

***We The Fallen :***  
***A Dark Age Resurgent***

***#2 Old Friends***

By Michael J. Grasso

## #2 Old Friends

### Upside down

The world was upside down.

He could only hear the stomps of boots bouncing on the concrete and the occasional heavy strained gasps of air from his starving lungs, Michael needed air desperately. He panted as he cut through the back alley of a strip mall, rounding a corner, then another and another. Only after long moments went by without the sounds of those chasing him did he finally give himself a second to rest. He heard the awful rumbles in the sky, but that wasn't what concerned him at that very moment, it was the echoing clamor of his fellow man that was his immediate fear.

After several long moments, he allowed himself to hope he had finally outrun his pursuers. He scanned the area, garbage, dumpsters, graffiti, plastic milk crates... nothing that could be of any use in the present moment. His limbs were numb, his lungs were starved, and he couldn't shake the ever-present nausea that had tormented him from the moment he awoke to the chaos.

The snap of a bullet slammed into the wall next to his head, it immediately renewed his energy. As he continued to run, weaving into the shadows and turns of the commercial space alleyways, he had a vague awareness of thunder rolling overhead, but the man with the gun was too close behind him.

He could muse about the unfolding chaos later after he escaped... If he escaped.

He risked a glance backward as he turned another corner, blood streamed down his attacker's face as he grunted with each breath and stood waving his pistol into the alley, firing at anything that gave him a reason, ricochets bounced in his general direction, despite the numerous ailments his body plagued him and through some sheer luck he managed to never be in the path of his attacker's bullets. That

and the shooter was blindly firing in random directions.

Whatever happened left a lot of people dead, and somehow he was left only with a brutal migraine.

Insanity, some kind of Mass Hysteria... It was the only explanation.

But to Michael, the world was always insane... It was just suddenly much more obvious... Too much more obvious. He was a Paramedic for the county's emergency 911 system and was all too used to seeing horrible things in his line of work, even well before the insane events of the last hour or two. His job took him into some very dark situations, the underside of society. Which, for a time in his life was what he wanted most... To see the "Real" side of things. Soon into the job, he had learned that "real" was a very relative notion. He then got paid to see the underside of life: suicides, overdoses, drunken traffic fatalities, kids riddled with bugs whose parents used a cardboard box as a crib for their kids and would then leave them to go out partying all night, punishment scalding burns on those kids days later, people who were shot because they wore the wrong sneakers, all beside an infestation of futile petty abuses of the system, People who called 911 because they needed to refill their prescription meds (who would then go off and sell them to others before calling 911 again), underpaid home health aides pawning off their patients to get out of a days work, and the drunks...always more drunks who managed to make their drinking and stinking a full-time job, and way too many mentally broken people living homeless...

Yes, for one who deals with the underbelly of society, the world is always insane...

He had woken slumped over the steering wheel of his Jeep, a broken windshield and the scent of locked brakes said he had been moving at a good speed when the crash happened. He recalled cursing through the cloud of pain as he saw his new Jeep's hood caved inward horribly by a large tree. Stumbling out of the vehicle, he tried to recall the accident but found he drew a blank. As the blurred vision eased, he tried to deduce where he was.

He vaguely recognized the mass of trees and banked slope, but he couldn't place exactly where. Through the haze, it struck that the last thing he recalled was heading home from work. The thought unlocked a better picture in his mind, that would make his location a familiar spot that he passed every day on the way to and from work... familiar signs and storefront confirmed it. It then occurred to him that no other vehicles were involved in the crash, and he was relieved. After some long moments, he resolved to making the inevitable 911 call... He'd have to be just one more asshole who drove his wheels into the woods. At least he wasn't hurt much, so he judged.

Of course, his cell phone wasn't working... which would be just his luck.

Michael stumbled away from the crash, desperately trying to ignore the pain running through his body, soon it was obvious something much larger was wrong. There were no lights, no cars passing, no background noise... There were only storm clouds and lightning, he must have walked or limped at least for half a mile, maybe more. Finally, he saw others, far up the road was a convenience store, other people passed by in a panic. He needed a payphone.

Small groups walked by, in twos and threes mostly, they seemed just as confused as him, he called out "What's happening?", most answered they didn't know and quickly scurried away.

One group looked particularly miserable. They were a small group of five people who seemed terrified, they huddled by beat-up family car catching their breath, one of which word a huge gash across his forehead with blood clotting down into his eyes, Michael had some gauze in his uniform, unused from an earlier call, and wanted to help, he approached. Three males, one younger in his teens, he kept his hands pressed to the wound on his forehead, a small boy about nine or ten who hid behind the others, and the third was a fat man decades older, possibly the father. The other two women were in their mid-thirties. Flanked either side of him. They coiled together as he approached. Looking to the older man for how to react to the approaching stranger, all the while, none said a thing. Michael remembered wondering why none of them spoke. He remembered

bandaging the teen's bloody head, and then he remembered seeing a gun being waved.

