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Reserves

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People will tell you that the world ending was a bad deal. This is completely understandable of course: the sun dimmed by ash-filled skies, radiation poisoning, virulent disease, toxic soil, and the constant curse of starvation have collectively squelched out billions of lives. But for me, the end of days has been nothing short of a new beginning. The tragedy of a few billion people has been one man’s treasure, I guess.

Before the world tore itself apart, before parents roasted their infants, and before bombs, bacteria, and brutality plagued the earth, before everything green disintegrated to dust and a nebulous haze of cinder, soot, and smoke blotted out the sun, I lived a life of abundance.

My father descended from a long line of oil tycoons. Business was his life and sole purpose of existence. Although he inherited a fortune as vast as the ocean floors he drilled, he prided himself in doubling it soon after taking over the family business. An uncanny foresight and a series of gut-busting gambles had led him to some
of the richest and largest offshore oil fields in the world, and in a little less than a decade his company had more floating cranes and nodding donkeys in more places than any other company in the world. My father was savvy and shrewd and his business ran like a well-oiled machine, greased by the black gold he dredged up from the bosom of the earth.

Sometimes he would have dreams showing him where the next well should be dug or where to build a new derrick, and regardless of what anyone thought of him, no one could say anything about his visions, because he was simply never wrong. He was feared within the oil business, worshipped by his 87,000 employees, and loathed by an army of environmental organizations and leftist politicians spanning the globe. During the height of his reign, Forbes called my father “a prophet for the petroleum industry and the Antichrist of the alternative fuel movement.” He framed the article in his high-rise office in Houston and often posed for pictures in front of it.

In addition to being one of the wealthiest men in the world, my father was also regarded as one of its most prominent playboys. He treated the women he courted like the oil fields he mined, drilling and dredging with relentless tenacity, then deserting them when he had extracted all he needed from them. When my mother became his latest hotspot, the two engaged in a short, heated romance. Had things gone my father’s way, I’m sure he would have left her behind like all the others. But
when she showed him a pregnancy test and then a paternity test weeks later, he was trapped. Around that same time a desert thunderhead ignited one of his largest oil wells with a bolt of blue lightning. For two days dozens of fire tankers and helicopters with loads of lake water and Purple K failed to put out the blaze, while my father watched millions of barrels of crude oil melt into smoke. Environmentalists, reporters, and citizens of the local community used the accident as leverage to crucify my father and his company. Eventually, a copious amount of dynamite detonated near the fire was able to consume enough oxygen to “blow out” the flames. My father accepted responsibility for the accident and pumped millions of dollars into cleanup and millions more into improving his image. I think he saw my pregnant mother as another one of these oil flares, one that he would nobly take responsibility for and clean up. They were married quietly a month later.

My father never spoke anything of the affair to me, so I learned of it on my own through magazines, newspapers, and a thousand blog pages that appeared whenever I typed his name in the search bar. As much as I wished to deny it, nothing I read or heard could disprove the stories, and the silent sadness that saturated the room whenever I asked my mother about it solidified the truth. It’s hard for me to pinpoint exactly when I first began to hate my father, but by the time I was in middle school I was well on my way. I was imprisoned in a palace guarded
by tutors and housekeepers, nannies and business associates visiting for the weekend. My mother had become my second shadow, more pale, but just as silent. Yet my father was nowhere to be seen. I can count on two hands the times I remember having dinner with him, one hand for the times when there were no other strangers with us, a middle finger for the times we ate as a family alone, and a big balled up fist for the times he spoke to me at the table. He hardly acknowledged me, never said hello or called me by name, never even touched me.

Instead I was given everything money could buy, which filled the void—for a time. In fact, if circumstances had unraveled in a more ordinary fashion, I no doubt would have become your typical trust fund baby, relishing month-long debauchery-filled romps and cavorting with supermodels every night. But instead, my dad's superhuman foresight had brought him another vision; only this time it had nothing to do with where the latest well of oil was to be tapped.

The day it happened I was lounging on the couch with the TV on and a comic book tucked neatly inside a large copy of War and Peace. Mother was in the corner of the room dozing in her favorite handmade cherry rocking chair. Suddenly my father burst through a pair of doors at the end of the room, causing me to drop my book and startling Mother from her nap. He locked the doors and moved quickly across the room, stopping about ten feet shy of us.
“I have seen the future,” he said.

