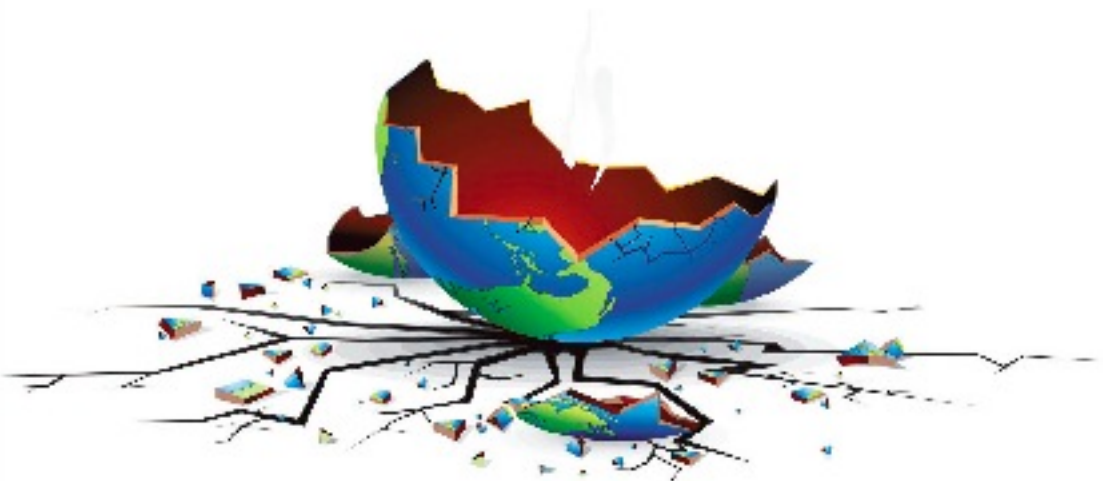
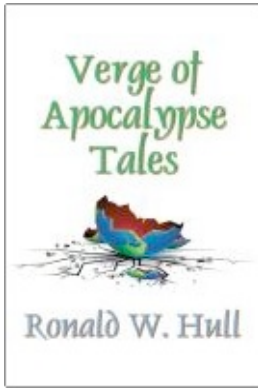


Verge of Apocalypse Tales



Ronald W. Hull



Verge of Apocalypse Tales is a collection of stories based on our worst fears of nuclear war, natural disaster, scientific blunder, financial collapse, manmade catastrophe, anarchy, political division, and sexual perversion, all wrapped up in the end of the Mayan Calendar, and other prophesies a notable as the Holy Bible, I Ching, and Nostradamus. Several stories have a startling twist at the end and many other authors have praised these stories.

Verge of Apocalypse Tales

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2012

Verge of Apocalypse Tales

Ronald W. Hull

Dedication

To my mother, Nina M. Hull, who had the foresight to conceive me just nine months before the Winter Solstice, a date that ancient peoples chronicled and revered, pointing to a time when time itself would run out.

And to my twin brother, Roger J. Hull, born just five minutes before me, for his ride through time with me and his mastery of the short story that I've tried to emulate here.

And to a high school classmate, Douglas W. Boucher, whose ideas and encouragement led to two of the lead off stories for this book.

And finally, the Mayans, whose precision with tracking the heavens and time ends on my birthday in this year, 2012, and with the many fears and concerns raised by humankind's great survival leading to many problems facing us, hopefully not insurmountable.

What Readers Say

1 - Revenge of the Gulf

Tom Hyland - Scary story! But - highly probable! As Puck once said: "What fools these mortals be!"

2 - Hellava Way to Die

Barbara Barbin - I liked the way you dealt with such a delicate subject. I will pass it on.

Sandra Mushi - My Gawd! This was soo ... geez ... soo realistic... Powerful!

Tina Clark - Wow... that was so realistic and so sad! I'm sure you just wrote someone's memory there and that's the terrible part that it could so very well be true!

Tinka Boukes - OMG...still uptight after reading your poem...and now I am really shaken!!

3 - Wish upon a Falling Star

Karen Lynn Vidra, The Texas Tornado - Fantastic science fiction tale... well done!

Patrick Granfors - You are a hell of a storyteller and on a topic I have always found fascinating. It's not if but when. For me, science fiction requires a factual basis. You have provided just that. I do question the velocity of the mass. Clearing the solar system in 36 hours or so seems awfully fast for sub light speed objects. Nothing is worse than horseshit sci fi and I can see you have worked hard at the details. This reminds me a bit of "Lucifer's Hammer" but stands tall on its own two feet. Again, masterful.

Karen McKeever - All I can say is WOW! "Awesome". Wow!!! Wow!!! Wow!!!

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Vivian Dawson - So well written is the intrigue, but equally captivating is the scary!!!

Jane Noponen Perinacci - This would make a great movie!! - Wow!!! This is a great piece of work!!!

Jon Willey - It reminds me a bit of the old movie, "Year of The Comet," I believe was the name. You built this sci fi story very carefully and presented it in a manner that kept the story moving along at a pace that prevented ho hums from useless filler rhetoric.

4 - On the Brink of World War III

Patrick Granfors - This has screenplay written all over it! Masterful, suspenseful and Clancy like. Reminded me of the "mystery sea launch" here last spring that was captured by the news media but never explained.

Jon Willey - The potential for global disaster is always just a misinterpretation or technical glitch away -- and we think Halloween is scary! -- good story.

Leland Waldrip - Great job with the story. And what a story! It's the very scenario that everyone feared so much. A mistake leading to the end of life.

Annabel Sheila - Frightening story... I can't imagine humanity would survive world war three....

5 - It's in the Water

Tom Hyland - Well written - suspenseful, quick-moving ... H₂O - everywhere ... but not a drop to drink!

Gerald Zollar - That was good. Michael Crichton, watch out, Ronald Hull is coming. I like good hard science fiction and this was a serious end of the world story.

Regis Auffray - Some story. Fairly early on as I read, I was reminded of Neville Shute's "On The Beach." It was neat how you referred to that story near the end of yours. You certainly provided substance for reflection here.

6 - Shockwave

Vivian Dawson - A healing story of scars for more than a bandaid fix...

Jane Noponen Perinacci - Science still doesn't really know what level of consciousness exists during coma. Is all the energy created by photons charging and neus and all that stuff going on in these so cool brains "us" or "our soul"??? Are we re-born in another dimension while "we" exist in this one?

Karen Lynn Vidra, The Texas Tornado - Great storytelling...

C. Dennis-Woosley - This was a wonderful story [that] kept me captured beginning to end! For my idea this was all a dream conjured within his mind while in a coma and then awakening.

7 - Last Man Standing?

Vivian Dawson - Way too realistic perception!!! Truly amazing!!! I thoroughly enjoyed reading it!!!

Chip Bergeron - Chilling... and a little too close to reality to be comfortable. Well written...

Annabel Sheila - OMG! This left my stomach in knots

Jane Noponen Perinacci - Wow! Too wild considering I was up all last night studying the Georgia Guidestones. Whoa!! I've got goose-bumps! Great writing!!

8 - Elephants and Donkeys

Jon Willey - I think your 'Fable'...gives us reason to pause and reevaluate our impressions of everyone whose opinions do not perfectly coincide with our own.

Donna Chandler - A truly well-written and entertaining story with many life lessons just below the surface.

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Vivian Dawson - So many great lessons in your great story....

Jane Noponen Perinacci - Amazing how the greedy elephant who used the donkeys to serve him ended up spending his last days honoring the donkey knowing he was the last of his breed.

9 - Serial

Jill Eisnagle - This is incredible and yet made me a little teary.

Mark Lichterman - Scary story. Kind of like, "Play Misty For Me" updated and magnified a hundred times.

Vivian Dawson - Ekkkkkkkkk for Friday the 13th. What an imagination you have.

Karen Lynn Vidra, The Texas Tornado - WOW!! Words fail ... amazed at your skills as a writer!

Mary Coe - Deep! Great imagination. Death angel got my attention!

Jane Noponen Perinacci - The beginning makes me think of a young girl reaching up and trying to grasp onto that something that might save her.

Budd Nelson - You keep the reader involved in this.

Regis Auffray - You are quite the storyteller. You captured my attention right from the start and held it more strongly as I read each line.

10 - Nympho Stalker

Jane Noponen Perinacci - This reminds me somewhat of "Lolita". Very thought provoking! Oh, the life of little girl!

11 - 2012: Verge of Destiny

Chip Bergeron - I guess the more things change, the more things remain the same. What I do know is that what is happening now happened then, and

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happened before, and each time there were those who thought the Apocalypse was upon us. Until men start learning from their mistakes, nothing will ever change.

C. Dennis-Woosley - Fantastic story! I can only add what the others have. With all the hype from the doomsayers of 2012, I am surprised others say nothing as well :)

Annabel Sheila - There's a lot of what you wrote going on right now, I really find it odd no one is talking about 12-21-12...I thought the hype this year would be phenomenal... like the year2000... Love the title!

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Preface

After I completed **It's in the Water and Other Stories** last year, my first compilation of my short stories, written over a ten-year period, I thought that it would be my only book of short stories. However, shortly after, I attended my 50th high school reunion and talked to a high school friend, a scholastic rival who had a highly interesting life story to write.

While I encouraged Doug Boucher to write his memoir of his time in the US Air Force, tracking satellites and helping to keep the Free World free, eventually published as **Watching from the Edge of Infinity**, I got an idea for a short story. With Doug's permission and input, I wrote *On the Brink of World War III*. Doug liked the story so much, he encouraged me to write a story about his current interest, near Earth objects, NEOs, that pose a treat to life on Earth. So, I wrote *Wish Upon a Falling Star* to his delight.

After that, ideas for stories came quite regularly. All of the stories seemed to have a diabolical component. This year, from Nostradamus to the Mayan calendar, impending doom seemed of significance. So, about six months ago, I decided to compile another book of these apocalyptic tales I was writing. I wasn't sure when to turn off the creation of stories and publish. By including *Hellava Way to Die* and *It's in the Water* from last year's book, I have enough meat to publish.

Sit back and enjoy these snippets about what may or may not happen in the near future and beyond.

1

Revenge of the Gulf

While geologically impossible, interesting to contemplate...