He ran. Thoroughly frightened off, he shouldn't have gotten so close. They saw him as a threat for some reason... and the gun... well, people do dumb things when they're frightened, but then he saw they were chasing after him.

The Handgun cracked again, concrete chips and cement dust pelted Michael as he forced himself to focus on the now... why chase him!?

They had been chasing him for blocks, tenaciously, rabidly, it was the only way to describe it. They certainly meant him harm.. one of the figures he had tried to help appeared around the corner in front of him. The tall boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old with peach fuzz sprouting from his chin, in his hand, was a piece of iron pipe about three feet long. Its wielder came running toward him, his oily face and scrubby facial hair wore a confused yet harmful intent apparent even in the low light, the bandage had been torn free, leaving the wound to continue oozing.

Michael saw how it was playing out, while the old man with the gun chased directly after him down the alley, the younger one ran around to the other exit, with the gunman somewhere behind trying to shoot him, there would be only a few moments to deal with this boy. He had to act now, in no more than ten seconds, the guy with the gun would appear from the shadows behind him and then he'd likely be dead.

The boy with the pipe pulled back to swing at him, and Michael had no choice but to pounce on the arm before it could strike, this stopped it from swinging to full force. The boy grunted and stammered, "Guh Guh Bahg Bahg Ung-Aael.". Phonemes. Just random sounds came out of the boy, it reminded him of how people who took too much dust acted. Violent, Incoherent, Aphasic, Psychotic.

He couldn't break the grip of the kid and was thrown off. Michael's back slammed against the concrete wall of the alley. He then remembered a trick from karate class years ago. He dipped his head

just close enough to get his enemy to hurry a rushed swing and then hopped back a half a foot or so, just enough for the pipe to arc past without making contact. This time Michael grabbed his attacker by the wrist and tried to redirect the weapon out of its grip, he wrenched with all his strength trying to apply enough pressure to wrest the grip, but it was again to no avail.

The medic's body simply didn't respond to him the way it should. Everything was delayed, for all the force that impacted on this boy, his grip on the bar held strong, it took them a few seconds of squirming with ever-changing angles without success, he felt his muscles begin to give in and consoled he himself to one last all or nothing burst of strength, he exhaled with force and pried it out of that weak spot between the thumb and index finger. Finally, the pipe came free, and the medic swung it towards his attacker. The teenager collapsed as he stumbled to the ground.

The medic lifted the pipe to the ready as more stuttering noises echoed from the direction he was running toward. A split-second later, he ran headfirst into more, Michael began swinging as they came around the corner, his first swing landed at shoulder level to another teenage assailant, he guessed it was one of the women, the recipient crumpled and tumbled to the ground. He swung again, and another adult tried to sidestep past. It hit her shoulder, and she landed with a crunch. Michael tried to push through and escape the group, but another attacker collided with him from nowhere, both of them went to the ground.

He heard moaning somewhere behind him and the screaming from his attacker on top of him. One of the women kept saying the same string of vowels over and over a gravelly voice scratched, "Uo. Uo. Uo. Uo." and Michael heard the dragging footsteps of what could only be the gunman from behind. Two hands slamming down on him snapped his attention back towards the rabid stranger who was now rolling on the ground with him, it struck him with such force that it could only have been the first teen again, another sudden smash dislodged his grip on the pipe. Wild blow after wild blow landed on his arms and sides of his skull.

For but a moment, he fixated on grimy walls in the alley, the years

of grease and scum that collected and ran off formed dark puddles on the ground, he could smell the garbage on the ground, the mix of decaying food and piss, the pipe clattered against the asphalt seemingly a hundred miles away. And there was a burning smell, the stuff of ash and soot that was once familiar forms struck his nostrils, and he thought he saw the traces of black smoke and ember.

The attacker got a shot past his defense, and it connected right above the nose, his vision exploded white. He couldn't understand it, Michael was a good two hundred pounds, and though his days of rigorous training were behind him and he only casually trained these days, this kid couldn't have been more than a hundred forty, he should have been able to overpower him without a second thought. Michael thought to himself how ironic it was that despite having trained almost an entire lifetime of martial arts was being beaten to death by a teen, that in all his years of training was utterly useless when he needed it. That was always the way it was, wasn't it? You needed a cell phone? It was dead. You needed a lift in an emergency? no one was around... You needed your years of training on how to kick and punch? Your body just doesn't function correctly.

Something just wasn't right. He hadn't felt right since he woke up from the explosion, his body was heavy, sluggish, and his brain was just not keeping up. It was all so lucid... like a dream... or a bad hangover. Was the migraine there the whole time, or had it started when he got cracked in the face? How long ago was that? He wondered.

Another wild fist landed, and Michael's head slipped to the side. He remembered he had a knife in his pocket. Actually, he always carried two in his work uniform.