Mother and I remained motionless as he continued. “I will be conducting affairs from home for now,” he twisted a packet of papers in his hands as he spoke. “Many of my business associates will be coming and going, and I expect you both to treat them with the utmost dignity and respect.”

A protracted period of silence lingered in the room, then my father began to walk away. Just before reaching the door he turned around.

“Starting tomorrow I will be making some modifications to the property. Please accommodate any workers you may encounter—and stay out of their way.” He exited the same place he entered and closed the door quietly behind him.

Construction started the very next morning. Wireless intercom systems were installed in every room in the house. Airtight bunker hatches replaced every hinged door, and bulletproof glass panes six inches thick replaced every French window. Electronic steel shutters were attached to the exterior of each window, so that with a push of a button they would seal off every ray of light and contaminated wisp of air that tried to invade.

My father locked himself away in the Northeast wing of the house and I didn’t see him again in person for the next eight months. However, I saw plenty of him on the news. My father had confided in a trusted friend about his vision experience, who in turn blabbed to the board
of trustees and the press by the end of the week. When the stock started slipping, my father was forced to cease overseeing day-to-day responsibilities of the company until the board felt the situation had stabilized. News programs and financial magazines jeered and mocked my father’s sudden withdrawal from society. Parodies and Late Night sketches rarely missed a night to take a jab at his apparent insanity. I couldn’t help but agree.

Meanwhile, I was trapped inside a Victorian-style fortress, reading books and watching TV and eating an endless supply of Devil’s Food cupcakes, mint frosted brownies, bread pudding, and key lime pie, all baked by the chef. I felt a layer of pudge begin to accumulate around my midsection and chest, but I kept eating.

One night while making a midnight cupcake raid, I caught a glimpse of my father wandering the hallways, still dressed in a shirt and tie. I followed after him, but when I turned the corner he had disappeared, as if he had faded into the walls.

Construction on the house continued: Decontamination stations were added to all the main entrances and exits, security cameras surveyed every room and hallway, spiraling rinds of barbed wire fenced off the ten-acre yard from the outside, and remote .50 caliber turrets were mounted strategically across the roof.

Over the next year my weight more than doubled. My insatiable appetite for anything sweet, baked, fried, or packaged in a Hostess box combined with a sedentary
lifestyle locked indoors helped me swell in record time. Yet to me it happened so subtly, I almost didn't notice. At first my mother contended, attempting to control my diet, forcing me to walk on the treadmill daily, and threatening the cooks with their jobs if they smuggled me any junk food. But my midnight refrigerator raids and covert bribes ensured that my appetite would never go long before being sated. Soon I ignored my mother's threats completely—what was she going to do, ground me? Even though I saw the hurt I caused her every time she watched me gorge myself, the isolation and loneliness I felt, coupled with the ever-growing resentment of my absent father, compelled me to continue eating.

Then one morning deafening echoes of heavy machinery woke me. Construction had been the one constant since the lockdown, but never this loud and never this early. I strained to pull myself up off the couch and staggered toward the racket. The harsh sounds were easy enough to follow, and soon I had reached the end of the hallway that led to the ballroom. Webs of yellow tape and neon caution cones barred the entrance. The large doors were chained shut with a padlock the size of a small toaster. I took an alternate route to two more entrances and met the same fate. The last doorway, however, had been completely removed along with the entire wall. An enormous black curtain of plastic had been draped from the vaulted ballroom ceilings to conceal the work going on inside. The covering did little to dampen the
cacophonous roar of palpitating jackhammers, whirring hydraulic handsaws, whining masonry drills, hissing blowtorches, Kubotas and CATs hacking and groaning, and the voices of men attempting to shout louder than everything else. A man in an orange hard hat stopped me as I attempted to part the curtain.

"Sorry son, nobody goes past this point, especially when they're barefoot without a hard hat and wearing a pair of pajamas."

"It's okay, my father owns the place," I said as I tried to step past him.

"Sorry kid, nobody sees what's behind the curtain, even family. Order's straight from the top." He remained stern and ushered me away from the construction site.

Tired and already breathing heavily from my short walk, I headed back to my place on the couch, stopping by the kitchen on the way. Week after week, month after month, the construction continued. Semis tugged every kind of heavy machinery imaginable to the front of our house. Trucks and vans arrived hourly; forklifts transported endless shipments of palettes and crates through our front door and past the curtain. The clanking of metal and groaning of engines rumbled on through the night, forcing me and my mother to wander around with earplugs night and day.

