

It took seven days for the world as I knew it to unravel.

The first day started more or less normally. I turned the news on as I made myself some breakfast, hardly listening to the newscasters as they discussed an uptick in missing people, animal attacks, and an explosion somewhere in California. I paid a bit more attention as I ate but quickly got lost in what I thought was the typical slog of unfortunate shit that usually filled a news network's time. I put my plate in the sink when I was done and headed off to work.

By the time I got back, the news was starting to filter in that there was *something* going on, but no one knew what it was quite yet. It felt like the very early days of Covid, with a heaviness that hung in the air, everyone looking for answers that no one really had. The whole workday had been filled with whispering gossip and worried questions about calling out sick, beating the crash of whatever was hanging over our heads.

The following day, I woke up to a much more uniform news report. Gone were political discussions, reports about shootings or anything like that. Instead, they were focused on what was going on. Still, it was early, so while the government was clearly feeding them some information, it wasn't a whole lot. They explained that we were under another lockdown and that everyone should stay inside until everything could be figured out.

A quick check of the internet was much more educational.

A video of a bear the size of an SUV overturning buses in Yosemite National Park. A picture of a wolf pack taking down a herd of cows, their jaws sparking with electricity. A boat being capsized by some sort of sea creature that looked closer to a dinosaur than anything I had ever seen. More and more information poured in every hour. Some of it was bullshit, but enough of it was backed up by video evidence to be terrifying.

By the end of the day, the general consensus seemed to be that Mother Nature was sick of our shit, and we weren't on the top of the food chain anymore. Unfortunately, that theory didn't even last the night, as by the next morning, Detroit had been quarantined by the National Guard, with rumors abominations of nature that didn't seem to fit the previous theory spreading online.

Videos and images came in faster and faster, with more and more extreme examples of what was happening. An elephant the size of a building crushing cars under its feet, a man getting impaled by a white horse with a horn on its head, shadows cast on clouds as something tore planes out of the sky. The Eiffel Tower pulled to the ground and turned into a nest for some massive crystalline creature at least fifty feet long.

The government tried its best to create evacuation orders, hunt down threats, and assure the population that everything was going to be okay. But when on the fourth day, the Whitehouse all but exploded, some sort of plant vine bursting out of it, eventually encapsulating a good fifth of Washington DC, nobody really believed them.

On the fifth day, the news channels flipped over to a repeat broadcast advising people to stay indoors, protect their families, and stay calm. Meanwhile, all I could focus on was whatever the hell was walking around outside. It was massive, enough that its footsteps sent tremors through the house. I could hear it shoving cars out of its way and smashing into a nearby home. I was too scared to peek my head out to see what it was, even when the screaming started.

On the sixth day, the power went out.

On the seventh, the water failed, and the night was filled with sobbing, crying, screaming people who knew they were doomed.

I'm not ashamed to admit I was among them. I cried and sobbed myself to sleep on the seventh night, wondering how long it would take for whatever crazy shit was stirring around my home to kill me. I cried myself to sleep, clutching my cell phone, praying to whoever was listening, but knowing it wouldn't matter.

Another week passed and by then, I was all cried out. In fact, I was surprisingly calm, knowing that I would probably die soon. Somewhere along the way, I had accepted it. But even so, I knew I had to at least *try* and survive. The government suggested we stay at home, hunker down, and... well I wasn't exactly sure what would happen after that.

What I did know was that my tiny, empty, shitty apartment in the back of my landlord's house would not cut it. I also knew that if whatever was out there found me, nothing about my thin walls would keep them out. I was running low on food, and only had a box of soda and half a six-pack left to drink.

I needed somewhere safer.

I knew for a fact that just a ten-minute walk down the road was an old abandoned fire station. It was built several decades ago, out of concrete and steel. I remembered people complaining that it was an eyesore, but now it would be a safe haven. The truck bays might be a weak spot, but the rest of the structure would be much better than my apartment.

With my mind set, I quickly grabbed everything I would need, packing a backpack and duffel bag with as many essentials as I could fit before making my way to my front door, putting on my leather jacket as I did. I'm not exactly proud of how long I stood there, blankly staring at the door, my body refusing to open it. Eventually, I closed my eyes.

"This is reality now," I said to myself. "If I want to survive, or even die at least trying, I need to do this. Anything is better than slowly starving to death, or getting eaten without at least *trying* to survive."

Pushing aside the absurdity of what I had just said, I reached out and opened my door. I looked around at the small plot of land that was my "backyard" before slowly stepping out into the morning air. I could smell smoke, but a quick look around showed that the source was far enough away not to worry about. The occasional scream and shout would sometimes be a bit closer, but I did my best to ignore them. I took a long, slow breath before walking around the house and onto the front street.

Just like I had heard, the cars that usually lined the sidewalk on both sides were smashed, scratched, and pushed aside. Massive claw marks marked the hood of my own car, the entire front caved in, almost a full foot thinner than it should have been.

Only the fear of being caught outside, frozen and vulnerable, got me moving after I saw that.

I slowly made my way down the street, picking stealth over speed and heading in the direction of the fire station. As I walked the streets, I passed several destroyed and ransacked houses, burning cars, and more bodies than I could count. I barely managed to hold onto the meager breakfast I had eaten before leaving. None of the bodies I saw were intact. All of them showed signs of being torn apart or partially eaten.

About halfway to my destination, I finally found something positive. In the middle of an intersection was the corpse of some sort of lizard creature. It was about the size of a large wolf, probably bipedal, with long clawed arms tucked up against its chest. Or, at least, I imagined they would be if it wasn't pinned between two cars, a broken, bloody mess. Even if it had taken so much effort, the fact that these things could be killed made me hopeful, if not for me, then for other groups of people, maybe military bases somewhere.

