

Of Men and Martians War of the Worlds 2.0

By C.J. McKee

Astronomy has always been of interest to me – but now I wish I had paid better attention to how close Mars came to Earth nearly two days ago. They called it the War of the Worlds on the news. It wasn't a war – it was a slaughter. Genocide.

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Living in the city, you never see the stars in the same way. That is to say, you never really see the stars except for a few, prominent points of light that pierce through the smog filled layer like a needle searching for a vein.

I loved the moon, even when it was black as the night. I always knew it was still there. Just as I knew the other planets dotted the sky and spun around the sun in their own time. Some of them *wobbled*, for lack of a better term. That's why Mars came so close to the Earth every fifteen years or so. Did you know Mars was named of the Roman God of War? That sense of irony bit into the laceration on my lip. Mars. Ouch.

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The day started and ended as any other. Numerous tasks completed or left to stew during the weekend, preparations for Halloween parties, and the never ending quest for the perfect costume. I settled for an Egyptian Pharaoh. Original, I know.

My girlfriend protested. She didn't want to dress as Cleopatra, or Isis, or something so *common* as she put it. As if. So she chose a hot dog. With mayo. I told her to at least put relish on her. She told me that mayonnaise was her choice on a hot dog. Mayo on dog it is.

Well, ok, it was still too early in the relationship to call her my *girlfriend*, but we had been dating for nearly a month. Nothing exclusive...yet. And I didn't think it would be appropriate to suggest I dress as a mouth...yet.

This whole summer had been long and hot, and tonight was no different. I dreaded placing a hot polyester costume over my sensitive skin. Hot weather and I have never been bedfellows – ah the joys of Southern California. Some people dig it, I hated it. Nonetheless, I pulled the costume on for a fit and placed the

Pharaoh hat on my head. It looks odd with my short, black hair. I know there is another term for it, but a hat is a hat. It fits. Great. Now back to my jeans and t-shirt and off to work. Though I thought the costume fit nicely in all the right places with my build, it's not really me.

Friday. Finally. The only F-word that is socially acceptable and relished by all. I listen to talk radio as I drive through congested Southern California and feel like ripping the heart out of every driver who cuts me off for no reason. I settle for a honk and a sigh. Loud voices on the radio bellow out jokes that are not funny and news reports that could put an anchorman to sleep. I catch a few reports about strange weather and glance towards the horizon at dark clouds boiling in the north.

Once again, I win the battle of hunks of metal on wheels. Driven errantly by people who have a desperate desire to put on make-up or pay more attention to the person on the other end of the cell phone than that of the road. I walk the steps and up to the second floor leading to my office.

I open my e-mail, and there it is; sixty-five new messages from those who deem the weekend as their own personal touch to the work load. I begin with a pot of coffee.

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Three hours later, it's time for a cigarette. That old nasty habit that turns non-smokers into scowling, primitives who watch you with accusing eyes. To me, it is a breath of fresh air that contrasts the cold, oppressing light of the office, and the regurgitated air that spews from the air conditioning system through filters that haven't been changed in two years.

As I took a drag, another flash of light detracts my attention from the smoldering cherry on the end of my coffin nail. I jerk my head to the west and see a falling star. Wait. During the day? I have heard that was possible, but not here. I can barely see them at night. It's big too.

I usually don't get spooked by anything, least of all a falling star. A meteorite that burns up in the atmosphere, harmless to us and fun for the kids to make a wish upon.

This one doesn't burn up. It gets larger. Brighter. A long, smoky trail follows behind it. The sunlight accents the edges of the trail. I have to block the near-noon day sun with my hand as it rises over my head. With the sun out of my eyes I can see them. Two? By my guess they're about five miles apart. Two?

I grab my cell phone and call. Anyone. I can't be the only one seeing this.

Two co-workers come out with the pained look of one who hasn't eaten for nearly an entire day. Although I know coming between an employee and their thirty minute reprieve and feeding time is risky, I have to.