The year 2012 proved to be a turning point for the United States of America. Mark Forrester wasn't so sure. He had just received his master's degree in environmental science at Texas A&M University and was hoping to embark on a career in that field. Instead, the only job he could find was testing toxins for a waste management company in Houston. His father, Greg, an oilman with fifty years of experience in West Texas and the Middle East, was dead sure of the way to go. They certainly were at odds.

Greg Forrester had retired early to his ranch near Brenham. Mark, at twenty-three, was still living at home, an embarrassment, but Mark had no other choice, the economy the way it was. Breakfast at the Forrester's was always a time of contention.

It started with Greg needling Mark like he always did. "Did you see what your President did last night in that speech about the Union? He said that he was going to open the way to all forms of energy exploration on American soil and offshore to keep us from being so damn dependent on the Saudis for our oil." Greg lifted his steaming cup of coffee to his lips and looked out over his beautiful spread through huge picture window wall in the dining room adjoining the open, restaurant sized kitchen, a Texas-sized smile on his face. So proud of what his oil money could buy. Greg earned

every penny of it. Worked very hard. Was away from home a lot. Sacrificed. Just reaping the *benefits*... that's all.

Mark was in no mood to get in a fight with his father, especially since Mark was indebted to Greg for paying for much of his education and providing him with a place to stay and work while Mark searched for work. He searched and finally found the words to respond. "The President was right that we have to use all means to bring work back to the United States and exploit what we have to bridge the gap to a sustainable energy economy." Thought he'd play along. No use in getting in another endless argument.

As usual, any words of Mark's raised Greg's ire. "We don't need any sustainable energy economy. All we need is for the young people like you in this country to get their noses out of their school books and computers and ears out of those damn cell phones and start digging. Why there's enough oil and gas under the Continent and Continental Shelf to last us for a couple of hundred years! Why, I remember when gasoline was 25 cents a gallon and I could drive to California in a day and a half on the brand-new Interstate. Now we are so tied up by the Arabs and Chinese *we can hardly move*."

Mark didn't like what Greg was saying, but he didn't respond because Mark knew it would only lead to another fight and he was tired of fighting. Mark's girlfriend, Kerry, lived in the Heights, and while he enjoyed the nightlife that Houston offered, Mark always felt better at College Station or at the ranch. Good time to bring her up. *Change the subject*.

"Dad, I guess I'm going to take the job with Waste Deep, Incorporated. Kerry wants to get married and I've got bills to pay, including what I owe you."

"Well, if you'd taken petroleum engineering at A&M like I wanted you to, you'd be positioned perfectly to enter this new era I'm talking about. You gotta be there at the right time in history, *like I was*."

"I wouldn't argue that Dad. You sure did well for yourself. But now it's my time, and you have to stand back and let me do it."

"You young folks always know everything. I've seen it time and time again. Takes some maturing to get on the right path. Oh well, do what you gotta do. But don't come running back with your tail between your legs when you find out you're on the wrong track. You're gonna have to work yourself out of that one on your own." Greg wandered off out of the room carrying his second cup of coffee to reconnect with his buddies on the Internet, leaving Mark to ponder the decision he had made a few moments before.

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Paul and Marilyn Peterson had come from the North during the economic downturn of the late 1970s and had found a quaint, but old, house in the Heights to raise their children. Paul had risen to Master Sergeant in the Houston Police Department and Marilyn worked at the Harris County Clerk's Office. They didn't have money for a big wedding for their daughter Kerry, so they planned a small one making use of a neighborhood hall they could cheaply rent.

When Greg Forrester got wind of the wedding plans he decided they had to be changed. His second wife, Georgia, was fond of Kerry and made the call. "Kerry, Honey, you know how fond we are of you and we want the best for you. We can't just have that beautiful wedding of yours in that little old hall in town. Not when we've got all this space out here for a real Texas size wedding. We know your folks can't afford more, but Greg wants to see you have the best wedding in the county. He says he'll foot the bill for everything, including the honeymoon in Tahiti. Greg wants the best for his future daughter-in-law."

Paul Peterson was used to orders, having been in the military prior to becoming a peace officer. He held his pride in and accepted Greg's generous offer, trying to pay for Kerry's wedding dress and some of the food and extras. Greg would have none of it and ended up footing the entire bill. The Petersons were embarrassed but wanted to do the best for their daughter and soon to be son-in-law, Mark, who they adored.

The scene for the wedding was perfect. A beautiful day, not too hot, in April, with the bluebonnets in bloom. A large tent with baby animals to amuse the kids, a well-known bluegrass band from the Hill Country, and a barbecue that would have been the envy of a Texans' tailgate party. But the wedding was an awkward affair to say the least. Old oil, ranchers, police, and mostly immigrant waste company workers didn't mix well. The liquor flowed and a few fights had to be stopped before they got out of hand. The festivities were scheduled to last past midnight, but the bride and groom left with some of his A&M buddies for College Station by 7pm.

Five years later, with a conservative President and Congress in place, offshore oil leases for the Gulf, the Arctic, and the East Coast, had been quickly divvied out and drilling was underway in earnest. Conservative was a misnomer, because the government was all about growth and American prosperity for Americans while the rest of the world struggled with ever-increasing energy prices. There was nothing conservative about the American rush for black gold. Coal was on the wane because the excesses of mountain topping, unclean so-called clean coal, and the danger of mine

tailing disasters and pollution of rivers had become too much even for the advocates of King Coal to stomach. As predicted, native gas and oil would save the US economy.

Mark and Kerry were living in a loft near downtown and could bike or take public transportation anywhere they needed except to drive to the Heights or to the ranch to show off the grandkids, Crystal, 4, and Jonas, 2. Kerry, a licensed speech therapist, had decided to stay home with the kids and home school them because HISD had such poor ratings and more than enough violence. Private schools were just too expensive. Greg and Mark had arguments over that idea, but Mark stood firm, knowing that Kerry was doing a good job. The loft had the latest in energy efficiency construction and utilities, and proved to be very inexpensive to live in. To improve their diet and save money, Kerry grew a garden on their spacious balcony that had a lot of sun exposure and good drainage. They had fresh vegetables often and Kerry knew where they came from. Georgia had a huge garden at the ranch. She shared its bounty with Kerry as well. Georgia's garden had to be irrigated by a deep well because of the ongoing Texas drought.

Mark bought a extended range electric utility van to get him to the various Waste Deep jobsites. With the loft, the van and their college loans, the Forrester's were deep in debt and not willing to ask their parents for further assistance. Mark's job increasingly was compromised by the company's poor practices, and in some cases, outright violation of the law by greasing the palms of inspectors, politicians, and anyone else who might spill the beans. While he thought of it a couple of times, Mark's contract required that he not blow the whistle. Whenever a problem would arise at a landfill or recycling plant, Mark was asked to write a report that would favor the company and get them off the hook. It all became very distasteful. Besides, Mark's buddies from A&M were all earning twice what he did.

Greg Forrester was busy converting his ranch into a wildlife hunting preserve. Wildlife ranches were becoming all the rage in Texas because they both bred endangered species and hunted them for high prices. Both conservation and profit motives were met. Some conservationists didn't see it that way, but there were many more wild animals that were endangered running wild on Texas land than they are were, in some cases, anywhere else in the world. In a few cases, animals that had become extinct in their native homelands were reintroduced and were thriving once habitat destruction and poaching was stopped. Profits from hunting paid for it all, and the hunters got to have trophies that could be obtained nowhere else. The recurring drought made Texas ranches ideal for African animals

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evolved to withstand long periods without water. Cattle were getting harder to raise and many ranchers had to sell off their herds because they didn't have enough water or feed for them. Raising exotics was just a wise and lucrative option.

On a week's vacation, Mark took the kids out to the ranch to help Greg set up the wild animal operation. There were stalls and larger pens with enclosures to be built for some of the larger animals to use in winter. The winters had been mild anyway, punctuated by fronts that brought violent weather and freezes that required that the animals be inside. There was a lot of building to do and fences to construct, so Mark was glad to help out. The kids really enjoyed all the baby animals; some so exotic no other kids had ever petted them. There was plenty of bottle-feeding to go around. Besides, grandma Georgia always liked to have children around, having none of her own.

Georgia had taken Kerry and the kids to New Braunfels for a couple of days so it was just the two of them at breakfast again. Only this time off in the distance, instead of cattle, Mark could see three zebras, a small group of black buck, some wildebeest and several species of antelope in small groups here and there. He could've been in a lodge on the Serengeti; only there were no cheetahs, lions or hyenas in sight.

"Dad, I really appreciate you paying me for the work I'm doing here. My work doesn't require me to get very physical. This work is what I really like because I can see the results of what I do each day. I'd do it for nothing, but we really need the money."

Greg raised the cup of hand ground Colombian that beat any that Starbucks could offer to his lips and took a sip. "I really appreciate your work, too. I'm glad I raised you on hard work. These lackeys I'm getting nowadays just don't have the skills or determination to do a job right and finish it. They walk off the job all the time. Can't take a little hard work. Sure wish we could get those Mexicans back. They'd work all day for a glass of beer and some tacos and do a great job to boot. Guess we were right to keep them from coming across the border, but I sure miss their smiling dispositions and good work at low cost. Isn't that what America is about anyway? Giving the immigrant a hand?" Greg was sincere as he could be.

Mark sighed inside, but tried not to let his father see it. "You're right, Dad, those were the days. But it's all about America now—jobs for Americans. It's just too bad that so many young Americans don't have the upbringing that you gave me so they can succeed in any kind of work."

"Speaking of jobs, I see here in the newsletters I'm getting on the Internet that DOSU is hiring environmental engineers. I know those guys—experienced wildcatters. You would be on the ground floor, and I bet you would do well and work yourself up through the ranks pretty fast. What are you making over there in Deep Shit? Can't be what DOSU is offering. These are top salaries. Why, I could own half of Texas instead of this little old ranch." Smiling at his own joke.

Greg's snide remark about Mark's company's name didn't get past Mark. "Oh it's a good salary, with good benefits, too. Only with all the debt we've incurred going to school, getting married and raising a family, I can't afford to switch jobs right now."

