Do not bother to get a uniform; just get to company HQ ASAP. You will be returning home this evening, but we are facing a national emergency." The time code showed the message was just five minutes old. As George absorbed the information he started to dial home as his cell phone rang.

"Hello."

"Lieutenant?"

"This is Lieutenant Walters."

"Sir, this is Sergeant Ramirez."

"I just got the message about the activation."

"I did to, Sir. Do you know what is happening?"

George realized that Sergeant Carlos Ramirez had his personal cell phone and was just calling socially. They spent hours together on while in the field and normally officers and enlisted were not that friendly, but in the reserves, things were far more casual. The since Carlos had been his platoon sergeant for a month last year before Goddard was promoted they had some manner of relationship.

"Let's just go ahead and get to HQ. I have no idea." George said.

"See you there, sir. See you soon."

George smiled and suddenly realized that he was not going to have to write the reports. He walked toward his boss's office suppressing a smile, but joyous that he was not going to have to deal with the road map.

Knocking on the closed door George did not wait to be told to come in. He walked in and interrupted his boss who was on the phone saying, "Sorry to interrupt."

Waiting a few seconds for this boss to put down the phone he then said, "You know how I told you that I might get called up one day?"

The professional manager said with complete detachment, "This is the Reserve thing?"

"Yes. I just got notified to report immediately. This sounds like some kind of national emergency."

The boss said, "Maybe this has something to do with the weird weather?"

"Huh?"

"The news is full of stuff about weather change. They are saying we changed on our axis this morning. Kansas is the new north pole."

"That could be what is going on." George said.

Then his boss let him know how unwanted he was, "If they activate you, there won't be a job waiting when you get back."

Becoming furious George said, "You can't do that. That is against federal law."

The boss laughed, "That is not what I meant George. This whole office will be gone."

"Well, if the company exists they will have to honor my employment."

The boss smiled and said, "You may just end up as the only one from our team to survive the road map."

"I have to report immediately, I will drop by or mail a copy of my orders along with other pertinent information you can put in my personnel file. You will most likely need to reassign my tasks to Leonard. I am sure he will be happy." George said as he backed out of the door.

"Good luck George. I didn't mean to come off like an ass." The boss said.

“You did. But you are forgiven.” George said over his shoulder as he walked toward his office. Grabbing his day planner, he rushed to the car.

While driving, he called home to talk to his wife and she was busy cleaning the house. It was laundry and floor day. The boys were occupied with a movie so she had not seen or heard any news. He could hear the dropping of the broom and she said, “How are we going to pay the mortgage on a soldier’s salary?”

“At least I am an officer now.”

“But it will be half of what you make.”

“Honey, just take care of the boys and try and find out what the news is saying. I have to report in.” Then he added, “If you could drag out my spare uniforms from the back of the closet that would be good.”

“You do the Army, stuff, I take care of everything else.”

“Fair enough.” He knew when he had been defeated. He commanded his platoon, not his wife. She was the boss of the family.

George arrived at the small reserve post that served mostly as a motor pool for their few aging cast off vehicles from regular Army units. The POV parking lot was full. As George walked around the overfull gravel lot cursing the people who could not find a space he realized that their headquarters was being used as a rallying point for Marine and Naval reserve units who were based in Atlanta but did not have an actual facility in the area. Walking through the narrow space between the crowd of soldiers, sailors and marines he found the shared office and at his assigned desk was a strong looking young man who appeared to just recently be out of college. Even out of uniform it was impossible to hide that the occupant of his desk was a Marine.

George always thought they looked as if they would just as soon kill you as talk to. The only reason a Marine let you survive was that they did not have orders to end your life.

Looking up the Marine said, “You must be Lieutenant Walters. The Captain said I could use your desk to make some calls and try to find my officers.”

“Not a problem. I was going to grab my notebook.”

With that the Marine slid back from the desk and said, “I will only be a few more minutes, but let me get out of the way.”

“Thanks.” George quickly retrieved his dark green notepad and a green Army issue green pen. Stepping away he said, “I won’t need the desk for a while.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“Your welcome... Um, I don’t know your rank.”

“Major James. Nice to meet you. Now let’s see if I can do as well finding my officers as your Captain has done.”

“Nice to meet you, Major.” George said as he walked away thinking he had misjudged the Major’s age. He must be much older the first thought

The meeting at Captain Burns’ desk was short and to the point. He said, “We have been activated and put at a war footing. I don’t have any orders but we have been told to act as if our borders have been crossed.”

One of the other platoon leaders asked, “What about our families?”

The company commander responded, “That is the hard part for all of us. We all have families here, and I will not allow us to roll out without assuring their safety. I am not going to abandon my family any more than I would ask any soldier to abandon his or hers.”

George relaxed knowing that he would not have to abandon his family today. His phone’s unexpected ringing reminded him that he had forgotten to turn it to quiet mode. Apologizing and lifting the phone to his ear he heard, “Hi, this is Carl. I wanted to let you know that no shipment came in today with all the weird stuff going on. I will call you when it arrives.”

“Thanks.” George said and hung up the phone. Not wanting to reveal that it was his comic book connection rather than his spouse he mumbled, “Just checking in.” No one pressed the issue and the rest of the meeting was interrupted 6 more times from cell phones and the Captain never flinched, each time he just sat quietly and let his officers take the phone calls. The commander

knew that everyone was scared, and everyone had families and friends who were worried about them. Discipline was important but would not be served by making his officers more nervous. The meeting ended abruptly when the company commander's cell phone rang. The Captain looked at the caller id hit the button to answer and before raising the phone to speak said, "Formation in 15 minutes. Gather your soldiers in the motor pool and let's do our best to look like professional soldiers in front of the Marines."

The officers disbursed and headed out to the motor pool finding their senior NCOs to round up the enlisted. The nervous soldiers seemed happy to have something to do, even if it were just a formation. It was better than standing around getting out of the way of the Marines that suddenly seemed to be everywhere.

With seconds to spare the rough formation of out of uniform soldiers fell in and Captain Burns appeared from the headquarters building. The First Sergeant called the company to attention and turned to report to the approaching commander. After an exchange of salutes the First Sergeant began his march to the rear of the formation and the Lieutenants began to exchange positions with their Platoon Sergeants, moving from the rear to the front of the individual platoon formations while the platoon sergeants marched to the rear taking the place previously occupied by the platoon leaders. It was an orderly process and it was usually ignored with the First Sergeant remaining in the front beside the commander and the Platoon leaders standing off to the side, but given the tense situation, following all of the procedures put everyone at ease and allowed the soldiers and their leaders to focus.

George's world again took another turn as the Commander began speaking. The entire Company wanted to let out gasps but not one sound came out as they listened.

"Soldiers, the situation is worse than any of us knew. I have just received orders that we are no longer a Reserve Signal Company. Welcome the 327th Infantry Company. We will be issued new weapons and given 1 month to improve our small unit tactics before we are deployed.

Where we will be deployed is still unknown. I will assure you that before we deploy our

families will be safe and provided for. First formation is 8AM tomorrow morning. Bring in all your gear and contact your employers. You will be on active duty for a period of no less than 1 year. Welcome to the Regular Army.”

The Commander then barked, “Company! Attenshun!”

Heals clicked and thudded together. Almost immediately, the order followed, “Dismissed.”

The drive home was horrific for George. A drive that should have taken 20 minutes took 3 hours. In the back of his mind he pondered how long it would take to make it back to the armory in the morning and considered just driving back in as soon as he got home, but thinking of his wife and the boys being left alone made him shake off that idea.

Local news was overwhelmed trying to pass along information but none of it truly useful. He left on the radio out of fear of missing something important. It helped pass the time in his car waiting to get a cell connection to call home as he crept along. The boys were asleep by the time he walked in the door to be greeted by a smiling wife and all of his uniforms and equipment stacked neatly in the kitchen.

Instead of complaining his bride said, “Let me help you load up in the car and you need to get back to the armory. An officer should be there before the enlisted.”

George smiled and asked, “What about you and the boys?”

“They don’t know anything is going on, and the neighbors are here.”

“You have the pistol?”

His bride patted the pocket of her sensible suburban housewife shorts and said, “It is in my pocket.” Then she said, “You should put the other pistol in the car.”

George said, “You should have been the officer.”

Beaming from ear to ear his bride said, “I am the dictator of this family. I don’t have time for another job.”

Patting him on the rear, handing him a Pepsi, and pointing him out the door she said, “Go protect us, soldier.”

George saluted smartly and started the drive back to the armory in the dark.

Ignoring the Elephant in the Room

Panic did not take long to overtake downtown Atlanta. Stories filled the news of people in the Midwest, which was now the North Pole, had started heading south to Texas. Stories from Canada were very different. They seemed to be enjoying their new warmer climate, though it was in a different position on the globe than they were accustomed.

South Africa seemed to be in a position similar to that of North America and they were now sitting on the southern pole. Video from Africa showed a massive migration north of people dropping everything and trying to get to safety. Stories of ethnic violence renewed were all of the news from the massive continent. UN troops already in the area for the previous wars were overwhelmed and retreated to their own compounds waiting to return to their home nations.

Like that old saying about all politics being local, it was true that all weather was local, and Carl did not let the panic he observed in the streets faze him. The weather had cooled but that just meant that he had to break out the fall clothing. It was not too cold and the news people predicted that the Atlanta area would be more like Canada in its climate now. A Canada in the winter, but still an area inhabitable by humans. Everyone hoped that the change was over and we would now see the same weather patterns with the land just shifted.

With his medium coat on the walk to work was chillier than the day before but Carl did not let it deter him from going to work. The roads were packed with people in their cars with most of their possessions looking as if they were leaving town for good. He crossed against the light in the crush of traffic and opened his shop as usual.

With breakfast completed, he checked the online status of his shipment. He was pleased to see that it was out for delivery but the date was no longer specified. He was tempted to call

but the red letters were still there looking even more bold today, “Due to the unfolding natural disaster delivery times can not be guaranteed.”

The television was more normal today, it seemed that some cable operators had managed to find a way to talk to their communications satellites and others were sending digital signals via the internet to local stations that still had the benefit of broadcast towers.

The national news anchors had nice three-dimensional graphics explaining how the planet had shifted, but no one could predict what would happen next. NASA released pictures from its global observer spacecraft showing the new orientation of the planet compared with previous images from the crafts static position in orbit. The most interesting thing to Carl was the weather predictions. In only 24 hours, the climatologists were fortifying their guesses. No two weather experts agreed as far as the comic storeowner could tell. He was not surprised. Carl had one customer that morning that did not seem to care about the world situation, but was just flustered that his comics did not yet arrive. The young man walked in, asked if his order had arrived and when Carl tried to explain about shipping interruptions due to the weather the customer exploded yelling, “I will take my business elsewhere. We are through.” The young man walked out and true to his word, Carl never saw him again. For anyone other than a comic book collector such behavior would have been unexpected, but for Carl dealing with irrational people with more intelligence than common sense was part of the job.