"Julie, Dave, can you see this?" I swing my arm and point at the sky.

They looked up and narrowed their eyes. I couldn't tell if it was from the sun or they just became irritated. Julie shades her eyes and her mouth drops open, revealing her bright, white teeth and a stick of gum stuck to her molar.

"Cool!" She says.

"Are those planes Jason?" Dave asks, looking at me rather than the fireballs.

"You're kiddin', right?" He just stares at me longer. "They're meteors."

Dave's eyes widen a little. I think I see the brain cells firing again. He looks up and he mouths an expletive.

"Exactly." I reply.

We stand watching for a long minute as they travel further along the dark blue contrast of the sky. My neck protests and I drop my gaze at Julie.

"Make a wish?" I say.

She purses her lips and rolls her eyes at me.

I shrug and glance around the parking lot. Twenty more people have gathered while we watched the fireballs streak through the sky. I see two more co-workers and others from neighboring offices.

"Has anyone heard about meteor showers on the news?" I asked no one in particular.

In between shakes of heads and shrugging shoulders that made the small crowd look like the ripples of water on a pond, one voice breaks through.

"Maybe they're planes?"

Dave gives me a smirk.

"On fire?" A woman adds to the stream of mumbles.

I hadn't thought about that. My cigarette is out and I barely got one drag. So, I light another.

Thunder rumbles across the sky.

In Southern California, rain or storms makes people's brains switch off and duck for cover. So it was with the crowd who seemed to run from the rain that hasn't even arrived.

I realized as I look back into the sky, I can no longer see the fireballs. Huh. Guess they burned up in the atmosphere after all. With one last drag and a shrug, I head back to my desk.

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Here it is, Friday night traffic. More foreboding than facing shoppers on Christmas eve. And I get to enjoy this every day! Something catches my eye. Something flashing. Not the endless sea of brake lights before me, but something in the sky.

Another fireball. No, this time there are three. And more thunder.

I roll the window down and leave a good two car length ahead of me so I can glance up at the sky in relative safety. Someone jumps into that sacred space ahead of me. Great.

The fireballs are brighter in the early evening sky. Or are they actually closer? I can see the details of the ball – or meteor. Dots of glowing fire emanates from the pores like a freshly popped zit – red and irritated. The smoke trail is less prominent and more like the dusty, rolling cloud that forms across the city from a fire on the ground. Flames dance behind it as if goading it to move faster. The closest one zips overhead and disappears behind the hills ahead of me.

Thunder.

The idiot in front of me slams on his brakes and actually gets out of his car. What the hell? I lean on my horn, not so much because of his actions, but because of the adrenaline that I am now quite aware of. The hair on the back of my head prickles along my neckline. Something is not right.

I turn the radio on and flip through a dozen channels. Each one relates news about the fireballs in the sky. Cities across the nation are reporting the same thing. Fireballs; three at a time; thunder.

I even catch a reference to Hawaii. London. Paris.

Now driving on the shoulder is of course, illegal. But I am sure a couple of fireballs are more interesting to the highway patrol than some knucklehead driving down the littered side of the road at high speed.

I grab my cell phone and begin to dial. Great. No bars. Stupid cell phone service.

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I finally make it home. Barely. The freeways are so jammed I had to take side streets the rest of the way. Radio and television reports are freaking everyone out, so in a panic, people are leaving town. I just wanted to get home.

Nearly everyone who lives in the cul-de-sac stood on the street and watched the sky. I gave up counting how many fireballs littered the evening with orange and yellow flames.

Matt Sanders, the older man who lives alone in the house next to me runs over to present his theories on the fireballs.

“Didja see this?” He asks with a grin. One that creases the age on his face but also makes him light up like a kid on his birthday getting the present he’s always wanted. “In all my days, I have never seen them this bright.”

“I know. But, it’s bound to happen eventually.” I reply. He looks at me with a furrowed brow and his smile fades a little. “I mean with all the asteroids flying through space and all.” His smile returns.