FOCUS!

*Wait. Just a second. Tie up an arm first.* Another fist came down, and he deflected it down and away, wrapping his own arm to prevent the attacker from pulling back. He suddenly threw all his weight forward, the attacker managed to keep on Michael and continued to rain wild swipes from his free hand and attempted awkward headbutts, but it gave him the moment he needed to pull a knife from his side pocket. It

made a click as he flicked it open, and the blade sank into the attacker's neck.

The attacker snarled and snorted a gurgling sound as his lungs started to inhale blood, he then wilted off of Michael. He tried to quickly wipe the blood off his face and then looked up to find himself alone in the alleyway. The medic looked to the one he just killed, he saw the swollen eyes and the bandage that he had tried to aid... the kid could have been no older than ten or twelve.

Horried and confused at what he'd done, he again tried to make sense of what was happening, then he heard more motion and yelling nearby. Out of some newly formed instinct, he ducked low, trying to disappear. Stay focused. *Something's not right with yourself, but it will pass. Stay on top of it.* His self-reassurance was doing more to give him strength than the knife in that moment.

The fat man had already seen him though, he had shambled forward while Michael fought for life... He now stood less than ten feet away with the pistol. Stumbling forward, pointing the gun at Michael's face, he showed indifference. If he was at all aware of the broken bodies around him, he showed no sign of it. The fat man wore a sleeveless tank top, sweatpants, and his round unshaven face accounted for more hair than the entire top of his head. Drops of vomit stuck to his shirt in patches, he rasped and grunted words that made no sense to Michael and then raised his pistol to the medic's head. The man's eyes looked ready to pop out his fat, balding head. And perhaps from a trick of the sky above, he saw a blue fire in the fat man's desperate eyes. The gun shook wildly in his extended hand as if he was struggling to remember how to use it, he pulled the trigger.

Michael tried to calculate some way to defend himself, but the only thing he could do was dive to the side of the dumpster, he knew this would buy him a second or two at most, but it was all moving so slowly, no part of him listened. He felt gravity claim him and felt like he could have been falling for minutes, but he never heard the gunshot that sought to take his life. Instead, hit the ground and heard the echoes of the weapon just making a 'click'.

He expected to hear another shot or two. He expected to feel pain

and see his vision fade to black. He expected himself to be dead. But none of it was the case. The old man growled in confusion and rage as he seemed to be trying to understand why his weapon no longer worked.

The medic scrambled back to his feet, unsure of if he should run or pounce on the man, he kept his arms up and started to give the man distance. Fight or flight paralyzed him, and Michael felt a critical reprieve being squandered. The fat old man spit froth as he tried to shout syllables in no recognizable order. Michael took another step backward, hoping it wasn't too late.

There was another presence in the alley now. It took shape right behind the fat old gunman. Michael thought he might have seen it much earlier if his vision wasn't so damn blurry or an eye near swollen shut. The old man must have sensed the motion too, he turned to face the newcomer and was greeted with the metal pipe across the head. It made a 'thwack' sound, and the gunman fell limp.

Michael struggled to fight off the blurring of his vision. But the image eventually came. He saw a man around the same age as himself, they had similar physiques, though the stranger clearly had a bit more bulk. He wore his hair short and wore camouflage army cargos, much like the navy ones he wore for work. A black turtleneck shirt and a pair of black sneakers completed the new arrivals attire...

"Did he hit you?" the stranger asked. Michael patted himself down, and found no severe wounds... or at least no bullet holes. "I'm fine, the kid knocked the crap out of me, though." He glanced to the child who had now bled out, the gravity of the last few moments sinking in. "Yeah, your nose is bleeding," The stranger added as he leaned to pick up the gun, "I think that was happening before I was getting chased." Michael tried to mock a smirk as he looked around at the broken bodies, then added, "...Thanks."

The larger man wrestled the gun away from the old man's still hands and inspected it, he slid the action backward and a round ejected. He looked toward the medic, "It was jammed... You're damn lucky."

Michael nodded and replied, "Fuck." he paused as a wave of nausea overcame him... it passed, everything screamed in pain. Too much pain to much worry that the stranger now had the gun. At this point, he doubted he could do anything if the man was as crazy as the old man.

The stranger handed Michael the pipe, and it did much to quell his rising worry. The stranger counted the remaining rounds in the pistol before sticking the gunman's weapon in his waistband. As they gathered their breath, the heaving of their rapid breaths echoing off the walls in the alley eased, and their ears tuned to the chaos further away. He looked at the stranger with the gun, "So what now?" he asked. "How bout we get somewhere safe?" The stranger answered. The medic agreed.

They walked for a few hundred feet in silence before the stranger spoke, "I was gonna jump in a few minutes earlier to help you, but you know... once I saw the gun, I didn't think there was much I could do." It made sense to Michael, "I hear ya. I'd have done the same.. I think." It dawned on him that the stranger was somewhat familiar, but he just couldn't place it. "I'm Mike, by the way."