Finishing lunch, Carl amused himself watching an exchange on Fox news channel between an environmentalist from a group the comic store owner had never heard of and that anchor with nice hair that like to make people cry:

Environmentalist: “This is what we get for ignoring the environment.”

Anchor with nice hair: “Are you saying this global shift is man made?”

Environmentalist: “Yes. We have ignored the environment and the out of control global warming caused the tilt in our globe to change.”

Anchor with nice hair: “Do you have any proof of this, Dr. Horton?”

Environmentalist: “Proof? What more proof do you need than evidence of what happened?”

Anchor with nice hair: “Some scientific proof would be nice.”

Environmentalist: “I am giving you proof. All the internal combustion engines caused this.”

Anchor with nice hair: “So you are saying the Earth is mad at us and decided to turn over?”

Environmentalist with nice hair: “No, our damaging the environment caused this.”

Anchor: “So you keep saying but offering no evidence this is any different that the other times it has happened in earth’s history.”

Environmentalist: “I would not think that you could understand the complicated interactions of the environment and the planet.”

Anchor with nice hair: “Sorry professor, but I don’t think you understand the Earth does this every 12,000 to 20,000 years. It just usually isn’t this severe.”

Environmentalist: “You have no proof of that.”

Anchor with nice hair: “Our next guest, the geologist does. See, Scientists use this thing called science. Not the pseudo science crap you are spewing.”

Environmentalist: “How dare you...”

Anchor with nice hair: “Get out of here with your human hating crap. You are no better than ghost hunters and faith healers. Shit happens professor. Face the fact that you can’t find a way to blame humans for this one.”

Environmentalist: “Why did you have me on if you were just going to insult me and my work?”

Anchor with nice hair: “You were willing to come on, and I figured why not let the fool show everyone why we should ignore you. At least the Reverend didn’t pretend to have proof when he said that God hates America.”

The environmentalist stormed off the stage and a calm discussion with a professor of geology started that lasted 45 minutes. Carl had stopped watching the clock and found himself

enthralled with the non-charismatic but learned professor who was happy to explain geology and the geologic records to callers and to the anchor.

A few people in cars stopped in the store to use the bathroom and ask when Carl was leaving town. He let them use the bathroom and always said, “Why leave. There is no where better to go.”

Later Wednesday night the traffic died down and the streets were almost empty as Carl walked home. The rest of his week was without a single paying customer, but that did not dissuade Carl from going to work. He was a creature of habit. Moreover, nothing was going to change Carl’s habits, not even acts of God.

His world hit a roadblock on Sunday morning when the restaurant he went to for brunch was closed, with a sign saying, “Headed to Mexico. God help us all.” Carl stood by the closed door for 10 minutes staring at the sign and trying the handle. He considered sitting by the door in the event they changed their mind, but he realized how insane that action would be and for the first time since the world moved, Carl changed his pattern. He walked to the grocery store hoping they were open.

To his relief the store was open but did not look to be freshly stocked. He looked around the frozen food section and had to make many compromises. Thinking ahead, he gathered all the meals he could carry and decided to reduce his eating to two meals a day until the grocery store’s restocking became regular again.

The older woman at the checkout asked, “Stocking up like everyone else who is staying?”

Carl replied, “Yes.” Then he asked, “Why would everyone else leave?”

The woman smiled a patronizing smile and said, “Fear, I guess. They don’t know what is happening and they want to get away.”

The comic store owner looked at her and said matter-of-factly, “They won’t be able to get to Mexico. Fuel supplies will run out with all those cars going there at once.”

She said, "Then I guess we are the smart ones."

Carl looked around at the empty store and said, "Maybe."

Then he thought to ask, "Are you going to be getting more shipments?"

She replied, "The manager says we will get some tomorrow. But, it will be a lot less. You might want to come early." Then she said, "You getting any shipments at that comic store of yours?"

Carl said, "UPS is days late, but the web site says they are still coming."

The cashier replied, "No customers though."

Carl said, "Just a few. Guess when the world turns out from under you no one wants comic books."

The cashier replied, "Who knows. Maybe they will all come back in a week and want nothing but food and comics."

Carl smiled and said, "Maybe."

He walked with four heavy bags of frozen meals and the last of the peanut butter cups. He knew this was going to have to last him a long time. He could not decide where to store it. At the apartment or the store and finally settled on the store.

With his food there, he decided to move the rest of his possessions to the store so he had only one place to concern himself with protecting. Bathing would be a problem, but he could work out a shower. The offices upstairs had full bathrooms installed for the attorneys that practically lived there; he would ask his landlord if he could use one.

Monday morning the weather was much colder but the sun had not gone down over night. It was more than a little disturbing but Carl thought it might prove to be more interesting this way. He had always wanted to see what it was like in the extreme north; he just never wanted to travel. In some strange way, this was like traveling.

On his way to the Comic Emporium, he carried an old suitcase filled with clothes and some other possessions that he was sure he would want to be without. The picture album and his favorite cup, a giant red plastic 48 ounce cup he used for water, could not be left behind. He considered moving the computer he had at home to the store, but that would have been another trip. Besides, the machine at the store was far better, if he lost the old one at home it would not be a huge loss.

When he got to the store, he was surprised to see his landlord, Mr. Weldon, standing in front of his store peering through the window. The large man was surprised by Carl's approach and dropped the sandwich he held in his chubby hand. Picking up the sandwich and dusting off the light cold dirt he said, "Carl! I thought you had left town like everyone else." Carl walked by, opened the door, and said, "No, sir. I am open for business."

Mr. Weldon followed him through the door and said, "I am surprised. There can't be that many customers."

Carl put his things down and said, "No, not many, but I really don't have anything else to do. I can wait for business to pick up."

Mr. Weldon looked around and said, "You do have a gun, don't you boy?"

Carl nodded to the affirmative and said, "I have a Spiderman number one sealed in mint condition. Of course I have a gun."

Mr. Weldon looked around at the valuables displayed on the walls and said, "More likely they will be after your food, son."

Carl noticed the trashcan full of frozen dinner containers and said, "Yes, sir. I probably should hide that trash."

Mr. Weldon asked, "Do you have enough food, boy?"

Carl nodded and said, "Yes, sir. For now I do. Hopefully the grocery store will get some more soon."

The landlord replied, "I would not count on it, but it could happen."

As if on cue, a large brown UPS truck rolled up and the driver hopped out and walked slowly to the back. He loaded up four large boxes and brought them to the door on a handcart. Carl opened the door and the driver smiled, "I didn't think you would be here."

Carl responded, "I have been waiting for this."

The driver shivered and said, "You are the only that has been home today. I have to leave most packages at the doors."

As the Brown uniformed deliveryman moved Carl noticed a pistol on his side but chose to say nothing. It made sense that the drivers were now armed, but life didn't seem that dangerous to Carl. He brushed aside the thoughts filing them away as overreaction to the weather on the part of some executive.

Carl then asked, "Are the planes still flying?"

The driver smiled and then said, "Funny you should ask that. Just before I left out this morning, they said the airport HUB was moving here, to Atlanta. The central US is becoming a ghost town as it gets colder."

Carl looked at Mr. Weldon and said, "Maybe those food shipments will arrive after all. If comic books can get delivered, there has to be hope for food."

Mr. Weldon smiled and said, "Maybe some of my other tenants will come back and pay their rent."

Carl smiled and said, "On-line bill pay. Regular as clock work. The internet is still working and my bank is still on-line."

Mr. Weldon laughed and said, "Thank God the banks didn't run out on us, like all my tenants."

Carl took the opportunity to ask for and received keys to the offices upstairs to use the showers. He agreed to watch out for the building in return for the access.

A week of sameness and a few customers was replaced by a sudden influx of traffic in the streets. Cars started coming down the street again. Some of the people who had fled south returned home. The restaurants opened again and customers started showing up slowly. The menus were shorter, but there was food.

Watching the evening news the Mayor of Atlanta announced that the city was open for business and city crews were working on preparing for the coming winter. It was then that Carl realized, it was summer and he needed a parka. Winter, if it came was going to be much worse.

Mr. Weldon showed up almost daily now, having nothing else to do. On one of those occasions, Carl finalized the deal for upstairs and got the commercial space above for his use as long as no one wanted to rent it. He could not find his apartment property owner to cancel the lease or to make a rent payment to, so he considered that deal complete. To be fair, he cleaned up the apartment and left a letter spelling out that if the property owner wished to contact him for their final rent payment he would be happy to pay them, and he left his phone number for the shop. Mysteriously, Carl never heard from the apartment owner.

With the last of his belongings moved and some sense of normalcy returning, Carl assumed he was on his way to resuming his normal life. All of that changed when the President of the United States addressed the nation. Carl sat eating his normal lunch and watching the news which had become his new habit. The impending statement from the President was hailed as an important speech by the talking heads so Carl anticipated something big. He was becoming a trained news consumer. Up until now the only official speeches were just statements that people need to move from the Central US to the coast. Carl wondered if the government even had a way of dealing with this situation. He was about to find out.

The president looked serious as the camera zoomed in on him sitting behind his desk in the Oval Office.

He demeanor did not relax as he said, "We live in unprecedented times. In ages past nations have found the need to use force to defend their borders and their national resources. Today I

regret that I must use force to protect our very existence at the expense of another sovereign nation. I did not come to this conclusion lightly, but with a heavy heart of a leader with no other options.”

The president swallowed hard and continued, “Our friends in Canada have allowed our citizens in formerly northern states across the border and have welcomed them with open arms. To that end, we have formed a temporary confederation with Canada and are discussing the joining of our two great nations into one powerful country. Unfortunately, the same great news cannot be said for our former friend Mexico. With the closing of their border and use of military to keep both US citizens out and their own citizens who were illegally in this nation they have shown themselves to be unwilling to help in this grave time.”

The camera shook for a second and the President halted his speech. When the technical issue resolved itself a second later he continued, “To that end US troops have crossed the border with Mexico and engaged Mexican Military forces. At this time I am using the emergency war powers and declaring by executive order that the United States of America is annexing all of the territory that was formerly Mexico.”

The president paused and seemed to think carefully before speaking, “I regret having to take this action but these are dire times and there was truly no other way. I encourage all civilians to stay clear of the combat area until such time we can guarantee their safety. I would hope that in the face of our determination that the government of Mexico will reconsider their choices and we can end this conflict while it is in its infancy.”

The camera pulled back showing the desk and the seal of the President he concluded, “These are extraordinary times and extraordinary actions are required. May God have mercy on us all.”

Carl watched as the stunned news anchors stared at the camera for a few seconds. Before the Earth moved, they would have had video of troops massing and helicopters flying. With communications strained because of the low angle to the satellites they were now as surprised as the viewers when breaking news occurred.

The male anchor with salt and pepper hair started speaking, "Extraordinary times as the President has said. You will forgive us ladies and gentlemen; we are watching as this unfolds, just as you are at home." The next hour was a series of experts analyzing the short speech from the President and debate over the correctness of his actions.