During this time my father remained completely aloof, and it seemed that he had dropped off the media’s radar as well. Whatever he was doing, it was secret and making
him busier than he had ever been, while I, on the other hand, moved less and less. My weight became such a danger that I no longer left the couch for even the slightest walk. After a while I was unable to stand altogether, which made the use of a catheter and colostomy bag necessary. Sores and blisters began to swell on my back and legs due to lying on them for weeks at a time. Intense heat and sweat would invite bacteria to congregate in these dark, moist areas, eating away my skin. Mother established a schedule for the help to come in periodically, rotate me, change my bags, and hand-bathe me to prevent the accumulation of sore-causing bacteria. I weighed well over four hundred and fifty pounds by this time—three and a half times my original weight. Platters full of my favorite foods and the flickering images from the screen became my constant companions. My mother would attend to my daily needs with the others and sometimes I thought I saw the fear of death in her eyes, but most of the time it was just an unfathomable abyss of sadness.

I really started to hate myself as much as I hated my father. I hated my heavy breathing. I loathed how a permanent layer of sweat glistened over my entire body and how I was drenched whenever I had to help the assistants flip me over. I felt shame every time I spoke, my triplet chins quivering like a bowl of turkey drippings. My own sour stench of sweat nauseated me. I hated what I had become, and I blamed my father for all of it.

Life carried on this way for another year-and-a-half:
the incessant construction, my father's absence, my mother's depression, and my obesity. Then I noticed the world begin to panic. The news reported an unknown epidemic sweeping through Argentina and Chile. It exploded through the continent, consuming towns and cities like flames surging through a dead forest. Within weeks there were rumors of mutation and going airborne. Countries quarantined their citizens and closed their borders. The world took a heavy breath of silence and watched, waiting in uneasy anticipation. A hush fell over the globe like the moments before a twister when the sky turns green and a suffocating stillness strangles the wind into silence.

Almost simultaneously, three confirmed cases of the disease surfaced in North Africa, China, and the United States. Global mass hysteria and panic ensued, and it was amazing how fast the world crumbled. Nothing had spread this fast through the Americas since smallpox and it raged through the states without remorse.

A few more months passed, and then one morning the regulars that attended to my bathing, changing, and feeding came in with something new. They wheeled in an object resembling a hybrid between a luxury recliner and a hospital gurney. My mother explained that it was an electric bed, created for the same purpose as an electric wheelchair. It would make me more mobile in case of an emergency, she said. It was essentially a mattress with wheels and a joystick. Despite my protests, she told
me that this was my father’s order and that he had custom designed the bed and retrofitted every doorway in the house so that I could navigate the mansion without impediment.

The eight assistants pulled out a large canvas that resembled a medium-sized trampoline and held it tight over the space next to me. Three of the assistants came around the other side of me and rolled me onto the canvas, which immediately drooped as the five remaining assistants struggled to hold me up. The three others returned to help carry me over to my new bed. I felt like a killer whale being transplanted into another tank. I was rolled very carefully off the canvas and onto my new mobile bed.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon tinkering with the various buttons on the command panels, located on both armrests. There was a pilot stick on each side that allowed me to steer and accelerate by pushing forward and to brake by pulling back. It had a switch for reverse and a built-in speaker where I could page one of the staff by holding down a button and talking. A universal remote programmed for every television in the house was included, as well as a built-in massager and an alarm button for emergencies. A number of buttons could move the bed into an upright position or flat, with all the variations in between.

As soon as I felt comfortable, I zoomed around the halls of the mansion for the first time since I had become bedridden, and as much as I wanted to hate my father
more for forcing me into such a ridiculous thing, I had
to admit it was extremely useful. It did everything for me,
everything but stop me from devouring food.

Even then I realized the harm I was causing myself,
but still I ate—every bite, every gulp, every swallow my
only means of revenge. By destroying myself bite by bite,
I felt I would somehow exorcise the demon of my father
from my body. I was punishing myself for never having
the guts to confront him, and so eating became a sort of
ritual, a purging.

Three days after receiving my new bed, I woke in the
morning to a loud vibration shaking the house. I pressed
the emergency button and spoke into the radio, but no
one came or responded. I steered myself around the
mansion. The housecleaners and chefs were gone. The
construction crews and delivery trucks had vanished.
When I wheeled into the ballroom it looked the same as
it always had—even the missing wall was replaced. There
was no sign that any work of any kind had taken place.
Later in the day my mother found me and told me with
an extra sigh of sadness that my father had lain off all the
staff and workers indefinitely and that he was putting our
estate on total lockdown. Every shutter had mechanized
into action, air-locking every window and door. The tur­
rets were armed and the elaborate alarm system activat­
ed around the house.