"Come on, bro. I know who you are." The stranger said. The medic took a confused glance to his new ally as a slow dawning occurred, "Jesse Cordery... we had a bunch of classes in grade school together. Not to mention Shihan's Dojo." Michael was shocked as his brain started working again. He had barely recognized the man, but his features suddenly clicked, and he remembered the boy who lived a few blocks away, "Wow, I'm sorry... it's been what, ten years?" "Twelve, I think," Jesse Cordery said.

Michael noted that Jesse too was now covered in blood. Jesse was two inches taller and of a heavier build than him. Where Jesse had more muscle, Michael was more wiry. The military had kept the soldier far more toned, while civilian life had allowed the medic to keep a bit of softness to his form. They both were on the taller side and even shared similar facial features and hairlines. Jesse's eyes were a dark brown and his skin a darker tone, whereas Michael's were ice blue and his skin much paler. And currently, Michael's face was bruised and swollen and Jesse's had barely a scratch, but was not

without a limp from his share of a fight.

It was a fair mistake to not recognize the old friend, he decided. Before Jesse had enlisted, Michael actually had a considerable size advantage in height and muscle, the soldier had definitely filled out in his time away.

They were not super close in the past, merely acquaintances, though they had overlapped in a number of social circles in the old days, their biggest connection was training at the same karate school back in their formative years. Last he had heard, Jesse was shipping out to boot camp, and Michael soon went his own way into adulthood.

Nearby were more gunshots, these were chorused with the howling of pain, screams and the random booms upwards in the sky. The alley in which they stood felt relatively safe, They were alone, but both knew they couldn't just stay there.

Heading toward the end of the alley, they had to stop short as another crowd of people wandered by in a daze. Michael counted seven. There were three adult men and one adult female, all escorting two young girls and a boy. Unlike the crowd that had chased the two earlier, this group seemed sane... but worried. Still, they decided to not risk it. The largest male's head darted back and forth in every direction, and he led the rest around the corner and out of sight. They kept hidden in the alley and watched, both thought it better to keep unseen than to try approaching another group until they were sure.

They waited a moment, more ran by. "Let's get off the streets." Jesse said as he was distracted by something, he was eying the door about ten feet behind them, the door was scratched and dented, a faded sign read "Murph's Pub" It was a side access door to a small bar, "I have an idea" The soldier said, then delivered a strong kick that caved the back door in. They entered.

Inside, the two brute-forced an ice cooler against the back door to serve as a makeshift door lock. And then they stumbled towards the front of the store. There they hid behind the storefront's window and took in the scene. There was a roll-down gate on the front windows, and

from behind the glass and iron gate, they could see people of all kinds running to and fro.

Some were terrified, and others deranged. They saw people run by with weapons taking hurried shots at each other, warning shots to those without the courtesy to keep a respectful distance. Most were shots taken in fear, but not all... some were definitely with intent to kill. A teen on a bike was struck down by an old man with a shotgun. That Old man got mauled by a fat woman wearing a formal dress that seemed to be on him out of nowhere. The fat woman proceeded to hammer the older man's head into the stone until there was just red mush, then she simply stood up, brushed some brain bits off her dress suit, picked up the shotgun and casually walked away after yelling a bunch of obscenities at an empty parked sedan... A girl in her early twenties walked by half-naked, seemingly oblivious to all the carnage she passed, holding a fingerless, bloody stump of a hand upward to the storms. Some people were speaking normally, others babbled incoherently. As time went on, less and less made sense outside those windows.

Michael could barely feel his arms or legs anymore, his head pounded, and with each moment, he fought back the urge to wretch. His entire body was likely still in shock. He stared out the window, exhausted and almost helpless. The sky continued to scream and flash, The thunder continued mercilessly, and the ground shook in reply.

## Civillian Life

Jesse ducked low as he peeked out the bar's front window and tried to mentally keep the fatigue from catching up to him. His limbs ached much like they did after a long ruck march, every joint and muscle in his body groaned as he tried in vain to rest. He was exhausted, and he wasn't sure why.

It was like this from the moment he woke up to the craziness. And though he hadn't been chased and beaten like his newly reacquainted friend, he had run a marathon all the same.

He always hated running, he had done way too much of that in the army. It made him think back to Iraq, or more precisely the PT that came before deployment, the endless ruck marches and the questioning of his life with every step of those marches. Of course, the actual deployment wasn't much better, not too fondly, he remembered running convoy missions for thirty-two hours straight, always moving, rarely resting, never sleeping. He felt just like he did back then, over-fatigued with every limb aching and a constant pressure behind his eyeballs though back then, he had a Humvee to fall back to. For him, Iraq and Afghanistan were a long time ago, but they had never left him. How could it? Many of his buddies were still over there in that part of the world while he was back home working on a degree.