Lunch finished, Carl prepared for the afternoon, but with only a trickle of customers, he did not mind the interruption of his landlord today. Mr. Weldon walked in and said, "Bad business this going to war thing."

Carl smiled nervously and replied, "Things are weird. I guess the president is doing what he needs to do."

Weldon looked around nervously again as if looking for hidden observers, "I think God is punishing us for our arrogance."

With a slight smile, Carl replied, "Maybe. But then again the core could have shifted because of a large piece of rock falling into it. Maybe we should be thankful the planet is not spinning over and over, making the weather impossible."

The Large man rubbed his sides and then said, "You're a real optimist."

The conversation paused and Mr. Weldon stopped to look at a small display that was now weeks out of date, but no one complained. The free comic book weekend was overshadowed by the changing climate. Carl did not see a reason to remove the display or do anything with the boxes of free comics. He gave them out as people asked. Not many did. He considered that they may be good to use for a fire or as insulation.

Weldon looked at Carl again and said, "How are you paying rent with business this slow?"

Carl got very serious and said, "I have enough stashed away to last a while. Don't worry about your rent money."

Mr. Weldon replied with hands held up in mock surrender, "I did not mean to offend. I was more worried about you, but I have 2 rent payments coming from you now so I am concerned for myself."

Seizing the opportunity Carl asked, “Maybe we can work out a package deal on the rent until business picks up.”

Weldon laughed and said, “The bank and the city still want their payments. My concern for you, son, is that I won’t be able to make the payment and lose this building and my others.”

The opportunity door blew wide open and Carl jumped through saying, “Maybe I could buy the building from you, then. I don’t have much, but I would think that it isn’t worth all that much right now with a glacier bearing down on the mountains just north of us.”

The troubled landlord pondered the offer for just a few seconds and then said, “Right now, if you have 100,000 you can have the whole damn building.” He looked into Carl’s eyes and realized the offer was serious.

Carl smiled and said, “How about \$80,000 and I will find the lawyer?”

Weldon laughed and slapped his right thigh with a meaty right hand then said, “You slick little bastard. Make it \$90,000 and you can have the deed signed over this afternoon. There is one lawyer down the street who isn’t all that busy. If he is sober we can have the papers done.”

Carl smiled and said, “You have a deal.” They shook hands quickly sealing the deal.

Carl said, “Thank you.”

Mr. Weldon laughed and replied, “No, thank you. You are the one who bought a commercial building with only one tenant, you. Those others ran South.”

Carl smiled bigger and said, “I think I will offset my rent.”

By the next day, Carl was the sole owner of the building he lived and worked in. Thanks to his parents leaving him, a very large inheritance he never had to worry about making a profit and now he only had to worry about making enough money to pay the taxes and cover the costs. If he could get one tenant, he would never need to worry about money again. His only fear now was the winter that seemed to be starting in earnest.

It had snowed only slightly. The weathermen said that was because of the dry air over Kansas was not allowing a lot of wet air inland to snow. Savannah was already under a thick blanket of

snow, but so far, they had less than 3 inches in Atlanta to Carl's surprise. The temperature was now holding at 20 degrees for a high and showed no signs of ever getting warmer again.

Surveying his building Carl knew that it would have to be better insulated or it would become uninhabitable. He converted old cardboard boxes and newspapers along with stacks of legal magazines into roof insulation on the 3rd floor ceiling. On the roof he left a shallow sheet of ice but brushed off most of the snow out of fear the weight would collapse the roof if he was not diligent. In a moment of inspiration he brought of a hot plate and melted snow in a pot pouring the water along the side of the building creating a coating of ice down the sides of the 3 story building. When the ice covering was complete Carl noticed that he was able to turn down the heat and the entire building was more comfortable.

Others noticed his ice blanket and followed suit in the neighborhood. Soon the entire city looked like an ice covered snow globe city. The city would have been pretty if it weren't an indication that things were horribly different than they had been. Some buildings collapsed as people tried to insulate and some burned to the ground as people burned anything to stay warm, but for the most part the city was still alive. Atlanta was lucky compared to the Midwest. The Appalachians were protecting them from some of the worst cold weather.

Road Trip

Dan loaded the last of the spare fuel into the back of the truck in a 50-gallon drum. Tucking the hose that would be used to fuel the truck when it became time the husband started to hug his wife and she pushed him away. Martha and the Girls were inside the large crew cab pickup so they did not have to listen as Melissa said her goodbye to her husband, "You are not leaving here because of her. She is staying and you can't leave her behind."

"No. I have to save the farm."

“God killed the farm. You just haven’t noticed it yet.”

“We have been over this.”

Melissa said, “I will call you and tell you when we are safe.”

“You can come back once everything goes back to normal.”

“Dan, we won’t be back. You know that. You can go ahead and move your girlfriend in the house and get it over with.”

“It is really over with her this time.”

“If it is, then get in the truck and come with us.” She said as tears started to fall down her face. The warm tears turned cold in seconds in the freezing air.

“I can’t. Dad needs me.”

“This is it then.”

The mother of two did not look back as she drove the large crew cab truck down the road out of town. She touched the small pistol on the seat next to her and headed toward Mexico. The road to Oklahoma was empty now and she was able to maintain a steady 35 miles per hour. Setting her speed slow to save as much fuel as possible and not able to go much faster with the ice and snow covering the roads. At times they were only able to move at a crawl driving off road on more than one occasion to avoid wrecked and stalled cars who’s owners were no where to be seen.

When they crossed into Texas the ladies found a fuel truck on the side of the interstate run by soldiers. The large hand painted sign next to the tanker read, “free gas, for evacuees.”

A soldier emerged from the tent with a smoke stack putting out a stream of smoke and refueled both of the trucks tanks and offered to top off the 50 gallon drum in the back. Melissa lowered the tail gate and stood close to the tank while the soldier filled the drum.

As he finished without warning the soldier slipped his gloved hand onto her rear end. He was emboldened by the fact that the other 3 soldiers with him were asleep. Knowing that no one else could see what was happening she knew that she could not stop the tall man who smelled of

onions. She froze in place out of fear that he might not be satisfied with a grope but might expect more from her. Mustering her courage she said calmly and strongly, “Please stop. I have children in the truck.”

As if hit by a brick and suddenly ashamed the soldier looked away and said, “Sorry, lady. I just though...”

“I am appreciative for the gas, but you thought wrong.” She slammed the tailgate shut for emphasis and hurried to the driver’s seat and got underway without looking back on the lightly traveled highway. Realizing that her hands were shaking and she had the strong urge to bathe she forced herself to take long deep breaths while trying to seem calm. Long quiet minutes had passed when Martha asked, “What happened back there?”

“Looks like the only thing of value we have is my ass right now.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” Martha said.

“I sold my soul for shelter a long time ago. Not doing it again.”

The women drove in silence until they neared a traffic jam in middle Texas. Interstate 35 was a parking lot outside of Dallas and showed no signs. With half of their fuel in the truck used and 50 gallons more in the back Melissa said, “That radio said Atlanta was okay. Maybe we should head there?”

Looking at the sea of stopped cars ahead, Martha looked at the map in her hands and said, “Turn off here and follow this road east. It will lead us to Interstate 20. That Goes all the way to Atlanta”

An hour later, they were rolling on an almost empty Interstate 20 heading East toward Georgia by way of Louisiana, and Alabama. The lanes heading west were full of cars parked with their engines off, either out of fuel or waiting. In Alabama they managed to get more government emergency fuel, this time Melissa was relieved to see a female soldier running the pump.

The young private said with a strong southern accent, "You looked nervus."

"Thought I was going to have to use sexual favors for gas."

"No ma'am. We ah here to serve. Courtsey of da Grate State of Alabamma by ordah of the Federal Guvment."

"The last fuel point had a soldier with busy hands."

"Sorry about dat. These ah bad times and it brings out da worst in some people. Yah should report it. We'd not accept dat in Alabama's 234th Transportation Company." The soldier said as she finished pumping the gas.

"Who would I do that to?"

The young soldier said looking away, "You have a point, der ma'am. I wouldn't know how ta doo dat." Then she asked, "Da ya need food?"

Melissa thought of the sandwich fixings that were running low and old meat that was less than appetizing now and said, "Yes. There are four of us. Anything would be great."

The young soldier walked away, came back with a half full Government Issue box of MREs, and said, "Srry dis is all 'ah kin spear."

"It is more than enough. Thank you." Melissa said as she put the food on the back seat and walked away. She extended a hand to shake the hand of the soldier and instead hugged her saying, "Thank you."

Once they were on the road again Martha said, "You need to rest, maybe I can drive."

"Martha, you have not driven in 20 years, and you are too weak."

"We should at least pull over and rest. You have had 3 hours of sleep in 3 days."

"I am doing okay for now. We can't spare the fuel to sit with the heater running."

They drove on at low speed through ice and light snow on mostly unused roads. Seeing only ocassion passing cars, but none going their way. The road toward what had been east was deserted.

They entered the outskirts of Atlanta on day 4. Melissa had managed to drive the distance eating the instant coffee from the MREs and catching cat naps when they made bathroom stops. She was shocked that her two daughters who normally talked incessantly had decided to be quiet. She was thankful for the lack of questions that she was not ready to answer about their father or where they were going.

The city of Atlanta had a large sign saying relocated citizens should come to the Georgia Dome for assistance. The signs pointing them to the massive sports stadium in the middle of the city guided the quartet of females to the official government evacuation location. Parking in the large open lot near the Dome Martha said, "Girls you stay here and keep a look out. Let you mother sleep. I will go see what they have to offer here."

Melissa started to protest but was too exhausted to argue. Martha walked across the lot toward the dome and Melissa slumped over in her seat. Debra, the oldest sat in the back seat and kept her eyes open, ready to yell out if anyone approached, while Carla crawled up front and got into her mothers arms. Together the mother and her youngest slept until Martha returned 5 hours later to the cold truck.

Melissa awoke slowly still exhausted and noticed that Debra has covered her while she slept with Carla. The 7 year old did not wake up fully as Melissa lifted her over the seat and put her on the back seat. Martha said, "Well, I have good news and bad news."

"Bad first."

"The dome is full. There is no help here."

"So what is the good news?"

"They gave me a list of places to find housing around town."

"I guess that will have to do." Melissa said. Then added, "At least the weather here is not as cold as home." The word home hung in the air as if she had just uttered an expletive. They would never return to Kansas. It was behind them.

Martha said, "This place seems as safe as any. Warm up the truck for a few minutes and let's sleep here tonight. We will start looking for a place to stay tomorrow. The cab stayed above freezing as the 4 huddled together under blankets. Melisa slept deeply but Martha kept her eyes open and only took cat naps. She felt energized from the responsibility that came with being the matriarch of their small band.

One rejection after another until Melissa found a hotel that would let them stay for a 3 days using up the last of their cash, but the warmth and a place to shower was more than worth it.