“Oh yeah!” He chuckles and gestures. “But we got nothin’ to worry. I’m sure the government will figure this out.”

Matt still believed the government took care of vets and the elderly as well as they did the rest of the world. Let him have it. He’s probably right. America’s good for crisis situations.

“Well, I’m gonna grab something to eat. See you later.” I said.

“Come back out soon, or you’re gonna miss this.” Matt offers.

I nod and pull into my driveway.

Once I yank a Marie Calendar's frozen dinner free from its cold prison and slide into the microwave for more punishment, I make my way over to the television.

Dammit. No wonder everyone is outside watching another show. No cable. I flick the remote onto the couch and turn towards the window.

Their voices are loud and agitated. I glance between the slits of the blinds in the front window. The group has huddled closer together and their fingers point into the air like stalks of wheat listing in the wind.

The ground shakes with a sudden jolt. A quake. Weird quake. Not the rolling type, but a jerk. Like God grabbed the ground beneath me and gave it a quick yank.

Yellow light flickers across my face as it bleeds between the partly open blinds. People scream and feet slap the black pavement in the cul-de-sac. A pounding on the door mimics the beeping on the microwave timer. Do I eat or answer the door?

## **Part Two**

It was Matt. His eyes were as wide as half-dollars.

"Jason, ya gotta come out here and see this!" He didn't wait for a response. Just ran into the street.

I walked out and noticed all those who lived on Acorn street now filled the cul-de-sac.

They stared at the hills east of my house. Normally the hills displayed row after row of green trees and brush. Now it glowed with an ominous light that threatened our homes.

Fire stabbed at the sky and embers danced in the air. Ash fell all around us. The fire was so close I could hear the crackle as each leaf died under its power and the brush wilted from the heat and flames licked at them with a growing hunger.

"Great. Someone tossed another cigarette into the bushes again, eh?" I said rather bemused.

"No, one of them meteors hit the hill on the other side. See?" My other neighbor, Ruthie, pointed.

I stood on my toes and followed her gesture. I could only see the fire.

“Where?” I asked.

“Up there. You can’t see it, it disappeared. There, behind that hill.” She said flinging her arm in the direction as if she had a bug on her hand.

“Somebody should do something.” Her husband, Daniel said.

I rolled my eyes and sat back on my heels. I knew that most of the people around me wouldn’t set one foot up there unless their lives depended on it. I decided to be the one who made the first move.

“Ok, so who wants to go check this out?” I said to the crowd.

Three teenagers and four adults walked up and responded their willingness. I nodded and directed them to gather as many tools, gallons of water, and whatever else they could bring. I ran into the house, grabbed my flashlight, digital camera, and the new Sparkletts bottle sitting on the floor.

Not being much of a gardener, I only had one tool – a shovel. Hardly used. Still had the sticker on it from the day I bought it. But now it would be a virgin no longer.

I walked into the garage and grabbed a pump canister; the type you fill with liquid fertilizer or anti-bug juice and spray all over the yard. I hastily poured the water into the canister, spilling about a third of it all over the concrete floor. It wouldn’t have all fit in the canister anyway.

I tossed everything into my car and backed out. The others had already pulled into the road and sat waiting. I waved at them as I sped out of the cul-de-sac and we were on our way.

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After driving for nearly twenty minutes, we saw it. On the side of the hill sitting where Ruthie said it had landed.

We didn’t have to hike very far from the road, as the meteor sat only about a hundred feet or so from the main turn. The fires smoldered nearby and only a few trees immediately around it had flames popping and snapping along their branches.

We brought our cars to the edge and gathered our tools. Harmon, the man who lived at the end of the street, dragged something heavy off the back of his truck. Two teenagers, Ashley and her brother Bryce, ran over to assist.

Matt Sanders surprised me from behind. I didn't expect him to be up for this little adventure.

"What have ya got there?" He said.

"I have a canister of water that you can pump by hand, and this shovel. That's about it." I said almost apologizing.

