

404

by Mathew Paust

How ironic, thought Thorogood, the economy's collapse coming forty days and forty nights after the Internet crashed. A quiet agnostic, he guessed this coincidence likely nothing more than that, although he kept the thought to himself. Were he able to Tweet Jane, she would have appreciated the coincidence as well. She might in fact have thought it herself, as the Collapse coincided to the day, so far as most anyone could know, two-score days following the abrupt termination of all digital communication on the planet, so far as most anyone could know.

Now, alone on the road, Thorogood struggled to marshal his warring emotions, foremost among them a mood of dread, a faceless stubborn swell of various dire possibilities that periodically pushed up from his intestines and through his chest into his head, occasionally with no apparent invitation from slack or reactive reasoning. Vying with these surges of black mood to compromise a reliable grip on the fragile optimism he believed kept him going was his grief and anger over the loss of his son and daughter to this apocalyptic turn of events. His teenage son, Jethro, as with most of his generation, had been unable for the first several days to disabuse himself of hope his smart phone would somehow return to life. By the thousands youngsters swarmed into the streets shuffling aimlessly, many mumbling to themselves, heads bowed as their eyes stared fixedly at the plastic devices in their hands. Some used both hands — one holding the device while a couple of fingers of the other tapped desperately on the tiny blank screens. Jethro was one of these.

“He's trying to text,” his sister, Esther, told her father. “I tried at first, too. I thought maybe it was just the screen, you know? The light or whatever? I finally gave up.”

His daughter's apparent practical sense amused Thorogood at first. Later, as he reflected on his children's different personalities, he no longer felt certain her response was as good a sign as it had

seemed . Esther had always been the quicker study, Jethro more deliberate and analytical. While it usually took Jethro longer to understand something, his understanding tended toward the more substantive. He was the ant lugging food back to the colony, his sister a bee flitting among flowers.

“You still have yours? This could just be temporary, you know.”

She held up a hand, clutching her phone. “Think so, Dad?”

“I hope, Sweetheart.”

Jethro disappeared three days after the Crash. He, Esther and Thorogood were walking from Thorogood's apartment to Rodney's Auto Repair in the hope Thorogood's pickup truck would be ready. It was in the shop getting a ring job the day of the Crash when Thorogood's ex had dropped them off for their court-ordered weekend visit. The Crash happened precisely as their mother drove away in her mocha tan Toyota van.

“What the fuck?” Jethro's adolescent voice shifted with an awkward break from exaggerated bass to tenor between the “the” and the “fuck”. Simultaneously with the “fuck”, the boy, squinting in exasperation, tore his eyes from his phone to shoot his father a fleeting glance.

“Jethro!” Thorogood shot back.

“Dad, all I can get is 404!” squeaked Esther, staring incredulously at her phone.

The siblings, fingers frantically tapping on their phones, followed Thorogood into his apartment without another spoken word from any of them.

Jethro vanished without a trace, no warning, simply swallowed into the oblivious shuffling herd. He lagged further and further behind his father and sister until he was gone.

“Jethro?” Thorogood said, raising his voice and craning his neck when the boy had failed to acknowledge a question he ordinarily would have reacted to with passion: “Wanna stop at Mickey D's?”

“Jethro!!” Thorogood and his daughter shouted repeatedly to no response as they stood like stumps in a bewitched river coursing in two directions. When Jethro didn't catch up with them after a spell,

they retraced their steps, calling his name, until they were back at Thorogood's apartment. No Jethro.

They sat on the stoop for much of an hour studying the trudging parade. Occasionally Thorogood or Esther would call his name if one of the trudgers seemed to resemble Jethro. This required a concert of conditioned reflex and perhaps instinct along with a heightened sensitivity to nuances of physical type, carriage and motion. Neither could remember precisely what Jethro was wearing, which made scrutiny the more difficult in that virtually everyone wore similar clothes and presented identical head tilts toward the devices they held in front of them.

"Zombie apocalypse," Thorogood muttered.

"What's that, Daddy? I mean, I know what zombies are but what's an acopalips or whatever?"

"It's from the bible, Sweetie. I guess it sorta means the end of the world. But I was just kidding. Maybe this is a movie they're making, and all these people are playing zombies, ya think?"

"Yeah, they do kinda look like zombies, don't they! But my phone doesn't work, either. Ya think we're in the movie too?"

"Maybe, Sweetie. Maybe we are." His voice was going distant, and Esther picked up on it.

"You don't really think so, do you."

Thorogood pulled her to him and gave her a one-armed hug. He tried to put more enthusiasm into his voice. "If we are, they'll hafta pay us, won't they? Maybe enough so we can go to Disney World, huh?" His effort failed.

"Dad, this isn't a movie. Something's wrong, isn't it." It was a statement, delivered in a normally lilting soprano voice gone flat.

She spoke again before her father could think of a response.

"So I wonder why everybody's walking? I mean...oh, I know! They're trying to find a signal. You know, like the ad, Can you hear me now?" She pulled away from him, stood and started toward the passing crowd. Thorogood grabbed her arm.

"No, Sweetie! I'm not losing you, too." He knew the instant he spoke he'd gone too far, that he should have said *losing track of* in

reference to his son. The slip, which sprang from a heart losing hope by the second, left no wiggle room for Esther.

She returned, dejected, to the stoop. Thorogood saw tears welling in her eyes. He draped an arm across her shoulders and patted her arm. Neither spoke until she'd regained control. She wondered aloud when she'd be able to go home.

"You're with me, Esther. This is your home, too."

"I'm worried about Mommy."

"Well, her car's OK so maybe she'll come by and pick you up. In fact, maybe that's where Jethro is. Your mother saw him and he's with her."