On the second day Melissa called home to have the phone answered by a neighbor. Instead of sugar coating the facts Mr. Tassej explained that the barn had collapsed killing Dan and Marvin. He was over helping and was rescued by the National Guard hours later as they did their rounds. He was too injured to go anywhere and he was staying in the house until his leg healed enough for him to head to safety and abandon the farms and join his own family in Mexico.

She said, "You get well and get to safety. God help you. God help us all."

Like a zombie the young mother of two walked to the bathroom and signaled Martha to follow. When the door closed behind her mother-in-law Melissa collapsed onto her often time rival. Sobbing more for her daughters than herself she said, "They are dead. Dan and Melvin are dead."

"How?" Martha asked as she held her daughter-in-law.

"The barn collapsed. Mr. Tassej was there. He is in our house recuperating."

"We are on our own now."

Melissa snapped back, "We have always been on our own."

Long seconds passed and then Melissa ask to no one in particular, "What are we going to do now?"

Martha said, "You can hate me if you want, but we have to find a man to take care of us."

"You can't be serious."

“You said it yourself. honey. Your ass is our only commodity. If I were younger...”

Martha trailed off then said to the silence, “I am glad the girls aren’t older.”

“Me too, Martha.” Then Melissa asked, “Why aren’t you upset?”

Martha looked at the ceiling and said, “Darling, you are not the only woman who had a philandering husband. Where do you think my boy learned his bad habits?”

“I... didn’t know.” Melissa said.

“Wasn’t it obvious. Look, when your dad died leaving you alone and pregnant with my granddaughter I was not going to let Dan get away with shirking his responsibility.” Martha said.

“There was a price for a roof over our heads.” The younger woman said.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have an excuse. You knew what he did, and still loved him.”

“I did, but he used up my love. I guess I just feel like a whore.”

Martha replied, “We all do sometimes. But now we have to do something for these girls. And we have to tell them their dad is dead.”

Debra was silent when she learned the news and Carla cried for an hour. After a long silence Debra asked her mother, “You didn’t love daddy did you?”

Instead of a lie Melissa said, “I did, but daddy didn’t love me. He loved you and your sister very much and that was enough for me. It is all a mother could want.” Melissa let the lie hang in the air. She hated their father for the youth he took from her that she gave so willingly when she was young and stupid.

Holding her daughters Melissa fell asleep in the bed while Martha walked down to find food and begged for two more nights in the hotel. Relaying the news that she and her daughter-in-law were now widows was enough to have the manger agree to 2 more days after the money would run out, but he said ominously, “You are not the only people who have lost loved ones. Please don’t make it hard, and force me throw you out. Just leave in 3 days.”

Martha agreed and then walked to the underground parking lot to bring in the last of the food. They would have to make 4 sandwiches last 3 days. She wondered if there were food to be found in the building and considered that she may have to go door-to-door begging. She vowed to do anything to take care of the girls. She lost her pride the minute she found out, they were on their own.

As she passed the desk going back to the elevator to take her to the room the manager said, "There is a town hall meeting for the city tomorrow. Maybe you can find some answers and some help there."

Martha said, "Thank you. We will be there. And then be out of your hair."

South of the Border

With their families safely living at the Armory South of Atlanta the 327th Signal Company turned light infantry headed out of town in the cold blowing snow with little fanfare. Just 4 short Weeks of training with a terminally angry trainer assigned from the Special Forces to help the Signal Corp Soldiers convert to a simple non-mechanized infantry company had paid off. The men and women of the 327th were more scared they would face the Green Beret if they made a mistake than any enemy they would face.

The days passed quickly and George was mostly quiet with his driver. The young female private looked terminally nervous and George was afraid to talk for fear of causing her more concern. He tried desperately to remember her first name, but could only muster her last name that was plainly written on her field jacket. He passed the time reading manuals and a Spanish language book the Army gave him. He considered trying to practice his Spanish with the private

at the wheel, but she looked so nervous he thought she might wreck while trying to remember how to tell him where the bathroom was located.

During a long slowdown in Texas George could not bear the silence any more and said, “Look, Private, I don’t know if you think I am some monster, but you will be driving with me for the next year. So you might as well talk.”

“Sir?” She asked never taking her eyes off the road even though the vehicle was not moving.

“You have been silent for 2 days.”

“I was told not to talk your ear off by Chief Donaldson. Said I was too chatty for my own good.”

George laughed. The Warrant officer, Green Beret, gave lots of instructions to the enlisted men, but few instructions for the officers. When George asked the Instructor over a private lunch with the officers if he had any advice for the Platoon Leaders he replied bluntly, “Let you soldiers do their jobs and don’t get any more of them killed than necessary.” It was not surprising that he had similar bluntness with the enlisted.

“You can talk. In a year when we get to go back to normal we may work together or be neighbors.”

The young woman smiled and said, “Not likely, Sir. I don’t think you have too many single mothers who are bartenders in your neighborhood.”

George knew she was right but instead of agreeing he said, “That was before all this. Right now I bet you child and my boys are playing.”

She smiled nervously and said, “My daughter is with her father in Florida.”

“Look, I am not good at the Officer / Enlisted separation thing. I was enlisted for 4 years before I went to college. I am just older and did more time in school.” He said.

When she rebuffed him he was completely surprised, “That may be, Sir, but your job is to give the orders, mine is to carry them out. I don’t want to be too friendly.”

He knew that she was right. There was a reasonable chance the he may issue and order that could get her or anyone else in his platoon killed. He knew she had over reacted and was most likely mad about something else, but he did not need to open himself up to fraternizing problems.

“Well, you can talk. I will let you know when you get to friendly.” He said and smiled.

Moving across the border into the newly annexed state of North Mexico was uneventful. The secure border crossing that had once covered the highway was now just rubble having been moved aside by Army Engineers as the first Armor units crossed into Mexico. It made sense. There was no border crossing for any other states. If Mexico were now annexed its border should be as open as any other. George mused that the militias that used to patrol the border to stop illegals from crossing were probably fit to be tied knowing that all Mexicans were now US citizens by executive order and force of arms.

For part of the drive the convoy traveled through some small villages that had recently converted to manufacturing cities thanks to the NAFTA treaty. New manufacturing plants lined freshly paved streets and just a few miles away the worker for those once busy plants lived in shacks with thin wooden walls and roofs that leaked when it rained. George was taken aback at the starkness of the differences.

On the outskirts of a small city whose name George did not know he was put to his first test. As luck would have it, his platoon had rotated into the forward position in the convoy. His Humvee was 3rd in line and the scout Humvee with a mounted .50 cal called back, “Charlie Three Seven, We have a road block.”

George recognized his designation and replied, “Echo Seven Hotel, please advise, who is running this road block?”

“It appears to be either out of uniform Mexican Army or Drug Lords. Can’t tell.”

George thought quickly and checked his squad's designations calling to Second Squad which happened to be on the Duce and a Half behind the scout, "Delta Echo Tango, Dismount, protective stance. Assume the opposition is hostile."

Calling back to the company commander after checking his code book he said, "Six Tango November, We have encountered a road block. Moving up to talk to the OP Four and see if we can clear the road."

"Charlie Three Seven, consider all to be hostile. Take no chances."

"Will do, Six Tango November."

George dismounted and checked his side arm. Clipping back the holster strap he did not have to check to be sure that a round was in the chamber, it had been loaded with one in the chamber since they crossed into Mexico. His pistol would be ineffective in a fire fight compared to the 16 rifles and mounted .50 cal aimed at the 6 men guarding the make shift road block.

A man with a smile saying that he knew something George didn't stepped out in front of the road block with his hand at his side. The Uzi slung by a should strap across his chest suggested that he knew how to use the bullet hose or at least intended to use it if threatened. George smiled hoping to at least charm him a little, but it had no affect.

The spokesman for the road block looked at the approaching Platoon leader and said, "Gringo, you have no business here."

"Sorry, we are just passing through."

"You won't be going this way soldier boy, so just turn around." The man said waving his hand in a circle signifying that they should turn around.

"Can't do that, amigo. My commander wants to pass through and I can't disappoint him." George said, stopping his approach. He was now in front of the scout vehicle standing slightly to the right out of the line of fire of the .50 cal aimed at the spokesman."

"There are a lot more of us than you, so you best go ahead and turn around."

George assessed the situation, and decided that talking was done, and it was time to act. As they had trained for facing a roadblock. The Platoon Leader dropped to the ground as the signal for all of his troops to open fire on their assigned targets.

The training paid off in seconds of overwhelming firepower. The 6 locals who thought they could force an Army convoy to turn around were sadly mistaken. George lay face down groping for his pistol and preparing to start firing when he heard the voice of Corporal Grason yelling, "Cease fire! Cease fire!"

Getting to his knees and pushing his helmet up slightly so he could see again, the platoon leader waved his right arm, pistol hand signaling his soldiers to advance. Silently and methodically, they moved by twos over and around the barrier and two more short bursts of M-16 fire rang out as one team moved over the barrier. First squad dismounted from their vehicles and moved up to take the place of Second Squad, the latter having crossed the barrier and at the urging of their squad leader took up a semi-circular defensive position.

Corporal Grason yelled back over the barrier, "If they had backup, they have unassisted their positions. It looks clear."

George looked around and looking at the Squad Leader for First Squad said, "Get this barrier out of our way. I want this clear by the time the old man gets up here."

Yelling back over the barrier, "Hold the defensive positions while we clear the barricade."

Walking to his Humvee he noticed his driver shaking visibly standing beside the vehicle with her rifle pointed at the roof of the low building next to them. She did not make eye contact but stood her position outside the driver's side while he called back to the commander, "Six Tango November, Hostiles have been neutralized. No prisoners. Clearing the barricade now. Estimate 10 minutes to have a hole."

"Acknowledged." Was the squawk over the highly modulated FM radios.

Seconds turned to minutes and George pretended to study the map so that he would look busy while his men moved the barricade and cleared the bodies of the hostiles. His silent moment was shaken when a Spec 4 from first squad rushed up saying, “Sir, these were Mexican Federal Police.”

“How do you know?”

“Badges, Sir. The ID looked real, at least that is what Sergeant Ramirez said.”

“What the hell were they doing trying to stop us?”

The Specialist looked at the ground and said, “Sarge said they were probably going to negotiate a bribe to let us pass.”

“Well that didn’t work for them.”

“It is how they worked, Sir.”

“Not any more. Good work.” George stepped out of the Vehicle and oversaw the remainder of the work. The commander arrived and George relayed the incident and the speculation of Sergeant Ramirez. The commander said simply, “You did exactly as trained, Lieutenant. You followed my standing orders. Do not do anything differently. This is a nasty business and it will only get nastier.”

The Elephant cannot be Ignored Forever

For the next month, life returned to some normalcy as the temperature dropped stabilized. Transplants arrived from the Midwest but as they arrived, an equal number of permanent residents moved to the new territories opened in the new state of Mexico.

For Carl his life became normal when regular shipments of comics resumed, albeit smaller. The publishers that had been located in Chicago moved their offices to Los Angeles to be close to the printers. Carl was able to get his fix and keep his few customers happy.