"That'll do." He said and grabbed the canister. For an old guy he sure had a strong back.

I grabbed the shovel and slung the camera over my neck.

Two more people showed up in trucks. In the distance I could hear sirens. I ran over to Harmon and helped him gather the items in his truck. What's that?

"Is that a generator?" I asked.

Harmon smiled and brushed the salt and pepper hair from his forehead. "Sure is!" He easily stood taller than me and had the muscles of one who worked in construction all his life. I didn't argue about the need for a generator.

All four of us took hold and heaved it out of the truck.

He glanced at my shovel and smiled again. "Not much of a landscaper, huh?"

I shrugged and shook my head. He waved it off and grabbed two rakes, a shovel, and directed the teenagers to grab the sacks of sand lying carelessly in the bed. They slumped their shoulders and dragged the sacks out with a scrape.

"Hey, careful with that. You'll scratch the bed of my truck!" Harmon said.

Bryce hefted the sack over his thin shoulders. His appearance was that of a kid who never did hard labor – only played hard on video games. Ashley seemed more concerned about getting dirty or ruining her nails. She kept looking at them over and over again while she carried the sack.

"My brother's kids." Harmon said, nodding in their direction. "They're staying with me for the weekend while their parents are in the Bahamas."

I nodded and took the rakes and shovels from him.

By the time we gathered our tools and shuffled down the shallow grade towards our quarry – a band of misfits looking to start a new town, the fire department screamed around the bend, nearly squashing Harmon's truck in the process.

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We pretended not to hear and approached the meteor.

It was big. Really big. Even buried in the soil, sitting in a shallow crater, it stood much taller than I. The heat that radiated from it burned my face. I felt it go flush and I began to sweat. I ignored the heat and moved closer.

Other than glowing pockets of heat and a thick, dark brown, crusty exterior, it appeared pretty smooth. It had the appearance of stone, but almost looked fake. Kinda like one of those cheap movie sets you see on the SciFi channel. It was as long as a large mobile home, probably larger. Definitely wider. I could swear I heard a soft hum.

Before doing anything else I grabbed the camera and snapped a few pictures. On the fourth I saw someone standing within the frame, very close to the meteor.

"Harmon, what are you doing?" I said putting down the camera.

He lifted his shovel in the air and smiled his toothy grin again. "Going to get a souvenir!"

"It might not be safe. What about radiation and all that?" I said, trying to sound knowledgeable about meteors.

He shrugged, cocked the shovel and wacked the side of it as hard as his broad shoulders would allow. A metal on metal bang echoed throughout the hills. Harmon reeled and stumbled backwards. He looked up at me with arched brows, rose the shovel again and hit it harder. Again the metal twang, this time sparks exploded from the impact point. Harmon dropped the shovel, ripped off his shirt and stumbled up the side of the crater.

"Dammit, that thing is solid." He said shaking his hands. "It feels like it's made of metal. *Solid* metal." He wiped his face with his shirt.

"Aren't meteors made from mostly iron?" I said.

Harmon shook his head. "Don't know. Even so, if it was iron, why didn't it make a bigger hole?"

I stepped back and glanced around the small valley between the hills and made out the grades and part of the crater. The only part of the crater that was very deep was where we stood. It looked as if it stopped short of the ground, and then plowed into it at a slower rate than its original speed.

I exhaled between my lips and wiped my face with my hands. It felt like I had a sunburn, the kind you get at the beach after being there all day during the summertime. I looked back at Harmon whose smile had faded, replaced by the contorted face of one who just heard he was being shipped off to war.

“What?” I said.

“You might be right. Radiation.”

Just then several firemen walked up with a hose and two fire extinguishers. They ordered us to leave the area. I turned just in time to snap one more picture as another would-be photographer stepped in front of me. I side-stepped, snapped another photo with Ashley and Bryce standing alongside a few others who had joined us. A fireman tapped my shoulder and motioned towards the road. I nodded and shook my camera in the air with a grin. He pursed his lips and walked towards the crater’s edge.