"Tell you what. You go ahead and see if you can get one of those jobs. I'll tide you over if there's a gap between. I'm so confident that you'll get one of those jobs that I can make this offer and you won't have to pay back any money I give you during the transition. What you say?"

"You're giving me an offer I can't refuse... Aren't you?"

"You're *damn right* I am."

"Okay, I'll take you up on it. But if this environmental job isn't about the environment, I probably won't go for it."

"Fair enough."

After talking it over with Kerry, Mark decided to apply for a job with DOSU. The federal government had released huge tracts of the Gulf for exploration and exploitation. British Petroleum, still trying to recover its reputation after the Deepwater Horizon disaster of 2010, had managed to secure several leases in some of the deepest parts of the Gulf. BP subleased some of these to the newly formed Deep Offshore Services, Unlimited. DOSU needed environmental engineers to oversee operations and make sure that they were not harming the environment with their work.

While the Eastern Gulf seafloor sediments had not recovered from the disaster, most of the rich waters off Louisiana to Florida had recovered their bounty and the businesses that depended upon the Gulf had almost fully recovered with funds from the disaster fund set up by BP. Better blowout preventers and pressure sensors, cutoffs and pressure releasers were developed to make sure that a spill of such magnitude would never happen again. Mark read all the literature he could, and, convinced that DOSU was on the right track, decided to change his mind about big oil and join the effort to make the United States free from foreign fuel.

With his experience and education, Mark found himself the target of recruitment from ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, Chevron and

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ConocoPhillips, and other, smaller, oil companies drilling in the Gulf as soon as he applied for DOSU. Mark stalled for a month while he and Kerry sorted out the offers and Mark consulted with Greg. Finally, Mark settled with DOSU for Central Gulf of Mexico Environmental Operations Manager over ten rigs in the deepest part of the drilling theater. The job required constant shuttling between floating rigs and platforms, and long shifts, but also gave him three-day weekends, a month's vacation and lots of time with the kids, growing rapidly, just like Houston.

British Petroleum had cleaned up its act but new dangers loomed. With all the floating drilling ships and platforms all over the Gulf, the danger to shipping increased while the danger of spills and leaks decreased as technology improved along with the ability to sense problems long before they became an issue. Drilling ships and platforms were given massive lighting and required to use foghorns any time visibility dropped. Cruise ships leaving ports from Brownsville to Naples had increased fivefold since the turn-of-the-century. Cruise lines were very aware of all the possible danger after the Costa Concordia disaster in 2011 and didn't want any of their cruise liners to run into any offshore oil equipment. There were some close calls, but thankfully, the cruise lines, commercial shipping, commercial fishing, and the oil industry got along quite well.

Hurricanes were always a concern and seemed to increase in number and size every year. Fortunately, except for drilling ships, platforms were made to take the full force of a level 5 hurricane without damage. Improved weather reporting, communication, and evacuation equipment saved many lives annually by evacuating crews and shutting down operations any time any hurricane threatened any part of the Gulf, now populated like never before with huge equipment doing a huge job. Within a few short years, every possible drilling site in the Gulf had been exploited. Thousands of wells were producing millions of barrels of oil and millions of cubic feet of natural gas every day. It was a heady time for the economy of the United States. Every year the dependence on overseas fuel declined. All of the money coming in helped fund solar farms, wind farms, geothermal sources, offshore current and tidal flow generators, advanced nuclear power including fusion, and conservation measures. The balance of payments improved while technology and jobs returned to the States.

At 2 miles down, the rigs were producing gas at tremendous pressure. Gas wells were set up to create LGN and feed it directly to tankers pulled up alongside the platforms. After a short run to the pipeline heads all along the Gulf coast, the tankers would unload their gas and return for another load.

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Shipping costs were miniscule compared to LGN from Oman or off the coast of Nigeria. The best part was that the rigs were a magnet for sea life, greatly increasing the productivity of the deepest areas of the Gulf of Mexico. Old platforms were often scuttled to start new reefs in the Great Caribbean Reef Restoration Project. One of Mark's fondest activities was reporting the number and variety of sea life each year for the properties that he managed.

Mark and his family luxuriated in their newfound wealth. They bought a vacation and retirement ranch in Colorado and a condo in one of the island cities popping up all over Central Houston. Completely self-contained with high security, these complexes are modeled after buildings developed in Dubai. These condo high-rises had their own water supplies, emergency power, shops, restaurants, theaters and amusements of all kinds within the confines of the development. Hurricanes and floods were increasing, causing periodic periods of power outage and causing millions in damage every time. Even the loft proved to be susceptible. The family moved to 2100 South Fannin and immediately benefited from all the amenities the property offered as well as increased security as they gained wealth. The city was still at their doorstep for a bike ride, morning run, or heading downtown for the evening on the light rail. Life was good.

But not for all. Global warming continued its inexorable path, like a huge freight train with its brakes burned out. There was no stopping the gradual increase in temperature or the level of carbon in the atmosphere. The Greenland ice sheet was rapidly melting and some of it was sliding into the sea. Worse, parts of the great Antarctic ice shelf were being eroded and breaking off into the sea. Snowfall increased in some areas to the point where naysayers still doubted that global warming was occurring because there was so much snow. But there were also increasing drought and floods, in a vicious cycle, along with stronger hurricanes, and violent storm outbreaks leading to more tornadoes. Sea levels had risen as much as 2 feet worldwide creating havoc for all those living on beaches and on islands. There was a mass exodus from many areas to higher ground. Tides and the surges from storms became increasingly more destructive and costly. Earthquakes were blamed on drilling and extraction, but there was no proof of it.

Galveston found itself rebuilding its seawall and using fill to reclaim land that was lost while importing sand for beaches that were eroding. Even the Houston Ship Channel faced problems with the rising water. Every year, FEMA declared more low-lying areas around the coastal cities unsustainable

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and the owners had to sell their property to the federal government and move inland. But there was money for all this and people were relatively happy with the progress made by reducing the United States' dependence on foreign oil and gas. Mark was able to send his children to the top private schools to prepare them for college. Facing these challenges, DOSU bought a fleet of vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) aircraft that had been developed for the military to ensure that its employees in the Gulf would have swift safe passage to safety in the event of any disaster. The company still used helicopters for rescues at sea and other work that required extended hovering, but the new aircraft were much faster. DOSU also had a policy to use these faster aircraft to evacuate immediate families of employees once employees had been brought to safety.

Soon, Crystal was in college at Caltech, studying space science. The recovery of the economy had increased interest in space exploration. Missions to Mars were being sent at a regular pace and soon humans would be going. Crystal wanted to be one of the first. She was getting good grades and there was no reason why she couldn't. In spite of the best prep school Mark's money could buy, Jonas dropped behind in his studies and decided to join his grandparents on the ranch. Greg thought it was a great idea because he was getting older and it was getting harder for him to keep up with all the work at his sanctuary. Georgia was overjoyed and spoiled Jonas with her cooking and affection. Mark welcomed Jonas's decision, knowing that Greg would be happy with his grandson there to take over when he could no longer run the ranch.

With her nest empty, Kerry went back to work for a foundation dedicated to eradicating disease worldwide with its headquarters in the Houston Texas Medical Center, where medical miracles were happening every day. Unfortunately, flooding from storms and their surges threatened the whole Medical Center complex on a yearly basis.

Both Mark and Kerry spent a lot of time in Colorado—most vacations—building their ranch. Mark prided himself in making the spread able to operate off the grid and produce its own food. Even with great prosperity all around, there was always the possibility that some war or natural disaster would set everything back again. The ranch was not only their retirement retreat; it was like an insurance policy against future unknowns. Work at DOSU was going so well with everything cloud computerized and a lot of new staff, highly trained, to do the deep water and detailed work, Mark managed with a thorough but gentle hand. His reports were upbeat, and kept the DOSU administration well informed of any anomalies related to

chemical and biological changes in his theater of operations. Mark looked forward to the possibility of an early retirement in his 50s like his father.

But Mark wasn't sure that he would make it that long. DOSU's operations in the Gulf had been going full bore ever since he joined the company. All the other companies were doing the same. Known reserves were being depleted at a rapid rate as far as 3 miles down. As with all operations like this, equipment was aging and gradually breaking down. Mark's reports started to show small spills and microorganism deterioration from aging infrastructure that was difficult to replace because much of it was deep under water and would require a shut down to repair. Mark's reviews weren't as favorable and he didn't get as much for bonuses or pay increases as he had during the earlier years when most of the equipment was new. Mark was better at his job, but the equipment he was responsible for was not. He had to take the blame. Gradually, Mark took more joy being with his family at the ranch during vacations than with his work. Mark still felt that his work was vitally important to DOSU and the United States. But it was hard to convince the company's administration that he was doing his best.

The United States finally turned the corner on its energy future with the announcement that 80% of the nation's power was being generated by renewable sources. It was only a matter of time before the need for fossil fuels would taper off. Until that happened, the offshore wells would continue nonstop until they ran dry or until they were no longer needed. It wasn't all good news. The loss of the Greenland ice sheet and much of the ice on Antarctica had raised the world's oceans an average of 10 feet, decimating most of the world's coastal cities.

On the Gulf Coast, much of Southern Louisiana was lost to the sea, even though the Army Corps of Engineers had repeatedly opened floodgates on the Mississippi to flood vast areas and bring in new topsoil every year there was a flood. Except for fortress like structures built to withstand the rising tide and frequent hurricanes, much of Galveston and the surrounding counties was inundated and abandoned. The Houston Ship Channel had to be rebuilt to accommodate the new levels. Several areas near downtown Houston had become wildlife refuges because they were no longer suitable for housing and the houses had been removed so that these areas could become wetlands. There was a massive shift of people fleeing the rising water for safer housing away from the coast. This was all rather good news for Mark, because he did not like most of the tacky development that grew up along the coast taking advantage of the sun, sea and surf. Kerry and he

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could bicycle down to the Bayou in the evenings and see all kinds of wildlife that ten years earlier they would have had to drive 50 miles to see.

Shirley Jackson came to Mark with a report of her findings. "I've been measuring plankton levels near Deep Well 54 for the past five years. Suddenly, this past month, they have been increasing rapidly. I can't figure out what is going on. Got any ideas?"