The food crisis was just becoming apparent and the national news media gave up counting the number of people who died from the weather. The Metro Atlanta area had about the same population of 4 million but at least half of that population was from new immigrants. Food was not scarce yet, but the variety of foods available was far less than before. Other countries were sending food aid to the US, some out of friendship, but most to avoid having the US Navy show up and have Marines take what they needed from their countries.

Carl expanded his eating habits to include cooking his own food since the price of frozen meals had tripled. He discovered that he enjoyed cooking and with temperatures outside staying below freezing, he really was not enjoying weekly walks to the grocery store. He was down to going every other week and buying staples. The fact that trash collection had slowed to once a month helped him decide not to generate as much waste as he used to. The hot plate and the microwave in the former attorney's office were getting a lot of use.

Layers of ice formed over the Midwest and news teams reporting from Kansas were in danger of becoming trapped without adequate equipment to get back to warmer climates near the oceans. Reporters sent to Kansas weeks ago were ready for temperatures below freezing, but they were not ready for the constant subzero and as a result reports from the area dropped off as one team after another realized it was stupid to try to report from the frozen poles without proper equipment. The central US was fast becoming abandoned and forgotten. The population of the US was now living in Mexico and the warmer regions south of the pole.

The big news hit 3 months after the Earth shifted. Carl was reading a book when a breaking news alert email arrived. It was simple and to the point, "Scientists warn that seasonal changes in weather may no longer occur."

The growing cold outside was acceptable as winter set in fully, but the idea that it was never going to warm up again was terrifying. Carl looked at the frozen front window, which he covered with makeshift insulation and only let in a fraction of the light that it once did. His insulation frenzy a month ago seemed that it would now be the norm. He continued his habit of

pouring melted snow and ice down the side of the building forming a thin layer of ice to act as insulation. If he had help, he would have finished the job, but he was satisfied with a 1-inch layer around the building for now. According to the experts, a layer just 3 inches thick could make the entire building comfortable.

The invasion of Mexico made more sense in light of the fact that the weather may never improve. The UN accepted that the United States began moving into continent of Antarctica as long as they allowed other refugees to come to the new territory once all the American's who needed to be relocated were moved.

The sinking feeling that he had made a massive mistake struck Carl as he tuned into the news. He knew that he was not alone; the Metro Atlanta area had as large a population as it ever had. All afternoon scientists talked about computer projections of future climate and by late afternoon Carl felt as if he understood just how bad things were going to get. On the evening news, a town hall meeting announcement got his attention. He decided to attend and find out all he could for plans of his community.

For the first time in 2 years, Carl closed the shop early. He expected the walk to take 1 hour to get to City Hall, but he gave himself 3 hours to get there. The walk down the freezing streets in heavy clothes took only 45 minutes, but Carl was still happy to be early. He had a chance to walk around the common areas and scope out the seating for discussion.

A few locals and attended, but a large part of the crowd were immigrants and local media. To say that nothing was said, would have been a lie, but the local politicians had no real answers. They only guaranteed to do their best and keep offering local services as best they could. The fact that water supplies and sewers were now freezing faster than crews could fix the lines. Plans for putting heaters in the main sewer lines and water mains were under way, but no firm date was given for completion by the tired looking man in dirty work clothes. The fact that tax revenues were off came up multiple times and plans to collect new taxes were mentioned, including additional sales taxes. The politicians answered only two questions and ran from the building to

avoid facing their angry constituents. Carl realized he had wasted his time; he could have gotten all this information from the paper's on-line edition in the morning.

He took advantage of the free coffee and ate a doughnut as the meeting broke up. The warmth and the carbohydrates would burn off on the walk home. As he ate, he noticed four women, a grandmother, mother and two daughters talking amongst themselves in that complete lack of accent voice that was common to the Midwest. Carl looked at the mother but did not stare. Not for lack of interest in looking at a woman, he did plenty of that on the internet; he did not want to attract their attention.

Carl could hear part of their conversation.

The mother said, "Not again. Martha.. not another... I am not a whore."

The Grandmother said, "Now is not the time to get stupid. The girls will starve if... don't be shy. Offer what you got."

He failed miserably at remaining unnoticed. His personal space invaded as the bold mother walked over and introduced herself. Carl tried to look away but she was not going to be deterred.

The mother moved again into his field of view and asked, "Excuse me, sir. Are you a local?"

Not being able to avoid contact any longer he replied said, "Yes."

The mother seemed pleased to hear that and said, "This is very forward of me, but we are in trouble."

Carl looked her in the eyes and mustered all his experience dealing with grifters and homeless people that wandered into his shop saying, "I don't have any money to give."

Embarrassed the woman replied, "We don't need money." She quickly added, "Well of course we do, but the truth is there are no apartments available that are safe, and we can't afford to stay in a hotel."

Carl asked, "What exactly do you want?"

She looked at him in the eyes and said, “We need a place to stay.” Then looked at her feet and said, “I can’t pay, but I can take care of you.”

Carl snapped back, “Sorry lady, I don’t need a maid.”

She did not look up from her feet and said, “That is not what I meant.”

Carl swallowed hard as he realized what she was offering. He had not had someone make advances on him since the last comic convention when a very drunk large woman decided that he was sexy because of his collection of rare comics. He took advantage of the fact that the mother had not looked up from her feet to look at her body. She was not overweight, but it was hard to determine much else with the thick clothing made necessary by the temperature.

Then Carl noticed the wedding band and diamond ring on her left hand and snapped, “You’re married. What is this? Some kind of game?”

The mother looked up with a startled expression as Carl continued, “You gonna move in, kill me and then your husband shows up?”

Stories of immigrants moving in and killing or just kicking occupants out of homes were becoming common. Carl suspected that he would have to deal with it soon, but since he was in a commercial building, he had not yet been approached.

She said, “No. Nothing like that.” She fell to her knees on the floor in front of Carl. He noticed the grandmother talking to the two girls to distract them from what their mother was doing. They were only 15 feet away and Carl was sure they heard his outburst, but the grandmother seemed determined to do her best to hold the girls attention.

The mother said, “My husband and father stayed behind to try and save the livestock.” She started sobbing and continued, “They had some asinine idea that you could keep cattle in the barn. They said they would send for us when it was safe.” Melissa could not help but stomp her foot in anger at their stupidity as she recounted the tale.

Carl remembered a story from Kansas of farmers trying to use warehouses to keep farm animals alive. When the ice sheet started to form, it proved useless. There was no way to keep the

power flowing and the livestock froze in place, along with their handlers. When news showed the images of the frozen livestock, Carl envisioned future archeologists discovering the locations and speculating as to what happened.

Carl asked, "Where are they?"

She replied, "We left 2 weeks ago. Martin Tassej from the farm 2 over from us answered when we called from the hotel we were are for a few days. Said they died when the barn collapsed under the snow. He was rescued by the National Guard." She started to cry and stopped herself. Then she added, "Mr. Tassej was with them when they died. I am a widow with no skills outside of being a housewife with two little girls and an old woman to take care of. I don't have a lot of options here." When she finished, she swallowed hard again and wiped her eyes. Carl just sat quietly. He was unsure what to do and thought that if he waited the answer would become clear.

Steeling herself she said, "Look, all I have to offer is me. I was a housewife. I know how to cook, clean, raise kids." Then slightly ashamed she said softly, "And keep a bed warm." The she continued in a normal tone, "Martha's not that healthy but she does not get in the way, other than her mouth. I will do what I need to do to take care of what is left of my family. You looked like a nice man. You seemed alone and I figured I could help you while you helped me. I can be like a wife."

Carl had shunned other people for most of his adult life and he was tempted to do the same again, but customers were rare, and he did not ponder any more comic book fan girls showing up at his store in the near future, looking for love. Against his nature he said, "I have some room at my place. Y'all can come back with me."

She looked up and said, "I will make sure you don't regret this."

Carl then realized he did not ask a very important question. Correcting his mistake, "What is your name?"

With a huge smile on her face she said, “Mrs. Melissa Doughtry.” The smile faded and then she said, “Ms. Melissa Doughtry.” She added, “My Mother-in-law is Martha Doughtry, and my girls Debra, ten, and Carla, seven.” She thought for a second and then said, “They are good girls. No real trouble.”

Melissa got to her feet and started to walk over to the girls when Carl said, “I don’t know kids.” She responded, “I will keep them out of your way.”

He replied, “Not that I don’t like kids. I just don’t know anything about them. I was an only child.” He stammered and said with a far away look, “I have never been around kids other than the store. No one brings a toddler to my store.”

Carl waited for a few seconds then walked over. Melissa started to introduce him and said, “Mom, girls, this is Mister...” She trailed off realizing that she did not know his name. Carl was socially inept but had enough skill to step in and say, “Carl Johnson.”

Embarrassed she continued, “Mr. Johnson is going to let us stay at his place for a while.”

The grandmother, Martha extended a hand and said, “We are grateful, Mr. Johnson. I will keep the girls out of your way.”

Carl shook her hand as he had been taught when he was young and said, “Thanks. I don’t know anything about kids.”

Melissa said, “Should we follow you, in your car?”

Without embarrassment Carl said, “I don’t have a car.” Seeing the quizzical look on their faces he added, “Didn’t need one living in the city.”

Immediately Melissa worried that she had just made a deal with a loser and she was about to take her family to a shack or worse.

Carl sensed the concern and said, “I can drive, just didn’t want to pay for something I didn’t need. I have been thinking about buying a truck but no one wants to sell good trucks anymore.”

The oldest girl asked, “So you walked here mister?”

He looked at her and said, "My building isn't far."

The little girl asked, "Building? Is it big?"

Carl smiled and said, "Big enough. 25,000 square feet of commercial space. My store is there and I converted some upstairs space into an apartment."

Melissa asked, "What kind of store?"

Carl smiled and said, "It is called the Comic Emporium. Business is slow as you can imagine."

The Grandmother rolled her eyes and said, "A comic book store."

Melissa hit the grandmother on the shoulder and said, "Be nice. Carl is being generous."

Carl chuckled nervously and said, "I am used to it. It is not a normal, job, but it used to be decent money."

That feeling of dread hit Melissa again that she had made a mistake, but then Carl said, "I bought the building a while back. I am not poor. If that is what you are thinking."

The ride in the truck was a nice break from walking in sub freezing temperatures for Carl. He decided that he would have to spend the money and buy a truck but he had to find a place to park it. He considered converting the delivery entrance in the back to a garage, but lacked the knowledge of how to accomplish the task, so he had ignored it. With his newfound friends, having a truck he decided it was time to learn or hire someone to build a cover. With temperatures being what they were, leaving a vehicle outside caused problems with the engine and over enough time the water in the gasoline would freeze and the news folks were harping on how the hoses and belts would break.

When they entered the shop Carl instinctively said, "Careful what you touch."

Melissa said, "The girls are good. They won't make a mess."

Carl replied flatly, "I meant all of you. Some of the collectables here were valuable before the change. Now, they may be one of a kind."

Martha mumbled, “We have a live one.” And twisted her finger around her head making the universal signal for crazy.