The army had paid the entire tab, which was the best thing he ever felt came from his time in. The government's cash allowed him to get working on a degree in social work, why Social work of all things? It was the exact opposite of what most veterans gravitated to he'd often muse, most of his buddies came back hardened conservatives, but not him for whatever reason. From video game nerd to martial artist, to fifty cal gunner to masters of social dynamics... Always Wandering, That was his life summed up quick. In retrospect, he thought not for the first time that he probably made for a poor soldier. His thought process always tried to push away everything about the army, but it was easier thought than done sometimes. He learned much in the service, he had seen much in war and liked to think he

had done some good, but the politics were so convoluted and contradictory that he wondered if he would ever understand why he was over there in the first place. It always came back to that, bodies, bullets, explosions and whys, again he simply tried to block the thought out, disregard everything about it, he was home now. A debriefing officer had said that it was important to acknowledge that after a rough deployment, it took time to adjust to life back home.

Home. He thought to the recliner chair in his living room, Dad's gone. He said inwardly. His father was the first person he saw after coming to. Jesse woke on the couch of the small apartment, a textbook over his face blocked the flashes outside. When his brain started working, he found himself in the small blacked-out apartment with no power, he lit one of several tea light candles that his father routinely kept around the coffee table, that was when he saw him. He was still and not breathing, at a glance, Jesse knew there was nothing he could do. As he sat there, it slowly began to dawn that there was something bad going on, and soon people were taking to the streets.

This was not a war zone. He was not on deployment, all of this was happening there, not in some backwoods village or a dusty middle eastern city... people were dying right here in front of him, not blocks away from his own home.

He looked to his old friend Mike, he remembered them playing card games at the lunchroom table over a decade ago, the man now wore a number of bruises and cuts and seemed to be trying his best to ignore the injuries with varying levels of success. Had Jesse not recognized his friend on the street or followed after the group that chased him, he might not be alive still. Jesse would have helped anyone that way if given a choice, but given the absolute panic in the streets, Jesse was pretty sure it'd be a bad idea to try anything like that again for a while.

He checked the pistol he had taken from their attacker, it was a 9mm Beretta pistol, he wasn't sure of the exact make, probably a 92 series. It had four rounds left in the mag and one chambered. He used to have a sidearm very similar, so he was already very comfortable with its feel. Five rounds weren't much, but it was better than nothing.

The storm above raged on, and a stray link of blue lightning cut above them so low his hair stood. He heard an explosion echo from a few buildings over where the soldier guessed the wicked light had chosen to land. *Lightning that splashes down more like liquid than anything else*, he mused.

It reminded him of something of a mix between the aurora and a checkerboard, as absurd as the thought was. He wanted to question everything about what he saw. Again, a habit that 8 years of the military couldn't stamp out of him.

He savored the air, Letting his lungs replenish as he tried to make a sensible plan. Too many unknowns, he thought to himself, he had no way of knowing what was happening or how widespread, but in a certain way, it didn't matter. A Normal catastrophe like an earthquake, hurricane or flood, would make certain buildings and locations more valuable than gold... the same logic could be applied here. These first few hours might mean survival.

He detected a whiff of sharp odor, the kind usually found in an electrical fire. Jesse then noticed smoke starting to thicken in their hiding spot. Their rest became short-lived as a hint of burning grew in their noses, subtle at first but then growing in strength. "You smell that?" Mike said.

Jesse looked around the bar and marveled at its total lack of uniqueness, he had seen hundreds of these bars in his thirty-two years on the planet... and he wasn't even a drinker. He always ended up on forays to such places when his buddies went off base. The towns and states might have changed, but this hole in the wall was the same in every dive in the country.

Every wall had some reference to the olde world days of drunkenness., Omally's stout, Malloy's dark, he saw ads for brands of beer and signs for towns he never heard of and was pretty sure didn't even really exist, "authentic" old Irish caricatures in photos complete with American cars parked on the American side of the road. He heard stories of how entire chains of restaurants had junk manufactured to paste all over walls to add a sense of authenticity and couldn't help but wonder... The falsity was impressive and obvious, and all the

decor no doubt effectively attracted thousands of barely legal girls and hundred of thousands of men to pursue those girls. He himself never much cared for alcohol, though everyone else he knew did, it was a hard thing to be part of the army and not drink with your buddies, in truth, it just never had an appeal to him, and he suspected his father's overindulgence during his youth had a large part in that.

Jesse's nose wrinkled as he focused on the growing electrical fire. He looked back toward the kitchen area and saw the darkening haze of smoke. He tapped Mike on the shoulder and gestured to the smoke. "It's time to go.". His friend weakly nodded.