"I don't know, Shirley, I've never seen anything like that either. Plankton levels have gradually increased over the years, but that was because these rigs provided an environment for them to flourish. I don't know Shirley, I just *don't know*."

That evening in the news, fishermen were complaining that their catches were down in the Gulf. Some said they had to shut down altogether because the game fish they were after were no longer present. And then there was an unrelated story that the international seismic grid had picked up some seismic activity, very small, in the Gulf of Mexico, an area that was generally seismically inactive. A headline in Corpus Christi news, "What's Happened to the Dolphins?" was featured in national news that night and on the Internet.

Immediately, a theory popped into Mark's head, and it wasn't nice. Not willing to wait until he got into the office the next day, Mark got on the computer and wrote the theory down, backed by information he gathered from the Internet. Staff meeting was in two days, but Mark couldn't wait for that. He drafted a statement and threw it out. Drafted another and that didn't hold up either. Finally, he arrived at a statement that he felt would get DOSU's attention. Mark attached the statement to an e-mail and sent it to his superior, Perry Hutton. It was 3am.

"What's wrong, Honey? Why did you stay up so late? You had me worried taking so long to get to bed." Kerry was a bit agitated because Mark was usually early to bed and early to rise and she didn't understand what was possessing him tonight.

"I don't know. It's just a theory that I have that something bad is going to happen. That's all. Let's go to sleep. I'm tired."

"Just what is this theory you're talking about? What's so bad?"

"Like I said, I don't know. It's so bad I don't want to think about it. I hope I'm wrong. Go to sleep. I have to get up early in the morning and attend to this. Please understand." Mark took her hand in his and pressed it gently. He couldn't sleep. So he pretended to. It didn't work. The thought of it kept working on his mind.

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An hour earlier than usual, Mark was in his office downtown. He didn't have to wait long. The phone rang. He pushed the speaker button and listened. "Hi Mark, this is Janine. Perry says he wants you in his office immediately!"

"Thanks Janine. Tell him I'll be right up." Mark had prepared a printed version of his statement, signed and dated, just to be sure. He was quite uneasy being called so abruptly to see Perry. The elevator ride from the 15th floor was trying and overly long. Mark approached Perry's office on the 45th floor with trepidation. The view from there was spectacular and he always enjoyed it, but this time there was no time to look out the window.

Perry Hutton seemed focused on what he was reading at his desk. Perry didn't look up when Mark came in. Instead, he ordered, "Forrester, take a seat." There was a tone in his voice that Mark hadn't heard since his last review. "I've been reading your statement about what may happen as a result of some shifts in plankton, fish populations, and seismic activity. *Have you gone off your rocker!* What makes you think you can come up with this kind of science fiction and hurt the company! I hope you didn't send this to anyone else or your *ass is on the line!*"

"No, I didn't share it with anyone except you. We've had a good relationship over the years and I hoped that you would understand my concern and somehow involve others without raising alarm."

"This is as *alarmist as hell!* I wouldn't share this with *my mother!* Before you go flying off the handle and whistle blowing or whatever your plan to do. Dig into this a little further and get back with me before you tell a soul about it. *You hear!* You're one heartbeat from being fired... *You hear.*"

"I hear you loud and clear, Perry. Shirley Jackson brought me the data on the plankton. Do you want me to include her?"

"You had better ask Shirley to verify her data, but don't you dare mention this to her or we're liable to have a PR disaster greater than the Deepwater Horizon fiasco."

Mark left the office aboard a company VTOL to the Gulf from the rooftop of the building. He called Kerry. "Hi, Honey. Have you left for work yet?"

"No, Mark. I was just about to head out the door. You know I'm busy. What are you calling me for now?"

"You know that thing I was telling you about last night that scared me. I want you to keep your cell phone close all day. If you hear anything from

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anybody about something happening, call Crystal and get DOSU to take you to Greg's ranch as soon as possible.”

“But I...”

“*No buts about it!* I have reason to believe that all our lives are at stake. Like I said before, I believe something is going to happen and you have to be ready to get Crystal and you out of there. It might be better if you didn't go to work at all. Trust me. This is the worst thing that could happen and I want you and Crystal safe.”

As soon as Mark got off the phone with Kerry, he called Crystal. She was out flying a jet as part of her NASA training and he couldn't reach her. He then called Jonas and got him on the phone.

“Jonas, I'm glad I caught you. I just called your mother and told her that something terrible is going to happen. I can't describe it to you because I have to be sure that it is going to happen or there will be mass panic. If something does happen, your mother and I will probably arrive there shortly after. In the meantime, make sure that you have all the guns secure and that you have plenty of ammunition. If what I think is going to happen, happens, we may need to defend the ranch and the animals from desperate people. I know Greg is going to be hard to convince and I will try to call him as soon as I get off the line with you, but there may not be time before I arrive at Deep Well 54.”

“Dad, Grandpa is out feeding the animals. He doesn't have a cell phone because he says that it, ‘Interrupts what he is trying to do,’ so I'd better hightail it out there and tell him. I'll have him call you, *okay?*”

“Okay. But find him *quick*, because I'll be arriving at DW 54 within 15 minutes and will be unable to talk after that.” Mark hung up, unsure if he was doing the right thing—alerting his family before he had anything concrete happening.

As Perry Hutton had requested, Mark arrived at DW 54 where Shirley Jackson was conducting her studies and called her into his office there. “Good morning, Shirley. Perry wants you to verify the data you got about the plankton. How soon can you do that?”

Shirley was understandably reticent. “I'm not sure if redoing the study will do any good. I've already shown on my timeline the great increase in plankton growth. What more does he want? That man can sure be hard to please. I have found out what I think is causing the excessive growth.”

“*Oh*, what do you think it is?”

Shirley shuffled her feet a bit, as if she had to go to the bathroom. “Well... (*She hesitated*) it may be methane leakage and they are growing on the methane.”

Mark sensed her unease, and tried to reassure Shirley that she wouldn't be punished for bringing bad news. “No need to worry about that. That's a good theory considering we been having to deal with deterioration all the way down the line and more methane could be leaking from multiple sources. I had something else in mind. Here, let's look and see what the Internet says.” Mark turned on his computer and opened the site for the National Geologic Survey. As he searched through seismic activity, worldwide, both he and Shirley saw that seismic activity in the Gulf of Mexico had been increasing since the day before, just like Mark expected.

Shirley turned to Mark and whispered, “*Something terrible is going to happen, isn't it?*”

“I think so Shirley... *I think so.*”

They didn't have to think about it very long because an alarm went off telling them that DW 60 was having pressure problems. After getting on the horn with the crew there, Mark decided to fly over to look at the problem firsthand. Shirley escorted him to the platform where the same VTOL that Mark had arrived on was waiting for his next assignment. As Mark boarded the plane, he reached out to wave goodbye to Shirley, and the whole platform shuddered like it had experienced an earthquake. Mark just had time to grab Shirley's hand and pull her in as the pilot revved the engines and the platform dropped away under them. The resulting splash as the entire platform hit the surface almost caught them as the plane was struggling to gain altitude and distance from the disaster unfolding.

Kerry was on the phone to Paul Peterson who had been promoted to Assistant Chief for Emergency Operations for the City of Houston. “I know I shouldn't call you, but Mark didn't sleep last night. He has some theory that something terrible was going to happen. He wouldn't tell me what it was, but it was bad enough that he wouldn't tell me any details. I think you had better alert emergency operations to be prepared for something, *anything* that might happen. It might also be a good thing for Marilyn to join you, *okay?* Certainly call emergency headquarters just in case something does happen.”

Paul was grateful for the tip. “Thanks Kerry. We can use all the help we can get. We get tips like this every day and I hate having to check them out. But Mark is a pretty sound fellow, and he may have real reason for concern having to do with something with that area he oversees out in the Gulf. I'll put everybody on standby alert just in case. I'm not sure if I can ask Marilyn

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to leave work, but I will try. Something tells me Mark is right. We haven't had a disaster since those floods last year. Seems like they always catch us by surprise. I'll call. The Chief, the Mayor, and the County commissioners and put them on alert. If nothing else we need an exercise anyway to keep us on our toes. Make sure all the equipment is running and we are able to respond quickly."

"I feel better for calling already. Thanks Paul. *Bye.*" Her anxiety increasing, Kerry closed her office and took the light rail back to 2100 Fannin. She resisted the temptation to call Mark, keeping her hand on the phone instead, hoping that he wouldn't have to call. Hoping she did the right thing by alerting Paul against Mark's wishes.

As they watched the sea drop and churn below them, Mark Forester and Shirley Jackson were in awe. It was as if some biblical event were occurring. Mark quickly came to his senses and urged Shirley, the pilot, Charles Shultz, and the copilot, Jim Schaefer, to call any family they had and urge them to get to high ground, preferably DOSU Tower or one of the other high-rises or tall buildings with a heliport on top and take the stairs, not the elevators, to the top.

There was no need to call DOSU because cameras and sensors on the rigs, ships, platforms, and from planes were already beaming live pictures and telemetry back to the mainland. As Charles told Jim as he watched the Gulf of Mexico cave in. "We'll have to save as many as we can. I hope we have enough fuel to make the trips were going to need to make today." Charles's usual calm demeanor was gone as his voice cracked and his face showed the strain he was suddenly under.

Everyone on the plane's first concern after they got underway was to get on the phone. Mark called Kerry. "Hi Kerry, where are you?"

"I'm on my way back to the condo. Knew you would call. Should be there in about 5 minutes. Is there anything *wrong?*"

"*There sure is.* A huge tsunami is coming. I want you to go to our condo and gather up all the papers and anything valuable you can find in 15 minutes or so and put them in a briefcase or suitcase that you can carry to the roof. Take the stairs to the roof because by the time you gather everything, the power may be out. I'll meet you there in about 40 minutes, *okay?*"

Mark no sooner said goodbye to Kerry than he was dialing Jonas. "Jonas, this is Dad. What I called you about has happened. The whole damn floor of the Gulf of Mexico has collapsed. A tremendous tsunami is headed for the coast. Forget what I said earlier. You and Greg hook up both horse

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trailers to your pickups and *get the hell out of there!* If the tsunami doesn't get you, then the lack of food, fuel, and power will make it very difficult to save the ranch. And there'll be danger on the road. Pack those guns like I said and head for the Colorado ranch...."