When the last air locks finally wheezed and snapped
shut, we were sealed in, entirely removed from the out-
side world. Although there was only the three of us left in the house, we saw no more of each other than usual. My father remained locked away in the Northeast wing, pretending there was still work to do while three quarters of the world lay dead or dying. My mother took over my daily needs by bringing me my regular meals, changing my refuse bags every day or two, and answering my summons for snacks. Occasionally I would see her late at night standing in the doorway, staring at me through the TV-illuminated darkness.

Eating and watching the news consumed the majority of my time. The only thing rivaling my obsession with food was watching the world unravel. The news stations broadcasted less frequently. The airwaves filled with droning beeps and color bars in between reports. Already three of the major stations had been forced to shut down due to lack of healthy employees who had not been infected. This left only the insane or devil-may-cares of the reporting world to bring any news from the outside.

The reports talked about rumors of chemical warfare and biological sabotage, and soon threats and epithets shot back and forth between countries. What was left of national armies and militias mobilized, despite the constant hand of death still snuffing out thousands daily. All vaccines created had failed.

Then some idiot politician hiding away in some bunker in the desert decided to throw out the word nuclear in a worldwide video conference, and soon a dozen nations
were running around flaunting their nuclear warheads, like primitive cave dwellers shaking their spears and banging clubs at one another.

All of this must have triggered something in my father, because it compelled him to speak directly to me and my mother after months of silence. I remember his raspy voice growling over the intercom that day.

“All members of the household report to the ballroom within thirty minutes.” No explanation, no invitation. Just a command.

Initially, I planned to defy his orders by remaining in front of the television, but the curiosity about the ballroom got the best of me. I clasped the pilot stick and heaved forward. I whizzed toward the ballroom, my bed humming like a speeding golf cart. I hollered and shouted for my mother as I went; I hadn’t seen her at all since my father’s announcement. As I rounded the corner of the hall, I caught a glimpse of her silhouette lit up by a single, dim lamp.

I moved into reverse and pulled partially through the doorway, calling for her as I did so. Her back was turned to me and she stared at an old, oil landscape painting on the wall of a small cottage nestled away in some snowy mountain range, a thin plume of smoke rising from the chimney. She turned to meet my gaze. She was thinner than I had ever seen her. After a moment or two, she moved close to me and kissed me tenderly on my sweaty forehead. She forced a smile and brushed away a tuft of
my hair dangling across one eyebrow.

“Did you hear the announcement?” I asked.

“Yes, go on ahead dear. I’ll join you in a few minutes,” she spoke in a hushed voice.

I started to resist, then thought better of it and drove out of the room.

As I wheeled into the ballroom my father stood in the center of the polished dance floor. He had aged so much since I last saw him. All of his hair and stubble had bleached white. The horseshoes under his eyes had darkened and age spots and wrinkles splotched and carved their way into new territory on his skin. Slowly waving his hand, he beckoned for me to come closer. A little wary, I putted toward him.

“We’re leaving. The future is upon us.”

He pulled from his pocket a remote with a touch screen. He tapped and slid his fingers over the glass until a sudden jerk of machinery shook the floor. The center of the room began to slide away, the wooden planks of the dance floor receding into the walls and revealing a chrome sheet of steel beneath. When the process completed, my father walked onto the vast metal platform and motioned for me to follow. I asked him about my mother and he told me she would be joining us shortly. I drove onto the platform next to him and felt an abrupt locking of my wheels. I heaved back and forth on the sticks, but the bed didn’t budge. The platform was magnetized for safety purposes, my father explained. He made a series
of swipes and taps again, and pulses of electricity surged somewhere underneath us. Fans whirred into action. The platform under us jolted abruptly and then began to sink through the floor.

“We need to wait for my mother!” I wrenched the sticks and pressed every button and strained to lift myself up. Regardless of how hard I struggled or how loud I grunted, I could barely move under my tremendous weight, like being buried under a body of sand at the beach.

I screamed and yelled, but my father remained still. The long platform plunged us deeper into the earth, the light dimming as we descended.