Carl ignored her as he showed them the shop, then he led them through the back door into the common hall and up the steps to the second floor. He showed them to his apartment and then the old attorney’s office next door. He said, “You’re welcome to anything you need. I only have one bed, but we can find another tomorrow.”

Melissa said, “We have sleeping bags and clothes in the back of the truck. They are freezing but they should warm up.”

He said, “There is plenty of space here, but I have the heater on minimal for upstairs but I will turn it up now that you are here. You can’t shut it off or the inside of the building will freeze.”

Melissa whispered, “This whole building is yours?”

Carl replied, “Yup, the tobacco shop and the dry cleaners left downstairs. The attorneys and the accountants on this floor left and never came back. They abandoned their furniture. The space on the 3rd floor had been empty for a while, I just moved all their files and books upstairs and spread them out across the floor as a layer of insulation. I have to go check up there every so often. I am worried that the roof will get heavy with ice and snow. Gotta push that stuff off every once in a while. I just did it this morning.”

She then asked, “Can this building survive this weather?”

Carl face lit up at the chance to brag as he said, “I reinforced the 3rd floor with cross beams and I have started building up layers of ice on the windows and the outside walls. In a few weeks this will be a giant igloo.”

Melissa smiled slightly and asked, “So you aren’t planning on leaving?”

He just looked at her as if she were speaking a language he didn’t understand and asked, “Why would I leave?”

She looked at him and said, “My husband and father thought they could stay.”

Without a pause he said, “The weather is a little better here. If I were in the Midwest I would have left.” In truth he wasn’t sure if he would have left, but it seemed like what Melissa wanted to hear, so he said it.

The look on her face said it all, but Carl lacked the people skills to understand the impact of his callous remark. Melissa realized that it was pointless to argue and did not press the issue. She would have been arguing with a man who kept selling comic books while the world shifted.

Carl took advantage of the silence and asked, “Why did you come here? Why not go to Mexico?”

Melissa said, “You have seen the news. Four women in a war zone? I will not subject my daughters to that.”

Without thought Carl said, “Guess it is a good thing I stayed.”

She smiled and forgave his complete lack of social skills. He was a big kid like most men. Something was wrong with him, but so far, he was the best thing she had come across since leaving home.

As Carl and Melissa ventured out into the cold to retrieve her belongings from the truck, Carl said, “I don’t think your mother likes me very much.”

Melissa started laughing and slipped on the icy sidewalk. She kept laughing as Carl looked on then she said, “Help me up, you idiot.”

Carl extended a hand and asked, “What’s so funny?”

As she got back to her feet she said, “Martha is my mother-in-law. Not my mother.” She continued, “It is the end of the fuckin world and I managed to be stuck without a husband, but I got my critical bitch of a mother-in-law.”

Carl just stared and said, “I didn’t know. I was never married.”

She laughed, “Really. I never would have guessed. No wife would have let you do this line of work. How could you support a family?”

Carl just said, "I have plenty of money from my parents. They died when I got out of college."

Suddenly things became clear for Melissa and she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Carl smiled and said, "It was a long time ago. I opened the store to give me something to do on the suggestion of my therapist."

They dropped the clothes and sleeping bags in the back hall behind the store. Melissa asked, "Do you still see him?" The thought of therapists might seem odd to some farmwives, but Melissa watched a lot of daytime television and found the idea of talking to someone about her problems and fears interesting. The opportunity never arose personally, so it was still something of a mystery to her. If it had she would not hesitate to take the help.

Carl shook his head and said, "No, I didn't like the meds they always tried to put me on, and going to work was enough for me."

He looked down at the ice-encrusted clothes and sleeping bags and said, "The old dry cleaners left all their equipment. There are industrial dryers and washing machines in there. I use them when I need to wash clothes."

Without hesitation, she gathered up the sleeping bags and said, "Let's start with these first." A mother of 2 knows how to wash clothes, early and often.

The attorney's office next to Carl's apartment was converted to a hasty apartment for the women. The newly cleaned sleeping bags were laid out on the floor and the girls toys found their way to the large oak desks that Carl had once considered burning for heat or using as building materials, now served as a play area. The computers were all locked, but Carl figured with enough perseverance he could find a password hidden in a desk, he just had no motivation to find it until now. He pondered that the girls might need them for schoolwork. Not that there were functioning schools, but the government was talking about making an internet school. It

would be safer than having children hike in freezing temperatures. The government talked a lot, maybe they would do some of those things they still collected taxes to do.

Carl left the room but did not go far. Through the door he could hear Martha in her gruff voice say, "You should go earn our keep."

Melissa said, "I wish you would not be such a rude bitch."

Martha fired back, "I lost a husband and a son."

Melissa did not back down and said, "I lost a husband and a father."

There was silence for a minute and then Martha said, "They were both fucking assholes who would not accept the truth of the situation... They would have had us stay there to die with them... They were idiots."

Then Carl heard what he thought were both women crying. If the girls were not asleep, he was sure they would be crying with them as well. He started to walk away then he heard Martha say, "That Carl is a good man. We could have done a lot worse. I am not sure my son would have taken in 4 females who have nothing to offer."

Melissa said, "Well, I did agree..." She trailed off not wanting to spell out exactly what she agreed to do for room and board for her family.

Martha responded with something he could not understand and then he heard the older woman say, "We need him."

Carl started rushed away when he heard Melissa say, "I will be back in a little while. Don't wait up." He walked quickly and quietly back to his apartment. His fears that this was some manner of con job were gone after hearing the women's private conversation.

Carl closed his door and took a seat on the nice leather couch that had once been in the attorney's office across the hall. Melissa let herself in the unlocked door and said, "There ain't no way to be polite and fancy about this. You have kept up your end of the deal. I gotta keep mine."

She never looked into Carl's eyes and just stood there as she started to unbutton her jeans.

Carl held up his hand and said, "Stop."

She looked up, saw his grimaced faced, and said, "Don't make this harder for me, Carl, please."

Carl said, "You said you would be a wife and take care of me."

She stood there with the top button of her jeans open hands at her side and said, "Look, I will do whatever I need to do for my girls."

He replied, "I know that. I wish I were that good a person. I invited you in, because of your offer, but I don't think you will be going anywhere for a while."

She walked over, sat down on the couch next to him, and said, "No, I don't think we are going anywhere."

He then said, "I would be lying if I said I didn't want what you are offering, but..." He swallowed and said, "If I take what you are offering right now, you will resent me forever."

She touched his hand and said, "No. A deal's a deal."

He said, "It is. You aren't going anywhere. There is time for that."

Suddenly she said, "You don't like me." She pondered if he were actually gay and just did not want to admit it.

He replied, "No, trust me. You are the most beautiful woman who has ever wanted..." he paused and corrected himself, "Offered herself to me."

Carl stared at the floor thinking that he was still alone. This mother was doing what she needed to for her daughters, but she did not want him. He had hired an escort once and decided that he preferred internet porn to a woman who was not interested in him.

She said, "I will do whatever you want."

Carl said, "Let's just watch the news and talk."

Melissa broke down into tears and fell on his shoulder. She cried and Carl held her. He never turned on the television. He held her as she cried until she fell asleep. Carl fell asleep soon after and they stayed on the couch until late into the night.

At some point after midnight Melissa woke up and went back to check on the girls. Carl moved to his bed by the time she returned and instead of going back to a sleeping bag on the floor with her girls, she took advantage of the opportunity and got into the bed with the half-asleep man who had taken them in. Carl enjoyed the company and held her in his arms. Without talking or debate they consummated their relationship in the early morning while everyone else was asleep.

Mexican Vacation

George sat in the temporary headquarters office and listened to his commander speak. “We have been given order to pacify a small village near the interstate. It looks like former government agents are trying to create a real insurgency and have been attacking passing convoys, stealing the supplies intended for the relocated citizens.”

The Company Commander pointed to a map. Instead of drifting off like in normal business meetings George was completely attentive. This meeting would determine strategy for fighting and survival. As he took quick notes the Lieutenant thought to himself that he felt alive for the first time in his life.

“We have orders to do whatever is necessary, but I don’t like orders like that. These are men and women whose country we have forcibly annexed. I will not debate need, as all of us know about the need, but they have every damn right to be pissed. Let us do what we can to calm them down and make them a less powerful fighting force without pissing them off more.”

The commander showed an overhead picture of the city circling key target on the clear plastic overlay with a grease pencil. George smiled to himself thinking that the tools of war planning had not changed in 70 years. Computers and GPS were nice things to have but most of the time; you had a map, a piece of clear plastic, and a grease pencil. Those were enough to plan any battle. The he thought that he did way too much thinking for a man in a war.

The briefing broke up and when George started to walk out the commander signaled him to remain behind with a glance. Once alone George asked, “You wanted to see me, sir.”

“I have chose to put your platoon in the worst of it.”

“I noticed, sir.”

“Do you know why?”

“It does not matter, sir. We will do it.”

The commander drew a deep breath. “Your troops are blooded, and showed that they can take enemy lives without hesitation. No one else has fired a shot in anger in this whole company, including myself.”

George smiled, “To be honest, neither have I.”

“I read the report, you were under fire, and you gave the order. That is all an officer has to do.” The commander turned toward the map then at the satellite picture. “The church is their base of operations. They think we won’t attack a church. Normally they would be right.”

“These are far from normal times.” George knew that this was normal for soldiers. Throughout history, soldiers were asked to do abnormal things. It is normal to grow crops and children. It is never normal to gather murderous men together and kill groups to take their land. This was also no time for morality. When all this was over it would be left to history to judge their actions. George swallowed hard and hoped history would understand what he was about to do.

Stand for Something

The delivery truck with unnecessary snow chains on its tires arrived with the beds and dressers along with some nightstands 3 days later. Carl paid a premium for fast delivery and the company was happy to have the order. The men trudged in the back door and as they were leaving one of the men asked, "You really open for business?"

Carl smiled and said, "I open the doors. If a customer wanders in I have stuff to sell."

The large man asked, "Are you getting new comics?"

Carl smiled and said, "Rarely, but UPS is doing their best. The printers are in LA and they have been slow, but I can wait."

The large man said, "I have a large collection of original X-Men and I am afraid that it will be stolen since the cops aren't patrolling my apartment complex. Could I pay you to store it for me?"

Carl's interest was peaked, "How large?"

The man smiled and said, "2 copies sealed with back boards from issue #1 to the latest." Then he said, "All mint except for #243 which has a crease in the second copy."

"I will find room to store them for you, but I might make an offer to buy if you are selling?" Carl said.

The man shook hands with Carl and said, "I will pay you to store them. I don't want to sell just yet."

Carl said, "I wouldn't sell either. We will work out a price once I see how big it really is."

The large deliveryman said, "I will be by tonight after work if that is okay."

Carl smiled and said, "I will be here. No where else to go."