Jonas had been arguing with Greg while Greg continued to feed the animals. When Greg saw Jonas talking on the phone, he grabbed it from him. "*What the hell you feeding this young man!* Any wave won't get past Galveston since they raised the sea wall 10 feet eight years ago. You can scare the kid, but you *ain't gonna scare me.*"

Mark was trying to get a word in edgewise. "Listen, I just saw the floor of the Gulf of Mexico *collapse and take with it DW 54!* The wave will probably be 100 feet high and more *at Galveston. Houston doesn't even stand a chance!*" Mark found himself shrieking. He had never spoken to his father like that ever before.

"Well, the kid can high tail it if he wants and take Georgia with him. I'm gonna stay here like I always have and protect this place from any outlaw that thinks he can take what I've worked so hard for. Don't need him anyway... more trouble than he's worth."

"*Please!* I'm begging you to listen to reason. That wave will probably reach all the way to Brenham, and if it doesn't, *there* is no way you're going to be able to take care of that ranch and protect it without us there to help you."

"Sorry, Son, but I ain't leavin'. Georgia can go with Jonas and I'll hold down the fort here." Greg hung up on Mark, handed the phone to Jonas and told Jonas that he had "*better get busy and get the hell out like his father told him.*" Greg continued to feed his animals while Jonas ran back to the house alerted Georgia, hooked his pickup to a horse trailer, and begin loading. Jonas helped Georgia load a second trailer and hook it up to her SUV. Georgia drove the SUV, following Jonas in a convoy. Greg's pickup was still there for Greg if he needed it.

Anyone who was on the coast or the entire rim of the Gulf knew something was happening almost instantly. Birds took flight and filled the air, the Earth shook with a mighty earthquake, quickly followed by water receding from the coast for miles so fast it left fish flopping in the sand. Soon after, anyone watching television the world over was alerted to thousands of videos beamed to satellites from ships, platforms, and coastal cameras of the unfolding catastrophe. Everyone knew it was a tsunami of massive portions, and fled the coast. Those that could get in their cars and drove. Those that couldn't ran. None of them got very far. The roads inland

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were soon jammed with cars. There were accidents and people yelling and fighting, but eventually, most people got out of their cars and ran. They had no idea what was coming. No one had ever seen a tsunami wave like this except in the movies.

Paul Peterson was one of the first to reach the Harris County Emergency Center. He called for all helicopters and VTOL aircraft, all aircraft, to take the air and aid in the evacuation, if they could. Almost immediately, there were collisions of aircraft taking off on runways all over the Gulf Coast, and worse, midair collisions as so many planes filled the air without flight plans or air traffic control. The Texas Governor ordered a statewide emergency and sent all the aircraft and troops he could from the National Guard and Army posts throughout the state. The President ordered a state of emergency, called all Armed Forces to muster and rescue as many as they could, and invoked martial law. Other governors followed suit. The governor of the State of Florida took to the air and had a heart attack when he learned what was going to happen. He died on the helicopter. The lieutenant governor, in a different helicopter, had to face what was going to happen without being sworn in.

The City of Houston panicked and everyone got in their cars and drove off at the same time. Within minutes, the streets were gridlocked and no one was going anywhere. Those that managed to escape the city were already on the road, headed in the right direction, when they heard. Everyone else jammed up behind accidents that occurred because so many cars, many with panicked drivers driving way too fast, collided and blocked the roadways.

Marilyn Peterson was caught in traffic 10 blocks from the Emergency Center. She left the car and ran the rest of the way to be with her husband. She put in a call to Kerry but got a fast busy indicating that all the circuits were jammed—too many calls. Shots could be heard in the distance as people caught in traffic began to panic everywhere.

Mary Schultz arrived at 2100 Fannin and the doorman wouldn't let her in. After she explained to him desperately that she was the wife of a pilot of an aircraft about to land on the roof, and to call him on her cell phone, he gave in and reluctantly let her in. Except for residents, Mary was the last to be allowed in the building. She ran up all 20 flights of stairs, afraid the elevator would be out, and joined a growing group of people on the roof at the helipad. Some were there because they felt it was the safest place to go after they felt the earthquake. Some were there because they wanted a vantage point to see the wave coming in, and some were there to be rescued, like Mary and Kerry.

With a disheveled Mayor and only one of the County Commissioners at his side, Pete Peterson made a plea for all high-rise buildings to allow people in so they could be above the expected wave of 75 feet to hit the city. He didn't know how many high-rise buildings would survive the pressure of the wave, but it was the only advice he could give to the panicked millions in the streets. Even before he made the announcement, people had climbed the fence and forced their way past the doorman at 2100 Fannin and were on their way up the building on the elevator and jamming the stairwells.

Charles Schultz gingerly maneuvered the VTOL over the roof of 2100 Fannin. The crowd gathering backed away and he landed in the middle of them. The craft was rated for 25 passengers, but 40 elbowed their way on. In the distance, they could see the water coming, filled with the debris of buildings and ships, in its inexorable swift course from the coast, 40 miles away. As they lifted off from the building, a crowd of people from the street poured onto the roof. They would be saved later if the building held up to the onslaught of waves and debris. There was no time to stop at DOSU Tower. The sky above the downtown buildings was filled with helicopters anyway trying to rescue people in every building. Loyalty to Deep Offshore Services, Unlimited and the orders they received gave way to necessity.

Perry Hutton stood on the roof of DOSU Tower, waiting for another plane to take him away that never came. All the execs except him had boarded the first plane out, leaving all the office staff behind. Chances for another plane dimmed as the roof got crowded and he saw the wave approaching from the south.

Hutton thought about his wife and kids who he was unable to contact in Hunters Point. He thought about his career at DOSU as Perry watched the wave wrapping around tall buildings in the Medical Center to the south. He watched some of them fall as the onslaught of water beat against them. He imagined the horror of so many people dying. The roof became crowded with so many people that some were being pushed off. There was no place for another aircraft to land. As a wave hit the building, the crowd crushed Hutton up against a small building on the roof. The DOSU Tower shuddered under the weight of the water. Perry Hutton could not breathe. As the shaking of the building caused many more to fall off the roof into the water, the bodies of others crushed Perry Hutton to death.

The Harris County Emergency Center, recently built to withstand level 5 hurricanes and equipped to rapidly deploy in any event, was engulfed in a wall of water and debris, drowning everyone, including the Petersons and the Mayor about to board a helicopter to survey the scene.

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Charles Shultz made an emergency landing in a field near Lake Conroe. Waiting for him there were Jim Schaeffer's wife, Eleanor and his two children. There was barely room for them to squeeze on to the plane before the water loomed in the south and many people were seen running toward the plane from the surrounding houses. Jim had given them a precise landing spot and it worked. So many others were not so lucky. DOSU's plan to evacuate company family members in a disaster largely failed. So did many other evacuation plans.

Charles pointed the plane toward Fort Hood and the safety of high ground. There was no more stopping to drop off or pick up passengers. They were all in the same boat. Scared. Tired. And in disbelief over what they had seen of the destruction the tsunami had caused. There was little or no cell phone connection with loved ones in the zone of the tsunami. The only reports they got were on personal pads and phones connected to the Internet or satellites overhead.

The destruction was so widespread it was unfathomable. The wave had spread out in all directions, washing over Florida and killing almost everyone there. Wiping out the Gulf Coast and everything over 100 miles inland, including New Orleans for the last time. To the south, Brownsville and Corpus Christi as well as all of South Texas were gone. The Yucatán and much of Mexico inland to the mountains 50 miles from the coast. Most of Cuba, including Havana, and numerous Caribbean islands, from the Caymans, to Jamaica, all the way to coastal sections of South America. The destruction was so immense that it was also hard to fathom. The United States and other countries were reeling under the immensity of it all. The President was on television and on the Internet trying to calm everyone. He broke down crying when he tried to describe the horror of all the dead, most of whom would never be recovered.

Greg Forrester had finished feeding his animals and returned to the ranch house. He didn't much like TV or the Internet, so he didn't have them on. Greg just sat there in silence, eating the lunch he prepared for himself and wondering why his fool grandson had believed his crazy father and run off to the Colorado ranch rather than stay there with him. He missed Georgia already. Off in the distance, Greg watched his animals. Suddenly, they all started running in the same direction, towards the north. And then, Greg saw the birds, thousands of them, flying by. He had never seen so many birds. Greg went to the window wall to watch. Others joined his animals from other ranches and the wild. Greg didn't know where they came from, but everything from dogs and cats to steers and horses were running across his

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ranch and past his buildings to the north. It was the most phenomenal thing Forrester had ever seen, like watching a tornado approach. He was mesmerized. After fifteen or twenty minutes of this colossal exodus of animals, Greg could see water, *a wave*, coming in the distance, about a mile away. The wave was coming very fast and consuming everything in its path: animals, buildings and trees—*everything*. As it approached, the wave became a roiling, muddy mass, filled with debris, bearing down on him at breakneck speed.

Greg ran behind the kitchen counter and prepared for the worst as the wave hit the picture window wall and broke through. For a moment, Greg was tossed around like in some kind of a cement mixer, tasting salty, putrid water and being slammed by all manner of wood and other debris. Greg was struggling for breath in over 10 feet of water and mud. Fortunately, the water receded as fast as it came, and Greg found himself bruised and cut, but miraculously still alive in a sea of mud, uprooted trees, pieces of his buildings and others, and worst of all, dead animals. Some, like him, were still alive and struggling. Greg managed to free himself from the shards of the house that had been his and wade, knee deep, in mud; toward what he thought was a safe direction, the north.

His empathy for animals still strong in spite of his injuries, Greg helped every struggling one he found, even releasing birds from a muddy grave. But there were too many. Greg's landscape was filled with them, and he couldn't help them all, only the ones in his path towards safety. It was nearly nightfall when Greg finally came to the end of the destruction, a mere three or 4 miles from his place. As it was getting dark, he called out to Steve Carmichael, a neighbor and longtime friend, busy digging out animals from the dregs of the tsunami.