The floor above us slid back into place and made a harsh sucking sound, sealing us in a vacuum of darkness. Even as I felt the platform shudder to a stop, I continued shouting, the glowing screen of my father’s remote the only light in the black. A long strand of fluorescent lights suddenly flickered on. My father walked off the platform. We were inside a control room full of monitors and computers and an enormous steel door that looked like it belonged in an airplane hangar.

Tubes of light still spurted to life as the massive door began to open. My father approached me. I called him a liar and accused him of deserting my mother. He stopped a short distance away from me.

“Young mother made her choice. She chose to stay and face what is to come. The world will burn, but we will survive.”
I cursed him again and told him I wasn't going anywhere. He punched a few more buttons on his remote and my bed began to roll forward. He was piloting me off of the platform toward the door; nothing I touched on my own control panels could stop my movement.

He steered me through the enormous doorway into an austere tunnel, white and empty and endless. I passed numerous silver doors, my father walking behind me as he propelled me forward with his remote. My bed suddenly stopped. A shrill beep sounded from the wall as my father slid a plastic card through an electronic lock. The door next to it clicked open and my father entered. The bed jerked forward and I rolled into the room after him. It felt like a large hospital room. A large plasma screen was mounted on one blank wall. There were some cupboards and a counter, a lamp on a small table.

The rage inside me festered and increased, but I was imprisoned in a straightjacket of fat. My father explained that my own controls would be deactivated for the time being and that this would be my room. Then he walked away and locked the door behind him. I lay in the dark and sobbed.

I woke up sometime later in pain. I hadn't eaten in at least six hours and my insides were churning. There was a small cupboard and closet in the room, but I had no way to get to them. I began to panic. The heavy weight I always felt from the excessive blubber padding my bones doubled, as if sandbags were being tossed over my entire
body. My throat tightened, my temples throbbed, and my eyeballs rattled with pain. My father entered the room and clicked on the lamp. He was carrying a cafeteria tray topped with food. He handed it to me without a word and I immediately started shoveling in heaping spoonfuls of oatmeal and guzzled down a bottle of orange juice. I crunched on large bites from a juicy apple and scooped in forkfuls of powdered eggs.

The meal had barely numbed the sharp pains and nausea and I was still starving. I asked for more. My father told me there would be no more until morning but that he would take me on a tour of the rest of the shelter if I liked. I screamed in protest as he walked out of the room.

That night I felt more pain than I had ever experienced before. It was also the first night that I heard the earth tremble. Everything above rumbled, shaking dust from the walls of my room and cutting off the light from the lamp. For hours, faint exploding sounds of shattering glass, bending steel, and crumbling brick echoed from above. Then everything went dark. After what seemed like half a day or more, I heard the loud hum of generators reverberating through the walls and the lamp in my room sputtered back to life.

Despite the urge to dismiss the tremors as a simple product of plate tectonics, I told myself I knew better. My mother was dead—the world was on fire, just as my father had said. The rest of the night our shelter shook under the preceding blasts, each explosion solidifying the
notion that there would be no going back.

The next day was uneventful and I had trouble deciding which was worse: the excruciating hunger, or the boredom of being stranded on a bed with nothing to do. My father came in three times that day with a tray loaded with food, mostly healthy stuff I hadn’t eaten in a long time. Every meal was moderately portioned, a picture perfect display of the food pyramid. There were so many things I wanted to scream at him, so many things I wanted to do to him, but I didn’t say anything because the fear of him not returning with sustenance overpowered my hatred for him, and I didn’t pound him because I couldn’t even take a dump on my own, let alone stand up and throw a punch.

I woke the following morning from an uneasy sleep. It had been three days at least since my mother had changed my colostomy bag and catheter. I had to replace it soon or I’d be lying above a puddle of my own piss and feces. When my father came in that morning I had no choice but to ask him. I despised the thought of having to ask him for anything, especially when it dealt with the removal of my own fecal matter. I secretly hoped that he would refuse, that he would get up in my face screaming at me, telling me what a tub of lard I was. But to my dismay, nothing like that happened. When I asked him he nodded, handed me my tray, and walked out of the room. A few minutes later he returned with fresh bags, and despite a few spillage scares and a couple uncomfortable
pokes, I was able to walk him through the process in a matter of minutes. I never asked him where he got the bags from, how he knew, or even why he had thought to buy them; mainly because I enjoyed the thought that perhaps long ago, before the world had turned on its head, he had thought of me.