They pushed through the side door they had entered and stayed low as they crept from dead vehicle to dead vehicle, trying to avoid again making themselves the target of any Psychopath's ire, the streets were quiet now, but for how long? Jesse led the way with the pistol, and Michael followed after him replacing the pipe with a fire axe that lay in the road. They ducked into the next alleyway and followed the back end of the strip mall to its end. Where they looked over a hill and saw the wreckage that was the Interstate Highway 495.

It was a collage of crumpled cars, buses and trucks, a veritable train-wreck without the trains but with all the wreckage. People lay where they landed after being ejected from their vehicles as far as the eye could see. The Long Island Expressway, the LIE as the natives called it, ran from just outside New York City and ran roughly eighty miles east until the end of the island, it never actually left the state as far as Jesse knew. Most every car on the 495 went a minimum of seventy mph, he tried to imagine every vehicle on that road suddenly losing control as the drivers suddenly went unconscious en masse. From all appearances, Jesse guessed that is exactly what might have happened.

They had halfway crossed the wreckage when something changed. The hairs on the soldier's neck stood on end, and he had that sudden feeling like they were now the attention of someone... much like the feeling he had when he was under fire in war. It didn't make sense, but he had learned to trust his impulses and threw himself prone beside an overturned limo. Mike dropped next to him and began

to protest. "What is it?!" he looked around frantic "Where?!".

Jesse didn't answer. Mainly because he didn't know.

He was about to stand back up and throw off the impulse as paranoia...Then the sky ripped open.

Blue lightning forked above them, spewing out of the clouds, it had a majesty to it, a lazy sureness like that of the tide. A loud buzzing sound ripped into the soldier's ears. And then the ground exploded in front of him. A Blue-White bolt fragmented away from the pulse above and whipped across the ground not a hundred feet away from them, it was an arc of lightning whose chaotic dance ripped across the highway instantaneously. Anything close to the arc, whether it be bus or truck, was tossed aside like it had no mass, where the bolt touched was little more than molten asphalt which that bit deep into the concrete, it was done as suddenly as it began... leaving but a silent tremor under the and a high pitched buzz the soldier's ears.

The husks of vehicles near the impact spit embers and sparks momentarily, then the buzzing sound faded... the glowing superheated metals quickly faded back into a suddenly dark and eerily quiet night.

## Cause and Effect

Michael's head screamed. The lightning bolt had dissipated as quickly as it had slammed into the ground, but it left behind a whole new cascade of pain through his body. His vision was blurred, and his pulse ran rampant... he knew because he could feel it in his head. It was odd, he thought, how even as his eyes strained to make out shapes, the colors he was blasted with were more vibrant than ever.

His head cleared, and he made himself remember what they were doing. He saw Jesse already advancing forward, looking side to side for any threats, Michael followed. They both stayed far clear of the molten crevice left by the freak lightning. The medic's feet still were felt sluggish and his body groaned with each step, yet he also felt the presence of an adrenaline high unlike anything before.

From a medical perspective, it made no sense at all. None of his anatomy or physiology schooling gave him the vaguest notion of what he currently felt. *It was all irrelevant anyway, he supposed, at least until they could get somewhere safe.*

There was a ringing sound that echoed off of everything, he tried to place where it came from, but he simply couldn't do it. As he followed his friend, the origin of the sound seemed to dance away at the very moment he'd isolated it. Audio hallucinations, he told himself, the kind of thing a person has before a seizure. He filed the thought away for later... Right now, he knew that they were out in the open and possibly in danger.

They passed through the wreckage and gridlock of the expressway, and Michael glanced at the bodies among the wrecks. He had been to hundreds of car crashes before, but they were tiny fragments compared to what he now witnessed, if he had relived every horrible car accident he had ever worked all at once, it might have been comparable to the wreckage they passed through...

Fifty feet from him was a sports car with a shattered windshield, its driver was still at the end of a red smear about a hundred feet past

that. He looked away only to see the crushed driver's compartment of a sedan beside him, the driver was crushed within. Other vehicles simply caught flame, he could see fifty or sixty stretch out in either direction... all were smoking remains hinting at the skeletons within.

Cause and effect, he thought. The excessive velocity of a vehicle makes it get where it's going faster, yet also makes it harder to control, therefore at higher speeds, its driver therefore, has less options available. If all goes according to plan, the driver gets to their destination at the end of their journey, but if the unforeseen occurs, for example, a bus veers off the road in front of the driver in just the right place, the option to avoid that bus simply will not exist... The result is a crash. Even then, the effect has barely begun, though the vehicle stops the riding passenger's motion carries onward impacting with the dashboard and steering wheel... inside the passenger organs displace & bones snap...blood vessels rupture. As the passenger dies of exsanguination while the engine of the dying vehicle catches flame... all unbeknownst to those behind the ill-fated vehicle. This action alone occurred thousands upon thousands of times a year, without the help of the storm...