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For the next three hours we watched the firemen spray the landscape with a thick layer of water and some kind of foamy substance. Steam turned the air into a fog and the fire hissed and complained in response.

I smelled burning flesh. My eyes darted about but I could barely see anyone else.

“Hardly see that in a lifetime.”

I jumped and spun around. Harmon was grinning again and nodded towards the meteor.

“Yeah,” was all I could muster.

“Firemen are doing a great job putting the fires out. Look at the meteor, it’s almost cool enough to touch.”

I narrowed my eyes and waved my arms in a half attempt to part the sea of steam before me. The meteor no longer glowed as intense as when we first arrived.

"I think I will pass on caressing the meteor just yet," I retorted.

Harmon chuckled and clapped me on the shoulder. He walked back to his truck and I could hear his diesel engine grumble to life. Rocks and dirt sprayed under his retreating tires and suddenly everything went very quiet.

For the next five minutes, the firemen stood surveying the land and the meteor. The steam-fog dissipated and I could see the meteor in more detail. I decided it was safe for me to approach.

I received a dirty look from one of the fireman.

Screw it, I'm tired. And hungry.

I left the scene and decided to wait until daylight for a better look.

Part Three

Six hours. That's not enough sleep for me. I feel like I am rising from the grave when I hear three sirens scream down the main street behind my house.

Dozens of cars honking and revving their engines mix with the shouts and calls from dozens of people competing for time in the street.

I groan, grab the pillow laying next to me and smash it against my face. I then give the world a one fingered salute.

Dammit, this is Saturday, what the hell?

Then it all comes back to me. The meteor. Did a fire start again? Has the entire country come out to see this thing now? The media is probably there. Twenty people right now are dancing and waving behind the reporter for a desperate chance to be seen on the six o'clock news.

I jump when my clock radio blares at me. It's too early to listen to Van Halen. I slam my hand on the *off* switch and rollover.

Too late. My mind is racing now. Guess I better start the coffee and my day. I *am* curious about that meteor. Its gotta be cooled down enough now to get close. I decide to go and renew my interest in a rock from space.

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One stale donut and a thermos full of coffee later, my tires are crunching over the dirt road leading back into the hills.

Dozens or more people are swarming down the road and across the field. I find it difficult to get around the knuckleheads that don't have the good sense to clear the road when a piece of two ton metal is rolling behind them.

Then of course I see what has them captivated enough to ignore my honks.

Five fire trucks sit about a hundred feet or so from the meteor. Its crusted skin reflected the sun without actually shining. It now looks more gray than brown, like it was last night. Smoke trails drift in the morning air from its surface and the surrounding crater. I can't see any glowing ash or smoldering heat from the meteor anymore. Hard to tell in the daylight.

I stop the car as close as the congested traffic allows and walk straight towards the meteor. I can't take my eyes off it. The humming sound still permeates the air and I can feel it in my stomach. I untangle the shoulder strap, heft my camera, and snap twenty pictures right away. The crowd thickens and I can't get a clear shot. I notice that where one of the hills stops at the valley, there are very few people. So I move in that direction to get a better view.

With each step, the humming deepens. I feel it in my joints now. Some of the people are holding their ears, while others are holding their stomachs. One woman turns suddenly and retches. A young girl walks over to her and comforts her. I know how she feels, the sound is shaking the donut and coffee sticking to my ribs. I feel like I am going to puke.

I ignore the churning in my stomach and stagger towards the meteor. No one else had dared to get this close. All I hear is the humming. The voices, cars, and police radios are drowned out by the sound. I snap a few more pictures.

The humming stops.

No one speaks. A hush. Even the police radios are silent.

The meteor moves.

No, an *end* of the meteor is moving. The crust is flaking off the end facing the crowd. What the hell? Is it rotating? It is! As it turns faster in a counter-clockwise movement, I can see silver metal glistening in the early morning sun from between the crack.

It drops off with a ringing thud.