I passed through the next few weeks never sleeping, never fully awake. My hunger was never completely satisfied, but slowly the aches and pains and stars of hunger twirling in my eyes dimmed and then faded away altogether. The third or fourth day after the first blast all television reception had ceased, and so each night I was left alone with only my gurgling pangs of hunger to break the silence. One night, after weeks of monotony, my father carried in something extra along with the usual cafeteria meal. He balanced the tray on one shoulder and with the other he carried a small radio. I stuffed my rations and watched him tinker with knobs, dials, and switches, searching for order and reason in a sea of chaotic static.

Crunches and high-pitched frequencies were the only sounds wailing through the speakers. Giving up in frustration, he turned down the volume knob, but not far enough to click off the power. Soon after he left the room, I had to force myself to stifle a small sentiment of gratitude toward him for trying.

Day after day my father made his punctual deliveries and periodic waste removals like clockwork, and gradually the groans from above lessened and then faded al-
together. The television and radio remained devoid of all signs of life, but we never shut them off, maintaining the hope that eventually someone would appear on the other end. I had long since refrained from any sort of verbal abuse toward my father; when you're almost twenty and someone is still changing your diapers and feeding you, by default you sort of have to respect them. Besides, my father's rigorous daily diet was paying off. Some weight had started to come off, and I was finally able to fully extend my arms above my head for prolonged periods of time.

We might have carried on our silent routine forever, if something hadn't interfered. One evening as my father handed me my final meal of the day, the faint crackling of static suddenly grinded from the radio. Fluctuating tones undulated in the static and my father rushed over to tune in the signal. By adjusting a few knobs he was able to hone in on a faint buzz separate and distinct from the static. Gradually a haunting whine of a violin emerged from the discordant sound. A few more slight calibrations increased the clarity and brought the melody into focus. The two of us rested in awe, listening to a mournful elegy pushed and pulled across steel strings. Every note zipped and wailed like an entire chorus of bees humming in perfect pitch. Sharp crescendos and drastic falls sliding into wide, sad moans encompassed us, rendering both of us motionless on a web of sound. It was during this moment that I saw something utterly
foreign to me: a glinting tear trickling down my father's cheek. The crackling and crunching started up again and soon choked out the violin in a cacophony of static.

Why this single token of emotion suddenly sprouted sympathy for my father remains unclear to me. But as he made for the door that night, I let go of the intense desire to hurt him—and asked him to show me the rest of the shelter.

He stood in the doorway for a long time. I desperately wanted out of my skin so that I could walk over to him and watch his face process my request. After some time, he returned and pushed me out of the room.

He wheeled me through the doorway and down the circular white corridor. The wheels squeaked as we made our way down the hall past scores of doors on both sides. An enormous steel door capped off the end of the hallway. My father swiped his plastic key card through a slot on the right and it slid open. We entered as more pipelines of fluorescent tubes hummed on above, revealing one of the most enormous spaces I had ever seen.

Industrial steel shelving units at least seventy feet high were staggered for hundreds of yards in all directions, aligned with the precision of a highly disciplined military platoon. Carefully measured pathways had been placed in perfect symmetry to provide access to the walls of boxes stored on the shelves.

As he wheeled me down a row, I marveled at the sight; the amount of supplies contained in this space must
have rivaled those of a small country. Boxes of emergency crackers and biscuits; stacked jars of preserves, potatoes, tuna, salmon, and cabbage; barrels of flour, sugar, and salt; plastic bags packed with space blankets and ponchos; palettes of distilled water piled neatly on the shelves. We continued past an entire quadrant that had been sectioned off as a library, ladders the height of half a football field propped up against frames crammed with books, magazines, newspapers, movies, and music. Further on I saw the largest gun rack I had ever seen, everything from hand grenades to automatic shotguns, Desert Eagles to trip mines perched on large metal hooks on the wall. There was an enormous kitchen and meat freezer. A spacious home theater. A utility wall displaying chainsaws and rakes, power drills and hammers, shovels and ice picks. He showed me the decontamination space full of waste management suits, disinfectant sprays, and gas masks. There was a pharmacy and an operating table. An extensive exercise facility complete with weights, treadmills, and a basketball and racquetball court.

My father moved me through the tour in silence, gazing along with me at the mass of supplies he had gathered. When he had shown me the entire shelter, he wheeled me back to my room and left me alone again without a word.

