




In a post-apocalyptic world, the future of humanity depends on an unlikely team: a discredited doctor, a cutthroat lawyer and a military dog.

After the Apocalypse:
A Story of Pandemic Survival - Book One, The Old Man
By Chris Russell

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A Pandemic survival story

AFTER THE APOCALYPSE

BOOK ONE — THE OLD MAN

CHRIS RUSSELL

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Chapter One - The Old Man

November 21st – Three weeks since the virus ended the world...

The afternoon sun slanted warm across the river's surface. The water was high from the recent rains and a muddy hue swirled in the shallows. Early mayflies prickled the surface here and there, and lazy ripples hinted at fish and dorsal fins.

A cottonwood tree trailed its branches into the flow, creating a rip in the otherwise placid waters. In the low hiss of water sounds, a man cleared his throat.

"How long you been here?" the teenager asked.

Near an old shed by the water, an old man leaned back, cleared his throat, and spat. "A week or so now." He eyed the younger soul with a mix of weariness and caution.

The old man was just under six feet tall and lean, but not skinny. He wore an old pair of cargo shorts and a loose cotton work shirt.

It was hard to tell an exact age, but he was at least fifty years old, maybe older. He sported grey, longish hair, swept back, and held under

a cap. His beard was grey-white with uneven patches of the original reddish brown standing like doomed islands in the flood of age.

He fixed the boy with sharp brown eyes.

The boy continued, leaning back onto a fallen tree, feigning disinterest, looking carefully sideways at the old man with shaded eyes. "You must've seen a lot in your time. What did you do before... yah know, before it happened?"

For the boy knew that the older ones liked to talk about the *before* times. Maybe he could get this surly old one off his guard.

"Yeah, I was there." The old man addressed part of the question and ignored the remainder carefully. He relaxed a bit and readjusted the weight of his wiry frame like a gymnast limbering up. "I was up north when it began. I worked my way down here where it's warmer, after the first wave hit."

"It got pretty weird." He continued. "Once the system got pushed beyond its limits, things got bad fast." He eyed the boy and gestured with a shrug to the top of a partially collapsed, burnt-out building tipping into the river less than a mile downstream.

"A lot of people died." He finished abruptly.

But the boy wouldn't let it rest and pulled the thread. "I heard up north there was the dying and then those who were left in the cities took to killin' each other."

The old man shrugged. "Once the supply chain broke down, it was a zero-sum game. Take a place like New York City, you had twenty to thirty thousand people per square mile and no way to keep them fed. Starving, dying people don't act reasonably." He looked out over the water. "It sorted itself out."

The boy looked over the man's shoulder, eyeing the shed and then the man himself. "What did you do back before, mister," the boy asked again.

A sharp look. "It doesn't matter, boy. I was fast and smart enough to make it out into the country and stay alive. We covered one hundred hard miles that first day and got out of the trouble. Those that couldn't run, stayed and died. We ran and lived." His eyes clouded over as he recalled the faces of ghosts.

The boy smoothed the front of his dirty shirt and casually moved his hand towards the hilt of his machete, as if brushing off a bit of dirt. "You got anything to trade, mister?"

The old man noted the boy's movement and squared himself. "I have some dried fish and squirrel, plus some sweet marsh plant that makes a pretty good stew. I'll feed you, kid. I have what I need here. But I'm not looking for company."

"I won't say no to a meal, mister. You've got a pretty good set-up here."

"I survive."

"Thanks, mister, let me cut some wood for a fire," the boy said, smiling, unsheathing the big blade and shouldering his way casually forward.

The old man rolled quickly over the log he was seated on, away from the boy. Landing on his feet, he took off running along the sandy shingle of the river.

"Come *back* here, you son of a bitch!" yelled the teenager, taking off in pursuit. But the old man already had a lead and was racing ahead.

The old man settled into a hard pace, his homemade sandals biting firmly into the soft mud. The boy was close on his heels, swearing and slipping.

A well-traveled trail opened on the left. The old man disappeared into the forest and up a steep, loose, rocky climb. The kid was pretty good and

was staying close. Others might have given up at the sight of the big climb.

The old man stumbled on a round cobble in the path and wind-milled for balance. For a terrifying second or two, he thought he might not recover. If he fell, the kid would have him.

He was able to push off the hill with his hands and pistoned his legs to regain balance and keep moving, but the kid had gained some ground.