The crust explodes from the meteor and reveals a shiny metal, roughly cylindrical surface. This is surreal. I feel like I should wake up. But I don't.

The cylinder opens. Rather, the sides simply slip away. What are those? They look like three, silverish, round spheres. Is that a light on the front of them? The surface actually looks like one of those geodesic domes or something. It's not perfectly smooth. I can see what looks like posts or something.

The humming starts again. This time I nearly retch. I run back up the hill, stumbling over rocks and reeling from tall bushes that slap my face. I cover a lot of ground but the humming is still there, still strong. I feel something jab me in the back and I spin around.

I didn't think I had made it as far as the fire trucks, but one of the pumps sticking out of its side had struck me as I backed into it. Two fireman stand nearby looking pale and wide-eyed. I turn back to the meteor, or cylinder, whatever it is, and widen my own eyes.

A sickly purple mist dances around the cylinder and over the spheres. It creeps over the dirt of the crater like a snake moving in on its prey. A whirring sound, the only way I can describe it at this point, comes from the first sphere. It rocks back and forth. The thing that looked like a light – lights up. It's bright. The sphere rocks back and forth.

Then, the sphere lifts about four feet above the cylinder.

#### **Part 4**

I don't think people were really paying attention. The metallic *clunk* only served to peak their curiosity more, and the instinct to get a closer look kicked in.

The adrenaline rush. That strange little organ inside your body that pumps you full of chemicals and make you want to run or fight. Well maybe there is actually two of them, I can't remember. All I know is people screamed and ran. And others moved in to get a better view. They were the first to go.

An arm, or something that resembled more like a cobra, slithered into the air between the sphere and the crowd. A beam of intense, orange, and yellowish gold streamed from the glassy looking lens at the end and sprayed everyone standing within twenty yards. Their bodies turned to an ash gray before exploding into mere dust. The silt from their bodies filled the air and I began to choke. I reached behind me to grab hold of something, anything.

The fire truck. It would protect me, right?

Another beam from the cobra spit across the field and took out another dozen or so people. Then, a car blew up.

I decided the fire truck wasn't the answer.

The beam arced overhead and fried several people standing on the small hill behind me. I felt a heat so intense it singed the hair on my head. I watched the beam carve a ditch into the ground near the crater and the sphere shifted again.

Within seconds the sphere rose straight into the air. Long metallic tubes unfolded and snaked out toward the crater. It seemed unsteady at first. It rocked back and forth like a three-legged spider trying to walk across its web. First one leg, then the second supported by a third. It reached its full height.

This thing had to stand more than forty feet high. No, make that fifty. The sphere was the size of an RV. Its eye, the front light, was so bright I couldn't look directly at it.

The ground shook. A quake? Now? Friggin' California. No, it was too quick. It was walking! The leg on the left lifted into the air and planted itself firmly into the ground about sixty feet in front of the crater. The ground shook again. Now the humming started. It was different. Not as bone shattering as the one I felt earlier. This one sounded like...a machine. I can't describe it. It was as if this thing was running on a steam engine or something.

Something *like* steam, but thick, and dark purple streamed from the bottom of the sphere like it farted and belched with pleasure at its first meal. Another leg reached out and jammed into the dirt not more than twenty feet away. I realized I wasn't running. Everyone else was. Only about two dozen people ran up the hills and struggled to get the keys into their ignitions.

The machine saw them. As each car started, the heat beam lashed out in protest. One by one, a car exploded into mere shards of metal. Those who weren't killed in the explosions were either vaporized into ash, or shredded by shrapnel.

All in all, about three people made it into the trees at the top of the hill. And then there was me.

I don't know, maybe I remained unnoticed standing practically inside the fire truck. The machine thumped its way towards the hills where it saw the rest of the people run. I didn't care at that point. Maybe they'll make it though. At least the machine isn't after me.