I was awakened the following morning by the sound of my father bringing me my breakfast. All the usual types of foods were there: powdered eggs, dried berries,
a glass of apple juice from concentrate, a couple slices of turkey bacon, and this morning: a chocolate cupcake with a small flaming candle protruding from the center. My father cleared his throat and shuffled his feet.

"Happy Birthday, son."

A multitude of emotions overtook my powers of speech. Just as he was about to close the door I spoke.

"Thank you."

He turned around.

"It's nothing. I got more of the things than I know what to do with." He closed the door behind him.

That afternoon I made my first successful attempt at raising my legs a few inches into the air.

The following morning my father came in to make his customary rounds of changing my bags. While I started in on my breakfast, he stooped over to make the switch. I heard him make a loud groan and turned to see him clutch his shoulder and crumple to the ground. He went rigid and his face wrinkled into a grimace as he struggled to breathe through clenched teeth. I called out to him, asking him if he was all right. His face started to flush purple. He tried to pry himself up off the floor by using the counter as an anchor, but instead stumbled backwards onto the floor, his arm flailing across the counter as he went down, sliding the contents of my breakfast tray across the room.

He slowly writhed, flat on his back, the hand over his heart rising with irregular, shallow breaths. I desperately
tried to move myself toward him, swinging my arms back and forth to build momentum that would take me in his direction. When I was close enough, I stretched out my arm and grabbed hold of his hand. Short, stifled breaths sputtered out of him and he mumbled and whispered words I couldn’t hear. I asked him what I could do and he whispered for me to leave him be. The intervals between breaths lengthened and he closed his eyelids to blink away the tears building up in his eyes. He gripped my hand tightly and looked directly at me for the first time.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. He sucked in another few gulps of air, exhaled them all with a final breath—and then silence.

I felt his withered hand go limp and stared at his still body. The purple in his face dissipated and the glossy trails of tears streaming from the corner of his eyes dried. I started sobbing. It was soft at first, but with each heave of my chest the sobs became more violent, until I was screaming as loud as I could and smashing my fist through sheetrock walls. The frustration of being trapped inside a useless body tortured me, like a starving pit bull staring at food just out of its reach.

I lamented for hours until I fell asleep, like a toddler wailing in a crib until it’s fuel of tears and sobs has been expended. The next morning, my father’s stiff corpse haunted me until I could no longer stand it. I grabbed onto his body and pulled the remote he always carried with him from the chest pocket of his shirt. It took me a
couple of hours to figure out how to unlock the manual override to my bed, but when I did, I left the room and locked my father inside.

For the next few days I spent hours wandering the shelter, abstaining from food or drink of any kind. After twenty-four hours with nothing to eat or drink, I started fading in and out of consciousness. In between the blackouts I rolled around the mansion sobbing, hollering, cursing like a madman. On the third day I could no longer fight back the hunger and I ate three entire boxes of Twinkies I found in the kitchen and guzzled an entire gallon of distilled water over the course of a few hours. Then I vomited it all back up.

The next few weeks are still rather hazy for me. Pendulum swings from fasting to bingeing. Blackouts. Vomiting. Weeping. Night terrors. I do remember being so frustrated once that I drove my bed repeatedly into the gun rack in the storage warehouse, using myself as a battering ram to knock a weapon loose from the towering shelf. On one particularly violent slam, a 9-mm double-action tumbled off the shelf onto the floor. I found a couple of nearby broomsticks and used them like a pair of chopsticks to pick up the weapon. Iron tingled on my taste buds as I wrapped my mouth around the barrel. I pulled the hammer back and squeezed the trigger. A hollow click made me blink and I tried again a little less reluctantly with the same result. I slid out an empty clip and looked back up at the shelf. All the ammo was stacked.
in large crates another thirty feet up from where the gun had been dislodged from the shelf. I hurled the useless pistol high into the air and listened to the clanks echo through the labyrinth of shelves.

A number of similarly ineffective suicide attempts ensued over the weeks that followed. The toaster I snatched from the kitchen and wheeled into the shower gave me a pounding headache and left a nasty burn on my stomach. I swallowed an entire bottle of pills I found in an emergency medical kit that turned out to be nothing but vitamins. Slitting my wrists occurred to me almost daily, but I couldn't get over the blade. And every time I contemplated hanging myself, some little voice would laugh hysterically and remind me that even if I could find a length of rope within my short reach, there would be no rope on earth that would hold up my fat ass long enough to strangle me.