He locked the back door and then locked the front putting up a note, saying "Back in 10 minutes." Before heading upstairs, he activated the alarm as he always did when he left the

downstairs. The outside security cameras no longer worked, but he saw no reason to remove them or replace them. The inside cameras still worked and watched the store. He was unconcerned about crime in his store since thieves were more interested in hardware and grocery stores these days. The police presence was larger than before the shift and National Guard regularly patrolled the streets stopping and going house-to-house and questioning people seen on the street, who were usually in trouble or were involved with shady activities.

It had been a week since the National Guard stopped by. Last time a young man bought \$50 of Manga comics. Carl hoped for more regular customers, but the only visitors he could count on now were the UPS and Fed Ex delivery drivers. They showed up every other day with a trickle of merchandise

The girls were happy with their new beds and asked if they were going to be able to keep them. Carl said, "They are yours as long as you want."

Melissa stood next to him with her hand on his shoulder and said, "You didn't have to do all that."

Carl said, "If you are going to do the job of a wife for me. I should do the job of a husband."

Martha said, "Guess you aren't a complete loser after all. Now about those damn comics..."

Melissa said, "Shut up Martha. That collection he has is worth more than our old farms combined, before the shift. It is like an art collection in one of those museums."

Martha muttered and shook her head die to side as she walked off, "Great. Now she is a fuckin nerd too." As she got to her bed in what was the former lead attorney's private office she turned and said, "Thank you for the furniture and letting us stay here, Carl. But I still think there is something wrong with a man who collects comics." She closed the door more to end the conversation than a need for privacy.

The girls were looking at the computers Carl unlocked the night before and connected to his network. The oldest girl asked, “How is the internet still working with so much of the country frozen?”

Carl walked over to them and said, “The fiber backbone is having problems, but the copper wire for DSL is doing pretty good. It is slower in America than in the past, but is working.”

The 10-year-old looked at him with a puzzled look and asked, “So the wire works?”

Carl was beginning to understand that he gave overly complicated answers to the kids and did his best to reduce complexity. He replied, “The slower connections work. The big fast parts are damaged, but it will keep working for a while.”

Melissa watched him learning to talk to the girls as she moved a desk further against the wall out of the way then said, “We are lucky to have found you.”

Carl smiled and said, “I think I am lucky to have found you. I never realized how alone I was. I think my parents would have...”

The calm of the moment was shattered as the alarm went off downstairs. Carl rushed to the alarm panel and said breathlessly, “It’s the back door. Use the phone... call 911.”

He drew the .45 caliber automatic from its holster in his lower back and flipped the safety off with his thumb, the slide could now move as needed. Holding the weapon down with both hands like the trainer taught him. As he walked quietly down the back stairwell, he recognized the large deliveryman who had left just a few minutes before.

Remembering the training class, he tried to sound assertive as he yelled, “What the fuck are you doing?”

The deliveryman had a disarming friendly smile as he replied, “Taking what you don’t need.”

Carl said, “Get out right now.”

The deliveryman held a large hammer in his hand, cocked the hammer back and turned around, and rushed toward Carl who was still three steps up from the bottom of the staircase. The thief did not recognize the pistol until Carl had fired two rounds into his chest. The large deliveryman died in a pool of blood with large holes where his back was prior to the bullet shots, the large hammer still in his hand.

If the rounds had been normal ball ammunition he may have lived minutes before dying, or even had a chance at survival, but Carl followed the advice of his trainer and used a type of hollow point round designed to cause massive damage to flesh. The deliveryman was missing large chunks of his back and pieces of internal organs that exited along with the bullets. Carl could not help but think that the Hydroshock bullets were a very good choice.

The second delivery driver dropped the tire iron he was carrying and ran away from his position outside the back door. Carl gave chase, following him around the corner of the building. The second deliverymen jumped into the truck, and started to drive away. Carl shot his front tire and then took aim at the driver's side door.

The stand off lasted for a few minutes with the man refusing to get out of the truck and Carl aiming the pistol on him, ignoring the freezing cold. The stalemate ended when the police arrived. A large officer, who did not seem happy to be out in the cold, took the pistol from Carl's hands and the second officer convinced the failed thief to get out of the truck with his own pistol and a series of expletives.

Carl said, "I think the one inside is dead. He came at me with a hammer. I fired in his direction."

The large officer asked, "You the store owner?"

Carl replied, "Yes, sir."

The large officer checked Carl's pistol put the safety on while his partner handcuffed the deliveryman from the truck. The officer handed Carl back his pistol and said, "You should have shot him too. It would have been easier."

Dumbfounded, Carl just said, “Huh?”

The officer said, “Now we have to put that one in jail. There is no room. He will probably be out in a few days. He might be back.”

Armed with the information that this man would be back on the street Carl decided to confront him now, rather than wait for a court date that would never arrive. Carl walked toward the handcuffed man and asked, “Whose idea was this?”

The captured thief did not answer until the officer ordered, “Answer the man.”

The surviving deliveryman said, “It was Joe’s idea. He said you would just let us take what we wanted. No trouble.”

Shaking with cold and anger Carl snarled, “Never come anywhere near me or my store again. I will shoot you on sight. Do you understand?”

The deliveryman said, “I won’t bother you again, mister. I was just hoping for some easy money. Times are hard.”

Carl replied, “They are hard for all of us. If I even see you again, I will just shoot you. Are we clear?”

The deliveryman shook his head to the affirmative and said, “Yes, sir. I will never come near you again. I am sorry.”

Carl walked toward the large officer who had worked his way in the back door. When Carl got close the officer said, “Yep. That is one dead thief with a deadly weapon in his hand. Remember that when the detectives come by later.” The officer took digital pictures of the dead man, the hammer in his hand, and the broken, kicked in, back door, and then returned to his warm police car.

Detectives arrived a half hour later; Carl had already begun repairs to the back door, when the pair of investigators arrived. One detective took pictures of the store and made notes while his partner talked to Carl.

The detective said, "Good thing you are armed Mr. Johnson. Thieves are just as desperate as everyone else these days."

Carl replied, "I never wanted to have to use it."

The detective replied, "That hammer would have killed you, sir."

Melissa was now sitting at the top of the stairs watching, but saying nothing. Carl had not talked to her other than to say he was okay. When Carl started to repair the back door, she snuck a peek at the dead thief, but never came more than halfway down the stairs.

Carl replied to the detective, "I have 4 women to protect."

The detective said, "You need guns for them too. I would say civil society has collapsed."

Carl replied, "I have some for them. I will take care of that."

The detective asked, "So this guy just delivered stuff from the furniture store. What an idiot. I think I am going to have a talk with his boss next. I bet they have robbed more than a few customers." The he added, "The coroner will be here in an hour or so. They will get rid of the body, but you will have to clean up the blood. Shouldn't be too bad, it didn't get on the nice carpet."

When the detectives left, Melissa started to come downstairs and Carl said, "You don't need to see this."

She stopped in mid-step and said, "I don't know what to say."

Carl replied, "We'll talk later. Right now, I have to fix this door and make it more secure."

Melissa started to say more, but chose to stay quiet and move back up the stairs. She was shocked that he would have taken her and her daughters so seriously. She had still held the secret idea that they would stay until the new territories in Mexico were safe. Now she decided that she was safer here with a man who would fight for her and her children.

Carl cleaned up the blood after the coroner left. The young woman from the coroner's office gave him a cleaner in an unmarked bottle saying it would clean up the blood. To his surprise the unmarked cleaner worked and a few hours later, he washed the rags in the industrial washing machines. It took several passes to find all of the blood spatters but there was no evidence other than the patched rear doorjamb, that a criminal died there while trying to rob and kill the owner.

Melissa made dinner in the kitchen that was once a large break room for the law firm that was now her family's home. Carl marveled that she even tried to cook something edible using just a large hotplate and a microwave. As he watched her he said, "I will get a stove and an oven installed next week."

Melissa said, "That would be nice, but I doubt we can keep spending money like this. You only had one customer today and he tried to kill you."

Carl wanted to laugh at that. It was funny, but there was no humor in the death of anyone, even a thief. He looked around making sure Martha and the girls were unable to hear as he said, "I will tell you a secret. But you can't tell Martha or the girls, ever."

Melissa stirred the frying pan contents and said, "I won't tell."

Carl touched her chin and made her look in his eyes, "No, you don't understand." He looked deep into her eyes and said, "You can never tell them."

Suddenly a little nervous she said, "I won't if you don't want me to. I owe you too much to break your trust."

Carl said, "Okay. I will tell you the truth. I don't need to ever worry about money."

She said, "I know you are rich."

Carl replied, "I don't think you grasp just how rich. My parents were very wealthy. How much money do you think I have in the bank?"

She continued looking at him and said, "A few hundred thousand maybe a million."

Carl smiled and said, "Try 37 million as of the last time I checked my assets, yesterday." Melissa gasped and then Carl added, "The collection in this building is worth at least 20 million. If there were anyone to buy it."

She swallowed and asked, "Why didn't you just leave when this shit started?"

He replied, "This you can't tell either... I couldn't. I have a type of obsessive-compulsive disorder. At least that is what the doc said. I just need order in my life and going to work every day and collecting comics kept me sane."

She let the spoon drop to the side of the frying pan and said, "This whole thing must have been hell for you."

For the first time in his life when someone found out he had OCD they understood. Breaking his pattern was like being allergic to peanuts, there was no cure, he just had to build up his resistance to the disorder.

Melissa hugged him, held him close, and said, "I will never tell anyone about any of that."

They stood there silent for a few seconds then Carl said, "I killed that man today. He was going to take some things and I did not care. You know what I thought of when he came at me with that hammer?"

She shook her head to the negative and Carl continued, "I thought, if he kills me, he will kill you and the girls." He started to cry and through the tears he continued while she held him close, "I saw that man hitting you with that hammer." He choked as he cried and continued, "I could not let him hurt you." He swallowed and just let the tears flow.

Then his world changed forever when he said, "I love you." He had not said I love you to anyone since the day he parents died. His heart was open for the first time.

Long seconds went by in silence and Melissa held him closer then said, "I still love my dead bastard husband. But, Carl... I love you too."

He whispered through tears, "Promise you won't leave me."

She took his face in her hands and looked him in the eyes saying, “I will never leave you. Promise you will never kick me out.”

He stepped out of her arms and dropped to one knee like he had seen in so many movies then asked, “Will you marry me?”

Melissa grabbed her mouth with both hands and then said, “Why would you ask a thing like that? You don’t have to marry me for me to stay. We have a deal.”

Carl looked up at her and said, “What if that man had gotten to me with the hammer. You and the girls would have no money. If you are my wife you can access the accounts.”

Grabbing her mouth again, she started to cry and fell to her knees in front of him. She wrapped her arms around him holding him close, then said, “If you want to marry me I will marry you, but I am not going anywhere. You don’t have to marry me.”

The food was burning and she ignored it waiting for him to speak. Carl said, “I don’t have enough experience at all this. I can’t replace the father of your children, but I can be your husband and take care of them.”

She laughed throwing her head back in exasperation at herself and said, “I am fighting the richest man I ever met who wants me to marry him.”