“Steve, Steve... Can you hear me Steve, help! I'm over here! Help!”

Steve looked up from struggling to pull a colt from the muck and his eye caught a muddy figure off in the distance. *“I see you... Who are you? Who goes there?”*

“It's me, Greg. Can you help me! I've been walking all afternoon! Please help!”

“Greg...? Is that you? You're a sight for sore eyes. We thought you were a goner—dead, like all the others. Hold tight, I'm coming to get you.”

Greg was dehydrated, and cut and bruised all over, but as he emerged from the shower and put on some clothes that Steve gave him, he felt safe and much better. Greg sat down for a drink of Gatorade and some hors d'oeuvres and asked, “What happened, Steve? What do you know?” The TV

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was droning in the background, but he didn't pay any attention to it—didn't like those things much. Rather get it from Steve.

It was pitch dark now, impossible to do any more rescues until the morning. Steve was making supper, Hoping that his wife would be home soon. Nancy worked in College Station and he hadn't heard from her. Steve was worried sick. He had heard from the kids and grandkids, except for his son, Tom, who lived in Houston and he feared dead. Ever since they returned, what with his ranch having its own power and having satellite TV and Internet, Steve had been monitoring the airways finding out himself what had happened. It wasn't good.

“Well Greg, I don't know where to begin, except that over 200 million people are dead or missing in twenty countries. The President tells us that because of all the loss of life, industry, and infrastructure, the economy might collapse. The National Guard in every state has been called up to assist the Armed Forces in the rescue of those few that survived a giant tsunami that came from the collapse of the floor of the Gulf of Mexico. Everything from here to Florida and South Texas was destroyed. It is the most gosh awful thing I've ever seen and there are a lot of videos of the first wave coming in at over 100 feet tall everywhere around the rim of the Gulf. As luck would have it, it got your ranch and a whole bunch of others south of here and spared mine. A lot of your friends and mine are probably dead. I thought you were, too, until I saw you struggling toward me. You are one lucky old son-of-a-bitch. But I'm afraid my Nancy didn't make it—haven't heard from her. And Tom and his kids. They lived in Houston. Houston was wiped out by a 75-foot wave. Never saw anything like it! *Never...*” Rock hard rancher, Steve Carmichael, a real tough guy, broke down crying.

Greg could only console him. He was wondering, too. “Mark and Kerry live in Houston. Mark told me, just this morning, that something like this was going to happen. And then he called later this morning and told us to get out while we could. Jason obeyed his father and left with Georgia. I couldn't believe his crazy ideas and didn't. Guess I should thank my lucky stars I'm still alive. How in the hell did Mark know when nobody else did? Beats me. He must be smarter than I take him for. Wish he could have saved more people. Hell, I don't even know if he saved himself.” Tears started to form in his eyes as he brushed them away with his fingers—as though Steve couldn't see them.

As both men regained their composure and started to eat the steak dinner that Steve had prepared, Steve got serious. “There's a lot of mayhem out there. Damn near anarchy in some of the cities as people are making

runs on banks to get their cash, looting stores, and getting on the highway and driving like fools with guns in their hands. Most of the National Guard has been called back from the rescue to try to keep order. I want to get up early and continue to rescue whatever animals I can find and salvage whatever I can from nearby ranches that will be of use.”

“I feel pretty beat up right now. But if I feel better in the morning, I'd like to help. It's the least I can do for your rescuing me and your hospitality.” Greg was thinking of his ranch.

“You are saving me from this worry that is eating me up. If you weren't here I don't know what I'd do. Say, I need some anesthetic. What's your pleasure, Jack Daniels?”

“I'd like some rum with some juice, lemonade or orange juice. That will help ease this pain these old bones are feeling. And help the dehydration too.”

Steve poured them both a drink. “And we'd better pack sidearms and keep a rifle nearby. I haven't heard of any problems in this part of Texas, being so remote and so soon. But we have to be careful that someone out there would want to take what we've got—including our lives.”

“That's exactly what Mark told Jason. To take all the guns to the Colorado ranch. I'd call Jason right now but I don't even know the number to that cell phone thing he has in his ear all the time. I'm an old damn fool for not getting it before he left. I do know Mark's though. Should give him a call. At least try to see if he made it.”

“They're asking everyone not to call. A lot of the infrastructure for cell phones was destroyed in the cities destroyed. On top of that, the traffic from global demand quickly jammed up the system, so nobody's calls were getting through, not even the President's. It's a mess, I tell you. But you can try... What's the number?”

“8 3 2 4 6 8 9 3... Oh hell! I can't remember it right now. Must be that knot I got on my head! *Sorry*. Maybe I'll think of it later.”

Steve tried Nancy again. All he got was a fast busy indicating that the circuits were full. He hung up in disgust and slammed down another drink.

They were both up before dawn. Greg remembered the number and they tried it. The call went through but kept breaking up.

“Son, this is your father, Greg. *What... What...* The ranch was destroyed but I got out... *What...* I want to tell you that I'm sorry that I didn't believe in you. *What?* Is everyone okay? I'm worried sick.”

“Everyone's okay, Dad. We're at Fort Hood. We picked up Kerry just as the building was being hit by the first wave. Crystal is here. She was flying

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from Pensacola to Edwards and saw the whole thing happening. She got some aerial video that was sent to the President and broadcast to the nation. Jason and Georgia made it to the ranch in Colorado early this morning just before some guys were going to break in. Jason fired off a few shots and they hightailed it out of there. He called the Sheriff, but the Sheriff was too busy. Says he'll put chains on the gate that won't be cut easily and hold down the fort until we get there. Where are you at, anyway?"

"I'm at... Steve... Carmichael's... You know, north of my place... About 4 miles. Should I get a car and drive there?"

"No, it's too dangerous. You stay put and help out Steve. Make sure you're armed. Shoot first and ask questions later. We've got a bunch of DOSU aircraft here and I have to go on search and rescue this morning. I don't know how long that will take. I hope it's not too long, because I'm worried about Jason there alone. Crystal has been assigned search duties with her high-resolution cameras in the Caribbean and will be busy with that for some time. As soon as I'm free from rescue efforts for DOSU I'll ask them to ferry you and Kerry to the ranch. With my theater of work gone, DOSU will probably retire me and that's all right with me. We can recover your ranch later. Dad, they are calling me... Take care and be safe, you hear?"

"I hear, finally, I hear you loud and clear. Can't wait till I see you again, Son... *Can't wait.*"

Ironically, the cave-in of the Gulf of Mexico displaced enough seawater to bring the water levels of all the oceans' coasts to the level of the year 2000. Most of the coastal structures built after 2000 were left high and dry.

2/7/12

4

On the Brink of World War III

A high school classmate of mine, the Lieutenant in the story, told me at a recent reunion that he had stopped World War III, twice. Intrigued, I wrote this story with his approval and input.

To paraphrase Field of Dreams, *“If we build it, it will be used.”*

*L*ooking at it now, 40 years later, it's hard to believe that it happened. But I, like the proverbial “fly on the wall,” was there, in the Situation Room in the basement of the White House when it happened. As an aide to President Clarke L. Guilford, I had to be there and witnessed the awful truth firsthand. Everyone was sworn to secrecy for fear of alarming the world. But I, for one, have had too many sleepless nights through no fault of my own except being a witness to history. It is time the story was told.

6:36 PM Honolulu time

The USS Montgomery CG 97, a guided missile support cruiser for the US Naval Fleet in the Pacific was nearing its port in Hawaii after being refitted in San Diego. Luis Gomez, Petty Officer Third Class, on deck, heard a loud hissing sound, and, looking over his shoulder over the rail saw a remarkable sight: A column of water hundreds of feet high that had

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suddenly burst from the ocean without warning. While the column of water descended in a misty spray, the sea from whence it came roiled for some time after, leaving the distinct impression that something large had ascended from the deep.

Gomez grabbed a deck phone and called to the bridge. “*Alert, alert!* I have just seen on the starboard side what appears to be a missile being launched! Did anyone there see it?” The bridge had seen it too and immediately began speculating what it was. They quickly came to the conclusion that it was a missile launched from a submarine by the size and direction of the water column. A chill ran down the spine of the cruiser's Lieutenant Commander, George Applegate, as he thought of the possibility of a nuclear strike against the United States. What more apropos place to launch it than the Hawaiian Islands, where World War II started?

6:38 PM Honolulu time

Chuck Warner, Ensign, the sonar operator aboard USS Wisconsin SSBN 725, a ballistic missile submarine out of Bangor Washington, picked up what appeared to be a large explosion near the Hawaiian Islands some 300 miles distant from their location. Warner immediately called Peter Madison, the sub's commander, and asked if he should report the incident to Pacific operations.

Commander Madison, leery of false alarms, said, “No, keep me posted if you hear anything more and I'll check to see if anyone else has heard similar explosions.”

6:41 PM Honolulu time

Warner frantically called Madison again. “Sir, I just heard two more explosions. They are huge and could easily be missiles being launched from a nuclear sub. *One of ours?* I hope not. We had better notify Pacific operations right away.”

“Okay.” Madison replied. “You had better have a good recording if we are going to raise an alarm like that.” Keep listening while I get this message out.”

Peter Madison hurriedly typed out a written message to verify what he was going to say over the radio and wired it just as he called Pacific command over encrypted radio.

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6:45 PM Honolulu time

“Hello Pacific operations, this is Commander Peter Madison from SSBN 725. My sonar operator has informed me that he picked up three explosions since 18:41 Honolulu time. We highly suspect that these are missile launches from undersea based on the sonar signature. Have you received verification from any other source? Are they friendly or foe? Do I need to get ready for battle? Hurry, this is top secret and we don't have time to make any mistakes. *Standing by...*”

“Commander Madison. Yes, we have a report from CG 97 that they saw a water spout—like phenomenon near their cruiser just as it was getting dark. They heard a loud hissing sound and the surface disrupted for some time as though it was something that came up from the deep. It's hard to imagine that an enemy submarine would launch so close to one of our cruisers, but whoever it is must think that they can be brazen to launch three missiles like that. This is very serious. We are passing this information on to the Joint Chiefs as I speak. *Stand by...*”

11:47 PM NORAD Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado

Colonel Reginald Lincoln, Commander of NORAD Operations, sent out an urgent coded DEFCON 2 alerting the Commander-in-Chief, the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that nuclear war was imminent. Requesting all information available from all military sources because only 20 minutes remained before missiles launched 10 minutes earlier would strike. There was a hush in his voice and intensely strange look on his face as he tried to gather information from many sources as fast as he could. His heart was pounding so hard it felt like he was going into a mission over Berlin like he did in his youth. A heart attack was imminent, but he fought it off.