Then without even realizing it, this tumult of trauma and sadness covering the gamut of negative emotion slowly subsided, and I leveled out. I started eating the meals exactly the way my father had prepared them. I perused the lowest shelves of the storage room library, straining to reach a copy of *Les Miserables*, *Catch 22*, or a collection of *Calvin and Hobbes*. Every day I carried films to the theater and laughed at Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Jerry Lewis. Audrey Hepburn hypnotized me. I fell asleep to Chopin, Berlioz, and Beethoven.

I lost weight. And then some more. I tried to stand up
and fell down—hard. The next day I walked a hundred or so feet, using the lowest shelf as a handrail. In a month I took my first unaided steps in over two years. I found a room full of instruments and took up guitar. I fired up the treadmill and started hefting weights. I used the toilet by myself.

In one single year I lived my life more fully in a hole in the earth than all of my years on the surface combined. The shelter became the greatest well my father ever drilled, his last and greatest gift to me. It rebuilt my body and gave me back my soul. Yet despite my lifted spirits and improved health, the thought of my dead father locked away in a room ate away at me. I knew that no measure of peace would ever come to me so long as his rotting corpse remained in that room.

Finally, after long deliberation, I decided to do something about it; I would return him to the surface for a proper burial. I spent the next few days in the decontamination room reading manuals on how to use the gas masks and rubber contamination suits hanging on the wall. Once I felt comfortable, I suited up, grabbed a few tarpaulins and coils of rope, and headed for my father's makeshift tomb. Although I doubted the presence of some all-powerful being, I found myself facing the door to the room, offering up a silent prayer that I would be able to handle what awaited me on the other side.

I was grateful for the absence of smell created by the mask as I wrapped up his decomposing remains in the tarps. I tied the bundle off at both ends as quickly as pos-
sible and dragged it into the hallway. I brought back my old bed to use one last time. After placing the bundle on the mattress, I used it to ferry the body down the long hallway toward the platform that so long ago had lowered the two of us down to this place. Before heading to the surface, I went back to the warehouse for a shotgun and fifty shells, a long field knife, a shovel, and strapped on a flamethrower just for kicks.

As the platform jerked into motion, I imagined what the surface would look like after four years. The thick plate above groaned out of hibernation and as the airlock hissed open, I saw a sliver of gray. The platform continued to rise and the steel ceiling retracted further. I felt a chill and then stared at snowflakes tumbling onto my goggles. The platform lurched to a stop and I looked at the place previously known as our ballroom.

Windswept snow and ash powdered piles of rubble. Dunes of snow shifted under a gray sky. The sun hung on the horizon like a dying light bulb suspended behind a thick sheet of frosty glass. All around a desert of white and gray covered everything.

I tugged the bed off the platform and dragged it over thirty or forty feet of charred lumber, brick, and slush to where I thought our front yard used to be. I shoved the spade of the shovel into a dry pile of snow. The first few shovelfuls were easy enough, but when I thrust down again, the blade of my shovel ricocheted from the frozen soil with a dull ringing sound. Gusts of frigid wind
bit through the plastic suit as I stabbed the soil in futility. Who would have ever believed me if I had told them that in the near future they'd be unable to break soil in Houston in June? Probably as many as believed my father, I suppose.

I dropped the shovel, unwrapped the tarps, and pulled them away from the body and the bed. I moved all the supplies a safe distance away. Then pulling the nozzle of the flamethrower from the holster on my hip, I gripped it with both hands and pulled the trigger. A stream of orange spewed from the barrel and drenched the target in flames. Wet snowflakes sizzled and popped in the blaze and sounds of melting plastic shrieked in the heat. I scorched my father and bed down to a pile of charred metal, ash, and embers that scattered with the breeze, peppering nearby snowdrifts with flecks of black, orange, and gray.

That night I sanitized my old room and scrubbed the stains from the floor as best as I could. Just as I was about to lock up the room forever, I noticed the old radio still sitting on the shelf. The thing was still turned on.

It was that night that I made my first broadcast. Since then I have told my story daily for the past eighteen months. I have also made numerous trips to the surface, searching for any signs of life. Sometimes I wander the rubble-laden wasteland for miles, imagining what I would do if I ever found another living human being. I've spent countless hours planning the first things I would
say to them. But lately I've been thinking that initially it might be best not to say anything at all, just stand at a distance and wait. Then when they smile I will tell them that I have food, shelter, and supplies for thousands—and with a friendly wave I will beckon for them to join me.