Nothing to be done for it now except to push like his life depended on it, because it probably did. Maybe he had underestimated the kid. Maybe this was the day when he'd have to stop running and fight.

The old man breathed deeply, filling his lungs, willing his heart to push blood down to soothe the burning in his thighs. He drove himself hard up the gravel slope, pumping his arms and lifting his complaining knees. The uphill was where he thought he had an advantage, so he pressed.

Three more stilted strides.

The fatigue in his quads felt like hot lead.

One last, deep, ungodly push and he was over the crest.

He shook out his arms and tried to will the pooling blood out of his legs. He sucked in a lungful of air and blew it out hard. He unfolded his lanky frame and dropped into the descent along, and then down the ridge.

He heard the kid about thirty feet back struggling up the loose slope. He relaxed his form and balanced his body against the downhill with long, quick strides, pulling his elbows back for balance.

He flew.

Through a cedar thicket and back out onto the river's bank, he pushed hard now for the shed. He rounded a corner and reached for where he knew it would be.

The kid was breathing hard when he came into view. He looked quite surprised, eyes wide in his dirty face as the old man settled his breathing and released the bolt from the crossbow.

It struck the boy cleanly in the chest. The boy staggered a couple more steps with his momentum and fell, a surprised look of pain and anger still on his face.

The old man scratched his scraggly beard and considered the kid laying on the ground,

blowing bubbles of blood around the corners of his mouth.

It wouldn't be long now.

The old man hated to do it. He was supposed to save lives, not take them. But in this new world, after the apocalypse, the rules were different. It was every man for himself.

Even so, something old and familiar felt sick inside.

Should he even be feeling this regret? The kid could have let him go.

He'd much rather run than fight. He wasn't built for killing.

He was 99% sure that the kid was sent ahead to infiltrate his camp and catch him off guard. He saw it coming.

There had been tip-offs. The way the kid carried himself. The way he asked questions – the old man had seen it before.

Send the least threatening one in to test the situation and then the rest would come in to take advantage if there was an advantage to be taken.

In just a few weeks, the world seemed to have regressed into some sort of Machiavellian

trench warfare and the Old Man needed to do what he had to do to survive. He didn't like it, but it was a matter of survival now.

Others might not have noticed the Trojan Horse nature of the boy's arrival in camp, but the old man did. It was his gift and his curse to be able to read people and see around corners to what was probably going to happen next. He wasn't always right, but he was right often enough that he'd learned to trust his instinct.

The kid had stopped breathing. Had gone to meet his ancestors and been added to the great pile of bones that was humanity's legacy. What did the old man care? Why should he mourn one more death on top of the millions of people who had recently been rubbed out of existence? Still, it bothered him. Sure, it was him or the kid — but what was so special about him? One old man surviving in the apocalypse. What did it even matter? One more day, one more week?

In the great chaotic calculus of the universe, maybe that kid deserved life more than the old man. Maybe he'd just snuffed out a future leader, a great savior who would rebuild this wreck of a world!

The old man shook himself out of his thoughts.
It was done.

He wandered back into the shed he'd been squatting in and saw the old medals hanging on the wall. Some sort of race medals achieved by the previous resident. The old man had a box full of similar medals somewhere in a forgotten lifetime.

The old man considered it for a moment. He took a medal from the hook, stooped, and hung it around the boy's neck. He put his hand on the boy's forehead and uttered a swift prayer to his ancestors.

He asked for forgiveness.

Then he dragged the body to the river's edge and rolled it into the swiftly flowing stream.

Coming Soon

Fear not! The Apocalypse continues!

There are five books in the After the Apocalypse series of which this is the first.

Look for the next installment and keep up to date with everything in our After the Apocalypse community by visiting visit our website at www.oldmanapocalypse.com

Find the Podcast on Acast ->

<https://shows.acast.com/after-the-apocalypse>

Visit the Facebook group ->

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/oldmanapocalypse>

About the Author

Chris Russell is a science fiction devotee who writes from the suburbs of New England. He is particularly passionate about the Apocalyptic genre. He began writing "After the Apocalypse" as an audio podcast in 2020. It has since grown to tens of thousands of monthly listeners across five seasons of the story.

In his spare time, he spends hours running and ruminating in the forest trails with his border collie Ollie.



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