1:49 AM the White House Situation Room

President Guilford arrived in the room in his robe and slippers, a look of disbelief on his face, as his aides and military attaché arrived in various states of dress and undress, unsure of why they are there but willing to help in any way they could. “*Where's the Secretary of State?*” Guilford bellowed.

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“She's in England, don't you remember.” An aide meekly replied from his side.

“I don't care where she is, we need to get her on the line so that she can try to arrange something to stop this. Those of you that don't need to be here, and you know who you are, please leave now. The rest of you, please get every one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including the Chairman, the Secretary of State, the Speaker of the House and anyone else you can think of on an encoded conference call to deal with this situation. Is NORAD Command on the line?”

“Yes Colonel Reginald Lincoln is. Our operators are connecting everyone as fast as possible. Your microphone is live.”

At that point, I wish I could have crawled into a hole, but I couldn't. My job was to help make it all happen and I was busy, working behind the scenes as quietly as I could to speed things along and try not to make any mistakes.

President Guilford opened the discussion. “Colonel Lincoln, what is it that you've got that makes you go to DEFCON 2 at this time of the night?”

After a slight adjustment of the speaker, Colonel Lincoln came in loud and clear. “Minutes ago, two Naval vessels detected what appeared to be three missiles being fired from undersea, Sir. We have no AWACS in the area to verify by radar and the launch was too far from Honolulu Center for it to be picked up. Likewise, worldwide, none of our radar sites has detected any missile activity. Should it be necessary, our B-52s are in the air and all of our missile silos and submarines are alerted and will proceed at your command, Sir.”

“I'm not commanding anything until I get more proof. Is there any other way... long-wave, magnetic, or visual, that can determine if we really do have missiles on the way to destroy us? Can I use the red phone?”

“We contacted our guy on Flat Island. He is telling us that he will need 5 minutes to develop the time lapse film he just took of that sector, Sir.”

“Who is this guy and can I talk to him. If this thing is as urgent as I think it is, I've got to cut out the middleman.”

“He is First Lieutenant Spencer W. Beauregard, a specialist in spotting and tracking satellites for us, Sir. We are patching him through to you right now.”

“First Lieutenant Beauregard, this is President Guilford calling. I understand you are attempting to verify whether missiles had been launched into space in an attempt to attack the United States. I don't need technical details, but, in sixty seconds, just what do you know.”

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“Thank you, Mr. President, I'm doing my best, but you'll have to wait 2 minutes until my films develop. Please stand by until then...”

The tension in the situation room was so thick you could cut it with a knife. No one spoke, but I could almost read the minds of those there by the look on their faces. With only a few minutes left, President Guilford would have to make a decision whether to throw the world into a nuclear holocaust or hold back and wait for the inevitable destruction that three missiles, and maybe more, with multiple warheads could inflict. Everyone was watching the clock and the secondhand seemed to slow down while time speeded up. Everything hinged on what our man on Flat Island found out.

1:56 AM the White House Situation Room

The microphone crackled alive as though it were 10,000 miles away and First Lieutenant Beauregard's voice could be heard. “Mr. President, *Sir*, I have reviewed the time lapse film and see no movement in space or near space either over the Hawaiian islands or over the United States. I detect no missiles in the air or in space. I believe you have a false alarm.”

President Guilford, his face drained of color, but looking much relieved, responded. “You had us, *helpless*, sitting on the edge of disaster, unable to act for a moment there. But you came through. When in a pinch our military always comes through. You can stand down now and be proud that you are part of the best defense in the entire world. Lincoln, are you still there?”

“Yes Sir, and I heard every word. The whole staff here at NORAD is feeling one great sigh of relief, Thank God.”

“Colonel Lincoln, I'm going to put someone in charge of an investigation to see why this near tragic event happened in the first place. And, as soon as I get hold of Admiral Patterson, I am going to find out why two of his ships both thought that missiles had been launched in anger against the United States of America. To all of you here in the Room, at NORAD, and in military units poised for action around the world, it is time for us to stand down and go back to bed. I want all of you to consider what you have seen and heard tonight to be top-secret. I do not want the other side to feel that we have any weakness at all and therefore we must keep this information close until sometime, in the future, when threat to our sovereign right to live no longer exists. Good night and God bless America.”

With that, everyone left the room but me. I was still standing there watching the clock wind down to when the missiles would strike in about 3 minutes. I waited about 15 minutes beyond that, but no explosions were

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reported and I finally wandered off to bed wondering what it would have been like had we launched World War III.

Admiral Patterson's investigation revealed that the source of the explosions and waterspout-like event were the result of volcanic activity in the rift that created the Hawaiian Islands. The recordings from the event became part of training for naval sonar operators.

My sleepless nights continue, especially since I recently talked to Spencer W. Beauregard. He is now a retired Major living in the mountains in Idaho, far from any population centers or missile sites. He told me over a beer that this was only one of five instances that he knows about of false alarms that almost caused World War III. How many times, I wonder, have we gone to the brink? Will we again?

10/28/11

9

Serial

(Warning: Sexual and Violent)

Author's note: Chatters use a lingo all their own, mostly cobbled together lowercase abbreviations like *hru* for “How are you?” similar to those used in texting on cell phones. The parties in this story are in a private session and have video and voice contact through computer cams mounted on their video screens. Therefore, for clarity and reading, this is the text of their conversation fully written out so that the reader will easily be able to understand what they are saying.

Sinthia, not her real name, runs a sex chat line in the late afternoon hours. Her customers range from teenage boys with their mother's credit card to old widowers who can't get it up and show her, to husbands, bored with their wives, to lesbians, hot for her bod, to guys who never had a woman and probably never will because they were too shy, too stupid, or too ugly. And crazies, the occasional crazy. She takes them all on—*for their money*.

For several days now, she's been getting this same customer. He must have a lot of money, because he hogs her private sex line and doesn't ask for sex. He only seems to want to confess...

Begin session: 3:05pm PST

Sinthia: Hello. How are you?

Death Angel: I am fine. I feel cleansed. I have glorified the name of my Lord, Jesus, last night.

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Sinthia: What do you mean? Glorified?

Death Angel: I have sent another sinner to Hell.

Sinthia: How do you do that?

Death Angel: I have to kill them. It isn't hard. After all, they are sinners and deserve to be sent to Hell.

Sinthia: What do you mean, it isn't hard? I would find killing someone impossible. I'm a lover, not a killer.

Death Angel: Because I started early. When I was a little kid, I enjoyed swatting flies and mosquitoes, crushing angleworms, caterpillars and ants. Whipping snake's heads off and smashing frogs flat with big rocks. When I was about six, I used to catch flies and pull their wings off, just to see them struggle. I got good at kicking dogs in the ribs and watching them yelp. I got spanked for it, so I learned not to do it when others were around. I found cats rather nasty, sneaking around and spying on me. So I would take them out back of the barn where no one could see me, hold them up by the tail, and hit them with a baseball bat. Sometimes their heads would come off the body and blood would fly everywhere. Mom would ask me where I got the blood on my shirt and pants, and I'd tell her that I cleaned a squirrel or rabbit for Dad. She was so stupid; she would believe almost anything I'd tell her. I buried them out back behind the barn or in the trees where no one ever found them. I'm very good at burying.

Sinthia: Why are you telling me this? Why don't you just want to have sex with me? That's what I'm here for. That's what guys want. Let me see your stuff...

Death Angel: Because you look just like my childhood sweetheart, Cynthia. I never told Cynthia that she was an angel, because I was too shy. Besides, Cynthia never even looked my way. She was the most popular girl in the sixth grade and I don't think she even knew I existed. But you are pure and beautiful. One of God's white angels. Right down to that mole on your left breast. It matches the beauty mark on your left cheek. Just like Cynthia. You are Cynthia, all grown-up. (Death Angel turned on his cam. He always appeared naked with a black hood over his face like an Al Qaeda hostage. Sometimes, he had blood on his hands and arms).

Sinthia: My name isn't Sinthia. And I never was that angelic girl you've described to me. Don't you like me the way I am? We could have sex for what you are paying.

Death Angel: You are too pure for sex. Besides, I'm already satisfied from last night. What I do with my money is my business. You talk like my mother. I'm glad she's dead. I saw Dad shoot her and then run off. It was the

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happiest day of my life. Back to you. I chose you because you are so pale white and so pure—not like the others. You are all pale and pink like a girl down there, like Cynthia.

Sinthia: I shave. You should. You have hair all the way to your navel and all across your chest and on your back. I'll bet your eyebrows grow together. (A snicker escaped her usual angelic composure)

Death Angel: You are still the purest here because you talk to me and don't block me like the others. My eyebrows do not grow together. You'll have to take my word for that because I can never show you my face. I'm too shy. Only the dead see it—or have sex with me.

Sinthia: You have sex with the dead? You've got to be *kidding*.

Death Angel: Yes, most of the time. They are still warm and soft. They don't fight back and they don't know that I'm shy, really afraid to have sex, except with them—my little kittens. Like Cynthia. I have a shrine to her. She is like Madonna, mother of Christ. I love her so much. I killed her, *you know*.

Sinthia: You *killed* her? You *killed* the girl of your *dreams*?

Death Angel: I didn't mean to. I just wanted to get her attention. I was down by the river that Saturday, throwing rocks. I saw her coming a long way off and hid back in the woods by the bank. The river was low, so she was walking in the space between the bank where I hid and the water, just sand and rocks. She was walking barefoot with her head down like she was thinking or something, maybe about one of her many boyfriends. She looked so sad. Didn't even see my tracks. I wanted to get her attention as she walked by, so I threw a big rock. You know, like the ones we'd throw at cows and they would just shudder and the rocks would bounce off their backs—wouldn't hurt them. It hit her on the side of the head and she fell. She was choking and spitting up blood, and kicking her feet terribly, so I choked her until she stopped moving. I pulled up her skirt and pulled down her panties and that's why I love her so much because she had just a faint little blonde hair that I think about all the time when I talk to you. I pushed her in the water and she floated downstream.