Michael found himself amid the lost thoughts and brought himself back to the now. He stopped right behind Jesse and observed his old friend's methodical scanning of the environment... his unrelenting scan for threats, he could tell the soldier was weary and pushing himself past exhaustion...but doing it anyway. Michael limped along behind him, it made the medic feel completely helpless in comparison, so he tried to mimic his vigilance as best he could.

Jesse never pushed too far in the open, he always pinged from one position of cover to another. He also never advanced more than fifty yards or so without doing a thorough survey of his surroundings, that he did all this with his pistol at the ready so naturally impressed The medic no small amount. Michale had done some tactical combat courses in his line of work, he understood the differences between cover and concealment, techniques like 'Slicing the pie' and all that, but he never ever really had to utilize any of that training. Jesse illustrated the difference between theory and consistent practice perfectly.

Michael decided he was quite lucky. It was good to not be alone as things are, he thought. If it had been someone he didn't already know who saved him, Michael doubted that he'd have been trusting enough to stay with that person. He'd have run off the first opportunity he had. No such thoughts occurred about Jesse. Put even more simply, he'd already have been dead if it wasn't for his old friend. That goes a long way to instill trust with things as crazy as they are, perhaps he'll be able to return the favor at some point.

They left the car pileup behind. After climbing over a safety fence, the two found concealment in a wooded area between two strip malls. There the reacquainted friends caught their breath for a couple minutes. It had just dawned on Michael just how exhausted he actually was, and it showed on Jesse's features as well. The few moments of rest were just not enough, his limbs still ached and sluggishly obeyed, everywhere was heavy feeling like he'd been running for days and his muscles had hit the point of utter refusal. It occurred to him they were just moving, with no specified destination. "Do we have a plan?" The medic asked. "No." Jesse sounded lost in thought, "We find somewhere safe until we figure one out." Michael couldn't think of any grander plan himself. In truth, he was barely able to stay awake... they stumbled on.

He guessed it was another mile or two before they saw signs of others. At first, they heard the isolated echoes, then more echoes built on top of those, filling the sound into a clamor, individual voices became indistinguishable remarks in a crowd, somewhere nearby. They soon came upon a crowd gathering in front of a grocery store, but the friends chose to remain hidden and watch from afar, they ducked low behind some empty cars in the parking lot of a gas station/ convenience store directly across from the grocery store and its gathering mob. There they tried to quietly observe.

The crowd was around twenty large and growing, it was mostly made up of adult men, but there were a handful of women as well. Shouts echoed from the mob, they were frantic and near hysterical. They screamed and threw insults at one another. He could tell the voices were all anger and fear, but he could not make out what was being said from afar, but he could tell there was an overflowing

amount of distrust and suspicion. Though not be able to make out the words, the body language screamed hostile and aggressive... but why?

We're witnessing some kind of mass hysteria, he thought. Hallucinations, then he thought to how he physically felt, it had to be some sort of strange Seizure. Maybe some kind of shared psychotic disorder...

"We're not going anywhere near that." The soldier said. Michael nodded.

Fights were breaking out among the crowd, he could see the figures pushing and shoving... before long it was a full melee like the first group he encountered, only on such a larger scale.

Michael saw a group of teenage boys approaching the larger group and found himself thinking back to the child in the alley, the bubbling blood and gurgling sounds that came from the wound that he caused. Was there nothing else he could have done?

Something moved in the corner of his eye, he recognized the sounds of hushed footsteps and then his vision exploded to white.

## Ideas

Jesse ducked just in time to avoid the bottle whizzing by, it exploded somewhere behind him. A new group had come out from around the side of the gas station, it blocked his line of sight to their approach until they had almost stumbled right on top of them. It was sloppy situational awareness on his part, his old drill instructor would be furious if he were training, or he might have been dead if he were still on deployment.

There were about six boys around mid-teenage range who warily kept their distance, they had seen the two friends trying to conceal themselves and reacted as if Michael and Jesse were the threat, "Stay back!" the teens screamed along with a salvo of slurs and insults. Jesse had the pistol in hand, but they didn't seem to notice, "Get the hell away from us!" They bellowed frantically. More missiles flew at them, nothing immediately lethal judged the soldier, just glass bottles and a few rocks from the ground. Jesse had faced worse, he was about to yell back but noticed the crowd across the street had taken an interest in the commotion.

He then heard a thud quickly followed by the shattering of glass beside him, Mike had gotten hit. It looked like it caught him right on the cheek, which brought him to the ground, he could see blood starting to run from the gash it left, the medic was trying to find his way back to his feet in a daze. Jesse saw the large mob across the road starting to approach. He tried in vain to gesture to the boys throwing rocks to calm down, but it seemed futile. They just kept looking for things to hurl... the kids either weren't aware of the crowd or simply didn't care.

The mob across the road was now moving toward the two parties at the gas station, they started with a wary shuffle that quickly accelerated to a full-on sprint. Rocks still pelted the ground around him, not doing damage but making a hellish clamor of noise. Jesse wanted no more of this. Protecting his face with one arm, he thought about firing a warning shot or two of the gun but thought better of it. He pocketed the pistol and helped Mike to his feet, "Stay with me!" the

soldier said before pulling his friend away and around the back of the building.