I turned and looked back at the cylinder. Two more of those things rose up into the darkening sky. Was it night already? I doubt the clouds that formed overhead were rain clouds. Rain clouds aren't purple. I got a whiff of the purple mist floating above my head. The smell made me retch. I wiped my mouth and pulled my shirt over my face. I could still smell it, but it helped.

I stumbled around to the other side of the fire truck. The two other machines hadn't seen me either. Instead, the spheres rotated on their legs and they moved towards the south. No, they moved southwest. They went the same way the other machine did, but spread out.

The beams from their long arms flashed in the air. I heard people screaming in the distance. Then, just as quickly, silenced. I watched the "head" of the machines bob up and down near the hills. They stood well above the trees. Their incessant humming buzzed in my ears.

Finally, the purple mist dissipated. I lowered my shirt and sniffed the air, carefully. It still smelled but it didn't choke me. I spat on the ground and blew snot and whatever else was in my nose onto the dry soil at my feet.

The ground shook with each step the machines took. I finally felt the urge to flee kick in and I ran towards my car. Where *is* my car? I looked up and down the road but my car was no where in sight. Stolen! I squeezed my pants pocket and my keys were still there, stabbing me in the leg as if to mock me. Those machines vaporized my car. Shit!

I glanced back at the fire truck. Of course I had no idea how to drive one, but, it's better than nothing.

I climbed into the cab and saw a fireman sitting there. I reached over to tell him to drive but he looked so pale. He looked almost ashen. Then I realized why when his body turned to powder and covered the seat in a thick layer. I coughed when his ashes flew into my mouth as I gasped. The urge to retch came back. I jumped down from the cab and saw a water bottle sitting on the ground. I grabbed it, gargled the dead man's ash from my throat and spit. Wanting to make sure it was completely gone, I dumped the rest onto my head. Gray, muddy liquid dribbled down my face and clothes. All those people. They were dead. Their ashes were all over me.

I squeezed my eyes tight and climbed into the driver's side of the fire truck. Without looking at the seat, I slid inside. I may not be very religious, but you can bet I prayed the keys were in the ignition.

They were. The truck started. Where do I go now?

## Part 5

You would think a fire department would keep plenty of gas in their trucks. No.

The fire truck stalled out only twenty miles south of my house. I estimated I was somewhere in Poway, eastern San Diego county.

I had barely enough time to stop at my house, gather water, snacks, and plenty of batteries for my flashlight. I also tossed my tool box into the passenger seat, although I don't know why. Instinct perhaps or the need to repair the town with whatever I could find. As I shoved the last piece of equipment into the truck, another meteor soared overhead and crashed near Ramona. I knew it was only a matter of time before those machines started moving.

And I sure as hell wasn't going to drag the tool box with me. I gathered the water, snacks, and a few, light tools and shoved them into my backpack. The weight of it threw me off balance when I slung it over my shoulder.

I headed south along Interstate 15. Dozens of cars sat in flames or stalled in the middle of the road. Piles of ash littered the road next to the cars like icons to those who were cremated while fleeing. Their clothes fell to the ground in rumpled piles as the beams fried only the organic flesh inside. The smell of burnt flesh mixed with something resembling old, charred barbeque residue assaulted my nose. My fingers fumbled to gather the towel across my mouth and nose to block out the stench of death in the air.

Just in time. A purple mist rolled across the road like a typical November fog from the coast. It stung my eyes but the towel protected my lungs. I spun around as something metallic rang against concrete.

A machine!

It stepped up onto the freeway. A bright, gazing light pierced the mist and followed the highway. It moved due north.

It doesn't see me.

I ran to an offramp; Scripps highway, I think. I don't know, I just ran.

The ground shook. One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three. The tremors grew stronger. I knew it was now moving south. Probably towards the main city. There were more people there. Miramar Air Base was close too. The machines are smart.

I slid down the embankment and dived into a water runoff tube. And of course there was water in it. It smelled like rotting leaves after a long winter soaked for months by snow.

Another tremor shook the concrete tunnel above me. Dust and pieces of concrete struck me on the head. I ducked and wrapped my arms over my head.