Sinthia: That's *horrible*. You're making me cry (Sinthia was openly crying—tears running down her cheeks and she was wiping them away). Did they find her?

Death Angel: Right after that, a big storm came up. I yelled at the wind and lightning and got very excited and soaked. I felt I had the power of the storm in me. I felt like God was talking to me for what I had done and the rain was cleansing me from sin. There was so much rain that the river

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flooded. On Monday, in school, everyone was talking about Cynthia being missing. At noon, they shut the school down and told everyone who wanted to look for her could join the search. I went home and played video games. I knew where she was and didn't want the others to know. I spent some time after that learning how to dispose of bodies without leaving any evidence. Oh, they *did* find her... At least her *remains* about six months later, some 30 miles downstream. The police went after her boyfriends; some were quite a bit older, her brother, an uncle, a neighbor, and her father. I don't remember if anyone was ever convicted for killing her. After that, I made sure that if I left any evidence at all, it would be misleading to throw anyone off my track. Husbands and boyfriends are always suspect. I was not.

That's when I started my websites, you know, just when the Internet was beginning. I found all kinds of guys like me—You know, who couldn't get a woman—who wanted to link up and share ideas about sex and death and stuff like that—you know, *a newsgroup*. We soon found that there were people who didn't like us and kept trying to report us to authorities on the “*free*” Internet. Some of the guys were real geeks, hackers, you know, and started websites that were almost invisible but accessible for those of us in the know. I told the guys how much I enjoyed killing and how I got off on it. We passed around some “*snuff*” movies and started getting off on killing the refuse of this Earth. The last time I counted, there were over a hundred of us. God's Death Angels.

Sinthia: *Oh my God!* You mean there over a hundred guys like you out there *killing* people? Whatever possessed you to do such a thing?

Death Angel: it's a right thing to do. I never left it, although I joined the Army for a while and learned how to be a good mechanic. Met my wife there, in the service, we married and had three kids. I tried to settle down like everybody else, but kept getting back with my buddies late at night after my wife had fallen asleep and we would swap stories about how we would off people and get rid of the evidence. I wanted to get in the action but couldn't until the ideal opportunity came up. I was working in an auto shop down by the sleazy side of town. My boss had taken on a lot of jobs from other shops and had to run twenty-four hours a day. He asked me if I wanted to work the graveyard shift, *alone*. I jumped at the chance because it allowed me to stay home during the day while my wife worked and get with my Internet buddies. Also, since I have the shop to myself from 11pm to 7am, I work fast to get my daily work done early so I can go cruise the neighborhood for prospects. I use cars and trucks that we are working on so that the stupid cops can never pin a single vehicle on me.

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Sinthia: Are you The Green River killer?

Death Angel: You could call me that. But then, you could call me a lot of things. The Railroad Yard killer. The Freeway killer. The Strip killer. Son of Sam. Hell, you could even call me the *Zodiac* killer (he laughed out loud).

Sinthia: How many have you killed?

Death Angel: Too many to count. I only remember the memorable ones—you know, the *young* ones. The beautiful ones, like you. The ones that tried to fight me. The ones with a story—what's yours?

Sinthia: My bio is posted below. That's all you need to know. I'm not the Cynthia you're looking for. How could you kill so many and get away with it?

Death Angel: It was easy, I have a toolkit in the shop that I just grab, hop in a customer's car with it, and go trolling. The toolkit looks like any mechanic's toolkit if anyone ever looked, but it has some special tools that guarantees success every time. You know, a garrote, a syringe filled with a knockout drug, some date rape pills, some cinch ties, plastic gloves, and condoms to throw them off. For them, I call it my "*love kit*." It's worked every time.

Sinthia: Worked? Trolling? What do you mean?

Death Angel: You know, I'd go surfing. Draw in the net. I'd finish up early, about 1am, when the bars let out. I'd commandeer one of our customer's nondescript cars or trucks. I like old and beat up rather than new and shiny. And drive on down to the Strip. There you have a mixture of cops, pimps, charities and johns, all there to exploit the runaways, whores, and just plain down and out girls that come there for drugs and money. The salt of the earth and its dregs. I'm just there to cull the weak and strengthen the stock. It's easy to spot the weak ones. They are the runaways, emaciated by bad or lack of food. The drug addicts. So easy to get them to come along for money or another hit. The over the hill prostitutes. I would just open the passenger window to my mark carefully, and she would come over to the car and we would negotiate like ten other cars were doing at the same time. She would hop in the car and we would drive off to the destination I selected that night. Depending upon the weather—I like cold, rainy nights rather than calm hot moonlit nights—I'd either go to my favorite place by the river or I would go to that patch of woods with all of its lovers' lanes. Or sometimes, I would bring her back to the shop or an old warehouse that I had found abandoned.

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I usually had something for her to drink. Water, Coke or Pepsi, sometimes even booze—spiked with the date rape drug or other sedative to make her feel at ease—or a little maryjane for her to smoke. Get her wrapped around my finger. I'd show her the money and off we'd go into the woods, the abandoned house, the warehouse, or the cot we kept at the shop. I'd tell her I wanted doggie style, and she would get down on her hands and knees just like I knew she would and pull down her panties and show me her stuff. I would tell her that I was putting on a condom while I was getting my garrote out and she would obediently wait until I slipped it around her neck and quickly dispatched her. Depending upon my mood, by that time I would be as excited as I am looking at you right now (he was clearly showing it) and would probably have sex with her warm body if it wasn't too appalling. I especially liked the ones that looked like Cynthia—like *you*. To throw off the cops, I usually severed the head from the body and placed them in different locations. I really loved having sex with dead heads. Especially if they were beautiful and their eyes were wide open looking up at me in such an obedient way while I came in their mouths, their moist tongues stroking me gently and their throats wide open.

Synthia: (Choke... crying) That's *terrible!* How could you do such a thing? Weren't you afraid of being caught? What kind of man does a thing like that? *You disgust me!*

Death Angel: I did them all a favor. Their lives were nothing... *nothing*. They were the dregs of the earth. I saved them. I purified them for the love of our Savior Jesus Christ. They are in a much better place in his hands than in the Hell on earth they were living. Who are you to judge? I am an Angel. I am ordained by God. My comrades and I are ridding the earth of all the scum, the downtrodden, and the blessed ones.

Synthia: (Regaining her composure, but crossing her naked legs as a defense) You're going *to get caught!*

Death Angel: The cops are so stupid. I've been doing this over 20 years and they haven't a clue. Sometimes, I purposely leave heads out where they can find them, and they still mess it up. I bury most of the bodies in shallow graves or dump them in the river. And still, they don't find them until years later when there is no evidence. I burn most of their clothes in the potbellied stove at the shop. And trade any artifacts or trinkets they may have at the local flea market on Saturdays. The cars are clean for the most part, but if they are not, I vacuum them and wash them so that the customer is very happy when they see their fixed, shiny clean car. My boss is very happy with the output of cars that I fix every night. Don't get me wrong. I only troll

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a couple of nights a week because most of the time the cars are hard to fix and I can't leave the shop. The girls always wait. They're always eager for another fix or some cash. I have to laugh at all the newspaper and TV reports chasing down suspects and cars. Sometimes, they go after a car of a customer... *hee hee* (a child-like but serious, giggle). Sorry, couldn't help laughing at the stupidity of the cops and the press.

There was a loud crash as the door to the room exploded inward behind him, hitting him in the back and knocking him down. There was a brief struggle with shouts of "*FBI!*" And kids screaming in another room in the house. The cam caught most of the action as the black hood was ripped off the man's head and he was handcuffed and dragged out of the room.

A head popped into the cam view. It was Sam Rather, Chief Investigator, FBI Sex Crimes Division. He didn't type any chat. He spoke into the mike. "Jackie. Did you get everything? Did you get the evidence we needed on a disk and backed up on a hard drive?"

"I sure did. I got it all. Got enough to put that slime away forever. Scared the hell out of me. After I hit the button, I was afraid you'd never get there and stop him from spouting that crap!"

"Looks like he scared the pants off you. Don't believe I've ever seen you looking so lovely." There was a big smile on his face.

"All in days work. Got to do what I've got to do to get the bad guys. This has been one of the worst assignments I've ever had to do, but I'm sure glad it's over—*he's over!*" Jackie Columbo was grabbing for something to put on to cover her nakedness.

"That's all right. You'll get a promotion for this. No more decoying for you."

"Thanks. That's why I volunteered for this. Somebody had to do it. Promotion or not, he had to be put away. Well, I'm getting off here. I've had enough for one afternoon. I'm going to pull this mole makeup off and to take a long hot shower to get the slime of the session off me and I'll see you later over at Scott's. Okay?"

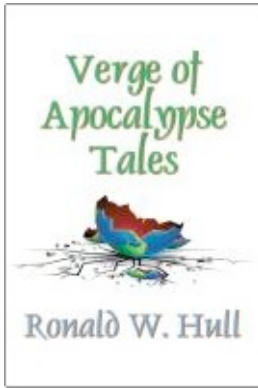
"Scott's it is. I'm buying."

Sinthia's site closed with an enticing picture of her bare rear and the caption that she was "off-line" but would be back according to the schedule posted. The eager followers that came back the next day found that her site and information were missing. Fortunately, there were plenty of housewives, divorcees, college students, and unemployed administrative assistants, engineers, lawyers, and strippers willing to flirt with, chat with,

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and have virtual sex with almost anyone and anything out there in cyberspace—*for a price*, that is.

7/13/12—Friday the 13th



Verge of Apocalypse Tales is a collection of stories based on our worst fears of nuclear war, natural disaster, scientific blunder, financial collapse, manmade catastrophe, anarchy, political division, and sexual perversion, all wrapped up in the end of the Mayan Calendar, and other prophesies a notable as the Holy Bible, I Ching, and Nostradamus. Several stories have a startling twist at the end and many other authors have praised these stories.

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