"There aren't any cars, Dad. Everybody's walking in the street. Cars can't get through. If we walked back that way maybe there wouldn't be so many people, and she would see us."

Although surprised and appreciative of his daughter's reasoning, Thorogood did not share her optimism. Fearing the phone-staring pedestrian clog extended much further back than he wanted to believe, he vetoed the idea of leaving the apartment building site.

"She might not see us out there with the rest of them. If she does get through and we're not here..."

Esther sighed and crumpled in resignation. She started staring at her pink-encased phone again, and even tapped its screen a couple of times, listlessly.

It was growing dark, and the shuffling horde had thinned some when Thorogood and his daughter stood and started for the front door. It was Esther who recognized the motor scooter's *put-put-put* as it worked its way up the street.

"Roger! It's Roger!"

Indeed it was. The man now living with Thorogood's ex. Thorogood felt a pang of gratitude that Esther referred to the man by name rather than calling him Dad. Pain replaced the gratitude while his daughter waved from the rump seat as she *put-putted* away through the oblivious mass of phone addicts. Thorogood trudged into his apartment, grabbed a beer from the fridge and

collapsed onto the sofa to watch the TV, which apparently had been on all day.

The TV served as his window on the accelerating decomposition of the world outside his apartment. His screen — all TV screens ultimately — went white when much of the digital technology that supported the Internet and network and local televising, having become interdependent on each other, could no longer sustain itself without its Internet component. This death started at the pyramid apex and percolated down until all that remained were local stations offering local personalities and questionable experts whose only substantive contribution to the collective consciousness was the incrementally escalating hysteria in the tone of their words and, eventually, their very voices. Thorogood happened to be awake and watching when WACK-TV news anchor Jay Teeterbaum-Pinckney's ordinarily sonorous baritone caved into a bullfrog croak as he tried to say, "This just in..." An unearthly electronic squeal interrupted the venerable Teeterbaum-Pinckney while a series of brilliant multi-colored flashes obliterated his tanned, smartly coiffed visage, leaving nothing on the screen but hissing snow.

The power grid took even that away when it eventually went down.

It was the quiet that woke Thorogood from a deep, though tortured sleep. With no electricity feeding the building everything that lived off the juice shut down, taking with it the subtle chorus of hums, whines and throbbing so familiar to the building's inhabitants it was unnoticeable. Until it was gone, leaving in its wake an alien silence. It took him nearly a minute to understand what was wrong, and it was the absence of the nearest sound, the timid grating of the gears of his electric bedside clock, that brought him fully around. Knowing it was finally time to hit the road and that he would never again enjoy the familiar comfort of his bed, he rolled back onto his favorite side and snuggled deeper under the covers, thinking to allow himself one last indulgence for the hell of it. Then hell intruded as he realized the heat pump too was dead, removing the poorly insulated building's primary defense against the bitter

January cold snap. Best get dressed before the snap came stomping into his bedroom.

The cold, he figured, would give him time to get out of the city and the roving bands of thugs that had devolved from the shuffling phone watchers of the early days. Their descent to the primitive began when their perspective switched from stubborn disbelief to the impotent rage of the betrayed. Striding now in clusters, heads no longer bent nor eyes fixed on blank screens, they clutched their phones in fists reminiscent of Mao's Red Guards wielding their little red books.

"Fuuuck! 'snot faaaaaaaair!" Their pre-battle cry.

Next they morphed into marauding bands, still clutching the phones but no longer bothering to distinguish nuances of social justice. With the unanimity of a frenzied cloud of starlings, these teens settled on financial branches as the target of their discontent. Bricks and garden rocks the weapons of choice. The banks had begun locking their doors and shutting down ATMs to thwart a run on their liquid assets.

Then came the ban on sales of gasoline. Police and National Guard units assumed its enforcement in part to deprive the teen thugs of firebomb fuel for their next weapon of choice but mainly to preserve the precious liquid for their own use, as martial law was asserting itself across the land with or without official sanction.

Thorogood shifted his backpack to better distribute the weight, which seemed to have increased now that he'd reached the city's edge and was trudging past a stretch of darkened commercial buildings. Were it not for these ghostly images and the paved road, it occurred to him, he and the others might have been traversing the moon's dark side.

He hadn't expected so many others to be out this soon. All were, as he, bundled against the bitter cold, wearing backpacks and slogging along the highway. No one spoke to anyone else, not even those who seemed to be traveling together. Noticing what appeared to be a phone clutched in the gloved hand of a spectral form as it passed him, he squeezed the small mirror he'd grabbed from his

shaving kit while packing it, silently congratulating himself on his foresight. Its presence in his hand, he'd figured, could protect him from a glancing impression he was an old fart and thus prey, as civilization unraveled around him.

He wondered where the others were headed, if any were also hoping to get to Georgia. He wondered why he was acting on the preposterous impulse to try to find Jane, if, in fact, Jane was her name. Or *his*, possibly. An Internet crush, but clearly one of the mind, as he had no clue to Jane's appearance. She—he resolved to think of Jane as female—had posted various images as avatars. Some of them were of a woman, but others were of flowers or other creatures. One was a bear cub. She presented herself as a woman, but Thorogood knew of pranksters who portrayed anything but themselves. For all he knew Jane could be an obese male cannibal who lured unsuspecting Internet “friends” to his home for fun and nourishment.

Even if Jane was real Thorogood doubted he could rely on his intuition regarding women, unless his judgment had matured some since the disastrous marriage that produced Jethro and Esther. He'd learned some things being a father. He knew how parents talked. Jane claimed to have two young children. She claimed to be a widow and that she and the kids lived on a small farm near Athens. He and she were compatible online. What the hell, he'd said aloud, when he decided his heading would be south.

“Oh, yeah,” he whispered now as he watched dawn peek peach along the horizon. Not much left to lose.