The clattering of rocks followed them until the building came between them and the throwers, behind the gas station was a wooden privacy fence separating the commercial lot with a wooded area that buffered the noise from the residential homes beyond, Jesse rammed right into it with a shoulder, and a number of the vertical panels flew apart, The two pushed through. The commotion of the mob was now very close, he heard yelling and a few shrieks of pain... the soldier preferred to be nowhere near it. He guided his wounded friend as they zigzagged through the back yards of the suburbia.

They crossed dozens of backyards and a few smaller roads before the shrieks of the mob had become mute, after a moment of listening Jesse was confident they had not been followed, and they stopped by someone's inground pool. "Lemme see your face," he said as he inspected his friend's wound, particularly around the eye... "It's not that bad." Mike recoiled at first touch, there was a deep cut above the left cheekbone, about half an inch away from the left eye. "The eye's fine," Mike grunted. "Head cuts just bleed a lot," he added, trying to sound unbothered. "I need to wake the fuck up.". Jesse Nodded and cupped some water to help irrigate the eye. After they had rinsed the blood and any uninvited glass particles from the wound, Jesse took in their surroundings and tried to form some plan. "Where are we? Patchogue or Medford?" He asked.

"Medford, I think," Mike responded. *Not that it mattered much... it's all kind of the same out here*, he thought. Jesse never cared much for geography when he was growing up, at least on suburban Long Island, where there was virtually nothing to distinguish one township from another. The houses and zip codes all just blurred over each other, and landmarks were better described by the nearest fast-food chains and gas stations.

That all changed when he enlisted however, he moved away and learned that the rest of the country and the world past it was nothing like his home at all. Sometimes there was only one small town within a fifty to a hundred-mile range that a town actually took on its own personality and its attractions and history provided its own spirit. In

a small rural town where people weren't vastly overpopulated, the town folk all knew each other, knew every little bit of the shops and lurings in the town, they drank together, and shared social events together... Those things were resources, the lifeblood of those towns. In an OH SHIT scenario, things would be well accounted for and likely fought for... but here in the anonymity of city/suburbia, there would be many things and places overlooked. Especially if there's so much trouble just getting from point a to b. . . .*it's all kind of the same out here... except for today.* Suburbia was all asphalt and anonymity, the thought gave him an idea of what to do.

"Ready to move?" The soldier asked, his friend nodded.

They kept a quick pace, at least as quick as one could go as worn as they both were. It made him think of how he felt after a twenty-mile ruck march. His training in the military taught him much about chemical weapons, biological agents, IEDs, he even saw some of the darker-sided psyops that were used in war. But he had never seen anything like the storm, Never trained for anything of the sort. Of all the things they had trained him for, he had never heard of any kind of weapon that could do what he was seeing.

The soldier's head started pounding again, one look to his friend showed the same pained look. On a hunch, he looked upward and saw the glowing clouds collecting again. His body immediately anticipated the waves of pain to spike at any moment, but he tried to keep his mind sharp. Whatever it was, he did not want to be in the open for it again. *Attain the basics of survival, Food, Water, Shelter, Means to defend these things were going to be in huge demand,* at least for the immediate future... If they survived the night at all. Jesse blocked out all thoughts but those that served this one notion. *If things are as bad as they seem... they were likely to get worse.* He recalled a place he had been to on occasion, and it wasn't far, maybe a mile or two into a nearby industrial park. He hoped it had been overlooked in the chaos. And he hoped its owners were far away, limited by lack of a functioning vehicle.

They walked in silence, looking to and fro for any threats. When they crossed paths with other groups, they concealed themselves until the strangers were long gone or they backtracked and went a different route. They passed over bodies in the road ...victims of either the

effects of the storm or from confrontations after. There were still no signs of electricity or vehicles in use. And oddly, many of the houses in this area seemed completely untouched by the chaos of the night. Finally, they reached the utilitarian architecture and slightly dressed up storefronts and office space of their targeted Industrial park. They ducked behind parked trucks and dumpsters as they passed by the variation of windows shuttered by metal roll downs, Black shiny glass, company logos both fancy and not.

Finally, they came to a halt in front of an unremarkable store window, in the darkness, it was near impossible to see any difference between any of the other buildings in the area. But its metal drop gate front was obvious enough "Here." Jesse pointed to the words on a small sign by the door. Michael read the sign " ' BOB's CUSTOM GUNS N' AMMO' " he said as he squinted through the heavy shuttered window front, there was no hesitation or doubt from his friend " Can't argue the logic, It's just gonna be a bitch to get in there.". "Yep," Jesse replied. "You've got another idea for that, don't you?" his old friend mused. The soldier just nodded.