I eventually made it to the old fire station, happy to see it was still in the same shape as I remembered it: ugly and basic but built to last. One of the garage doors was open just enough for me to push my bags under and slide inside. I stood slowly, dusting myself off before reaching down to grab my bag. I flicked on a flashlight, walking further into the building. Most of the space was empty, though there were some things that had been left behind. A countertop still had stools along one side, and there was, shockingly, a dusty and worn leather couch along one wall.

Just one layer of concrete wasn't enough for me to feel safe, though, not with some of the footprints I had seen. I pushed further into the building, eventually finding the centermost room, a decent-sized office about twelve by twelve feet in size. There was a desk along one side, but other than that, it was completely empty.

I quickly started to unload everything from my bags, stacking it all on the desk, even filing some of it away into the drawers. Once everything was empty, I returned to the first room, grabbed the cushions off the couch, and carried them back to my new space. I stacked them by the desk, dusting them off a bit in the process.

I took a minute to gather my thoughts before eventually nodding to myself, taking a deep breath and letting it out.

I knew that while having a secure place to live, one that could survive whatever the *fuck* had been walking around outside, was a good step in the right direction, I still needed to eat and drink. I needed supplies.

I grabbed my now empty backpack and duffel bag, making my way back out of the interior of the firehouse and back into the garage area. I kneeled down by the slight gap under the garage door and listened intently. I spent a full minute there, trying to discern how far away the shouting was and if there was anything outside, before peeking out and looking for myself. Luckily, the coast seemed clear, and I made my way under the door and back outside.

Once out in the open, I knew I was working on borrowed time, so I quickly headed to my target. First up was a nearby grocery store, which, after arriving, I realized had already been picked over. Still, food was food, even if three cans of tomato sauce, a jar of pickles and two bags of beef jerky that had been kicked under a counter wasn't exactly a gourmet meal.

I spent the next three hours grabbing whatever I could, going from shop to shop, taking anything that could be useful and fit in my bag. My biggest find was from the trunk of a wrecked car, which held a whole box full of canned goods. I grabbed a baseball bat from a smashed store display, only to immediately trade it in for a machete and its sheath, not three stores down.

It was late in the afternoon by the time I started making my way back to the station. I was nervously waiting for my good luck to end, taking it incredibly slow, desperate to stay quiet. Unfortunately, while I was managing relatively well, other people weren't doing nearly as good of a job. Only two or three hundred meters from the station, I turned my head as the sound of a running motor started getting closer and closer. Suddenly, some idiot on a dirt bike turned a corner onto the road I was walking, burning rubber and weaving in between cars.

Before I could even formulate a question about what they were running from, the universe answered, and a massive, six-legged monster came barreling after them. The creature was big, big enough that when it took a turn too tight, the corner of the house it smashed into exploded under the force of the impact, throwing chunks of debris everywhere. If you squinted, covered one eye, and only looked at it for half a second, the creature could vaguely be labeled as canine, with its fur, muzzle-like snout, and quasi-recognizable limbs and paws. But between the array of spines that ran down its back and the massive mace-like growth at the end of its tail, any similarity quickly stopped there.

It chased after the dirtbike rider with reckless abandon, its snout already covered in blood, as two more of them charged around the corner, right on their leader's tail. As the entire clusterfuck got closer, I realized I was in very real danger. I ducked behind a car and crawled, dragging my duffel bag with me behind a rock wall, taking cover and silently praying as they got closer and closer.

When the chase finally reached me, I closed my eyes tightly, trying to seem as small as possible behind the rock wall. Suddenly, I heard a yelp, a screech, and I was thrown forward. One of the canine monsters had slammed into the car, lifting it off its wheels and smashing it into the stone wall, which exploded and threw me across the small yard I had been cowering in.

When my brain stopped spinning, the pain started. It was fuzzy, and my thoughts were slow and hard to grapple, which I could only guess meant I was concussed. I shifted slowly, trying to sit up, managing to get my feet under me. I looked down at my arm, slowly realizing that I had an extra joint halfway between my shoulder and elbow.

"Fuucccck," I whispered, trying to keep from screaming as what had been a somewhat fuzzy pain became much more present.

Still, I was completely exposed, and even my slow, rattled brain knew that was bad. So I bent over, grabbed my duffel bag with my good arm and slowly started to head back. I had managed not to die from my first encounter with... whatever the fuck had happened to us, but the cost might have been enough to kill me anyway.

Sliding under the garage door nearly made me scream, but I managed to grind my teeth and bear it, pulling myself inside and standing again, making my way to my chosen room. I dropped my bags on the desk and slowly began pulling off my jacket, cursing and hissing every time I jostled my arm. When I was finally free, I sagged, leaning against the wall before sliding down, all the way until I was sitting on the floor.

My head was throbbing by now, the pain in my arm fighting with a rising headache that threatened to stomp out any hope I had left.

Why had I thought I had any chance? Why did I even bother? The world was going to shit, and there was no hope, no chance. If my arm, which was now visibly swollen and red, didn't kill me, then it was only a matter of time before I was mutant dog food or worse. I shivered when some of the pictures of what had happened to the citizens of Detroit came to mind. I had no idea how to survive, no idea how to do anything. This had all been false confidence, bluster born of pretending the problem wasn't nearly as lethal as it really was.

Like I had a chance

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Maybe... Maybe this was pointless. Maybe it would be better... be better if...

I faded away, letting go of any hope I had left.

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