Carl looked at her hopefully and waited. She said, “Yes, I will marry you.”

Then reality surfaced as Melissa’s practical side emerged. She asked, “Can we wait a few months to get married? For the girls.”

Carl said, “We can wait as long as you like.” Then he said, “I hope you understand I can’t move right now. Maybe one day, though.”

Melissa replied, “Why would we leave this place? It has everything. Comics, electricity, internet, and ice to melt for water.” Carl was unsure if she were kidding, but she never once mentioned leaving town, so as time passed he assumed she was comfortable in his world.

Negotiations broke down less than an hour after the city came under siege. Most citizens walked out of the small village hands over their head to a holding area guarded by 2 squads from another platoon. The Commander was a half mile away dealing with the mayor who was willing to help the US Soldiers and prove his loyalty to the new men with guns.

The 150 men women and children in the church had a different opinion. The interpreter said they mentioned the illegal occupation of their country and the fact that they would rather die and live under the oppressive imperialist nation that invaded them.

George deployed his forces in the surrounding buildings and snipers and heavy gunners caused the holdouts in the church to abandon their positions in the church steeple and the windows without firing a shot. To the interpreter he said, "Tell them to cut out the bullshit. We are here, and we are not leaving until they disarm."

The interpreter relayed the message and then translated the reply. "They say they will never surrender. You will have to kill them all."

A single shot from a sniper still hidden in the steeple missed the platoon leader and hit the interpreter square in the neck. The small man in dark clothing clutched his neck in vain. George lay him down but did not let the man's imminent death distract him.

His driver drug the interpreter away trying in vain to staunch the flow of blood. His feet shaking violently he died from shock before the loss of blood proved fatal. Both covered in blood spray George said to his driver, "Well that fucking does it. We can't even talk to them now."

She nodded in agreement and raised her rifle and took aim at the window next to the door. George called over his unit radio to the deployed squads, "Take that sniper out."

Sporadic but controlled bursts from snipers and M-60 gunners eventually killed the sniper. Before their shots were fatal all of the steeple windows were destroyed and the roof of the ancient church steeple sagged and looked on the verge of collapse. As it quieted the voices from inside the door started yelling and then gunfire from inside the church erupted causing the soldiers to duck and stay behind cover.

Into the radio George said, "Clear the building."

As planned individual gunners opened up on the windows and then grenadiers fired their RPGs through the broken windows. Long seconds later the return fire from inside the church stopped. George looked at his Driver and nodded. The corporal lifted the old LAW, Light Anti-Tank Weapon, and fired at the heavy wooden main doors of the church. The doors that were well over 150 years old splintered in a spray of wood and metal spreading over the interior of the sanctuary.

Return machine gun fire started from inside through the heaving doors and again as planned, the TOW gunner on the humvee to the left of the Platoon leader fired and the high explosive armor piercing wire guided warhead found the floor of the sanctuary collapsing it into the basement. The weapon was designed for destroying enemy tanks, but today it was a weapon of demolition of a house of worship.

George again keyed the microphone and said, "Cease fire, Cease fire. Return fire if fired upon." Looking over at the corporal he noticed the look of horror in her eyes and she said, "There were kids in there."

She started shaking and the Lieutenant grabbed her shoulders and yelled into her face, "Those bastards in there killed 35 people who were guilty of nothing more than driving trucks with supplies. They could have sent the families out."

"You killed them." Her eyes were glassy.

"Yes, I did. But we are alive Corporal. Get yourself together."

Hours later the smoke cleared and a small fire went out making it safe to approach the building. Local fire fighters entered along with American Soldiers. The bodies of the dead were laid neatly on the street and identified by local police as members of a local gang and their families.

The mayor and the company commander toured the location. The Mayor looked at George and with a heavy accent said, "They should know to Fear Americans. They killed your people, you will kill them. The next gang will not take your threats lightly."

George looked at the dead and replied without looking at the mayor, "I hope they will. This wasn't necessary."

The mayor said as he walked off, "It was. You have their respect and fear now. I am proud to be one of yours." He took off his white hat and wiped his sweaty brow with his suit jacket. "God bless America, and God bless you soldiers. Our city is now safe from these monsters. And safe from you. We won't trouble you again."

Climbing into his Humvee he looked over at his driver and said, "You did good today."

"No I didn't. None of us did, Sir."

"Stow that shit soldier. You wanted me to act like an officer when we started this mission. Now you want to act like a sniveling little girl. We don't have that luxury. Now we are died in the wool god damn killers. Conquerors of old. Because of how we have fought today we won't have to fight tomorrow."

"Yes, Sir." She seemed taller and stronger than she had been just a few seconds ago. Driving toward admin area she never took her eyes off the road.

"These are bad people who were doing bad things for their families. We are bad people doing bad things for our families. We were just better at the bad things." George did not want a reply and did not expect one.

"Sir, please forget that I said anything."

"Consider it forgotten."

Life goes on...

Three months later, Carl and Melissa were married at the courthouse with the girls, Martha and some friends Melissa made at the grocery store looking on. The girls slowly accepted him as their stepfather, Martha still did not like him, and Melissa reached a point where she could say she loved him without feeling guilty and qualifying it.

Winter showed no sign of ending and the weather never rose above freezing, but life became more normal. Three days a week the girls attended school online and the deliveries became more consistent. Martha enjoyed her job of looking after the girls and watching television, while Melissa and Carl ran the shop.

The store had less than a dozen walk in customers now. That changed when his old customers found out he had not moved, but was still open and willing to serve their needs. The Comic Emporium started shipping orders to old customers in the new territories of Mexico and New America, the former Antarctica. The business was as unimportant as it ever was. Melissa still did not understand the interest in comics but she had grown to appreciate the cover art and pondered aloud on occasion that Carl really liked comics for the buxom heroines in revealing costumes. He would laugh and say, "If they were not sexy they would not be on the cover."

All in all life was normal, as normal as living in a freezer could be. People slowly moved away from the northern cities to the more comfortable climates, but Carl made a happy life with his wife and her children in their little corner of the world. Melissa was pregnant with their first child and the girls were adjusting to life easier than the adults.

The once completely commercial building had slowly become the igloo Carl envisioned and converted to a safe place for his growing family. The store remained on the first floor and

the former dry cleaners served as a laundry for the growing family. Life had reach a new kind of normal for the family.

Late one evening, a year after the shift, a knock on the front door came, as Carl was getting ready for bed. He disarmed the alarm system as he checked the pistol he now wore in a low holster on his right hip at all times. Standing in the door was a face he recognized, but knew only as a customer.

“Can I come in.” The short haired man in a heavy jacket asked.

Carl considered saying no for a few seconds. “We closed an hour ago, but for an old customer I can open up.”

Never turning his back on the man who looked the same but now had a steely gaze of a professional killer Carl walked behind the counter.

“I bet you don’t remember me.”

“George right? The X-Men fan. You wife came by to get your orders until a month ago. Is everything alright?”

The soldier looked tired as he took a seat on one of the many stools on the customer side of the counter. “My wife and sons are fine. They are still living at the armory. Our house could not stand the cold. It collapsed some months ago. I have been fighting in Mexico.”

“I have heard about that on the news. Was it as bad as they made it sound?”

“That I don’t know. It was plenty bad for me and my unit. But we are back for now. The Army want us Reservists out of their way now that the dirty deeds are done.” George swallowed and with returned from his 1000 meter stare, “I read on your site that you have rooms for rent.”

Carl smiled. He had mentioned apartments available in the area many times on his store’s web site, but for the most part no one wanted to live in the converted commercial building. Preferring to move to the warmer climates in one of the new states. “I have a large

apartment here, and several in the building across the street. I really need some more across the street.”

“I don’t have a job right now, but I am looking.”

“How would you pay rent?” Carl didn’t need the money, but he didn’t really want unemployed bum living in his building that he would have to throw out later.

“I have some money from the Army for relocation and out processing from active duty. But maybe we can do some odd jobs for you. Maintenance. Don’t think you need software project management.”

Looking into his eyes Carl thought that he would feel safer with this man living near him. Thinking for a few seconds he said, “I could use a hand with maintenance here. And I really need someone I can trust living in the building across the street. Pay me what you can when you can. It is more important to have friends now than money.”

George looked around noticing that the shop had changed little since he was last in it, but the whole world outside would never be the same. “Thank you, Sir. I just want to get my family away from the Army. I am sure they will deploy me again, but I want to be sure they are safe.”

“Do you mind if I ask why you don’t just take them to North Mexico?”

George considered a lie answer but chose blunt honesty. “I have killed way to many people there to be safe. To that end, I don’t want my name to appear anywhere. It is safer for my family and maybe for you.”

“That seems reasonable. I doubt anyone would travel this far for revenge.”

“The news doesn’t tell you half of what we did to pacify that country.”

George shook hands with Carl looking him in the eyes, “When can we move in?”

“Tomorrow morning if you wish.”

“I will bring you the rent money I have and we will be here first thing in the morning.”

Early the next morning George and his family showed up, to Carl’s surprise the first thing George did was unload 30 boxes of bagged and boarded comics in pristine white boxes. Placing

the boxes in the front of the store he said, tell me what that collection is worth and if you agree apply it to my bill. Carl was shocked. George had been an avid collector for years and the value of his collection would pay rent for years.

“How did you keep these safe when you house collapsed?” Carl asked.

Grinning George replied, “It was a perk of being an officer. I moved these into my office at the armory.”

George’s wife added with a smile, “His comics were safe, while his family was left to freeze.”

Carl said with a smile to Melissa who stood behind the counter, “A man has to have his priorities straight.” Looking through the boxes quickly he said, “I think you won’t have to pay rent for a long time.” He slid the 4 X-Men Number ones back into the box and resisted the urge to start hauling them behind the counter into the storage area.

Being a landlord came first and he showed George and family to the large apartment across the street that had once been an accounting office. Pointing to the office furniture stacked on the walls Carl said, “We may need those for material to repair the buildings. I will help you move them to a storage area. Otherwise, do what you like here. Let me know if you need some help unloading.”

George said, “No, sir. I can get my family moved in. You have done more than enough.”

“I have just done what any man should. I have done what I can.”

Afterward

The community that formed in Buckhead was one of strength and determination to survive. Carl found himself the owner of a large number of buildings but he was far from a

slumlord. The weather never changed and stories told to the children born after the shift seemed like nothing more than fairy tales. Seasons were hard to explain to someone who had never seen one change.

Occasional tales that NASA was going to try to move the earth again into a tilt to give it seasons were persistent, but most understood that the earth could hold its current orientation for 6 hours or 6 billion years. There was nothing to do but live and thrive in the environment provided. The people who came to live with Carl were glad that he had the foresight to create a place for people to live that did not want to abandon their nation.

Melissa kept secret that her husband was unable to leave, instead she fostered the idea that he was a visionary who wanted to fight the elements themselves. Those that knew him from before saw through the lies, but the lie sounded better than the truth and when the world shifted under your feet it was nice to have a crazy man to lead the way.