One. Two. Three. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Its strides were long and it passed by me quickly. I dared to look up past the embankment. I saw its round, metallic head bob up and down with each step. It glanced about the countryside as if searching for something. Hope it's not me.

I reached down and scooped up a hand full of water and splashed my face. It was cold. Really cold. My face felt hot. Would love to know what my blood pressure is right now as I felt it rush through my veins and pound against my temples.

The machine's clanking feet echoed in the silence. I couldn't feel the tremors anymore and walked back to the highway. Should I take Scripps now? Or should I head for the base?

Does the base even exist? Ok, east on Scripps it is.

I heard voices.

Sounds like a woman. No, two men. And a woman. A child?.

I hope the voices aren't those who run those damn machines.

I hear a man shout out a woman's name. Ok, so what are the chances of that? I doubt little green men were named *Jessica*.

I ran up Scripps road. Just as I reached the overpass a man shouted. I jerked my head and saw his face peering over the concrete shelf below the freeway overpass.

"Hey!"

I wave and glance around. He follows my gaze and waves back.

"Come on up!" He says, his arms flailing in the air.

I saw smoke drift into the air behind him. A fire. Just what I needed to dry my clothes. My smile faded as I walked up the steep embankment.

“They’ll see!” I told them frantically pointing towards the smoke rolling under the overpass.

“What?”

“They’ll see the smoke from the fire!”

“Everything is on fire, what’s one more?”

I pursed my lips, looked around at the trees smoldering along the road and shrugged. “Good point.”

I finally crawled up to the concrete shelf and slid my pack to the ground with a heavy sigh. I looked at the four faces staring at me as if I was the second coming.

“Glad to see another human face.” The slender, dark haired man said reaching his hand out. “I’m Jack.” His teeth shone like a used car salesman. His clothes hung loose on his thin frame and he pointed towards a young girl. “This here’s my daughter, Ashley.”

I shook his hand and waved at the young brunette kneeling near the fire. She didn’t look up at me; just stared at the fire. She couldn’t have been more than eight or nine. Her hair was bobbed on the sides and clips held her bangs away from her blue eyes. She wrapped her arms around her narrow shoulders and squeezed what looked like an Elmo doll. It protested with a series of annoying giggles.

“This here’s, er, Daniel?” Jack said gesturing at another, heavier man who peered down the road. He turned, nodded, and waved with gloved fingers.

“And Jessica.”

The woman looked up at me. Her brown eyes met mine. She stood up so fast her long, red hair, tight in a ponytail, bounced against the back of her neck.

“Jason?” She said with a clap of her hands. Her smile widened as if meeting a long lost relative for the first time. She was a co-worker. Small world.

“Jessica, are you alright?” That’s all I could think of. I was stunned to see any survivors let alone a co-worker.

“Yes!” Then her smile faded and she wrung her hands. “Julie’s dead.”

A feeling of vertigo washed over me. Julie and I just talked yesterday. Or was it the day before? She had stood and watched the meteors with me at work.

“Julie? How...”

“Those fucking machines. Those beams. She just...” Tears streamed from her eyes. “We were just having lunch when they came.” She finished in between sobs.

I walked over to her and cradled her head in my arms. Her body shook, racked with sobs. Something stung my eyes. I had no time to allow this to all settle in. Her crying was contagious. I thought of Julie, my next door neighbors, family...

My hands found her face and I lifted her eyes to mine. They were red and swollen. She had been crying all night. She wiped the snot from under her nose and turned her head.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. None of this makes any sense.” I said.

“Who the hell are they? Terrorists?”

“I heard on the radio that Mars is really close to us right now.” Jack said in the distance.

I rolled my eyes and gave him a side glance. “Martians, Jack? You’re not serious.”

He shrugged one shoulder and glanced up at the sky.

“What about all those probes? Mars is a desert. They haven’t detected life there.”

“Yet.” He deadpanned.

“Actually, maybe those probes pissed them off.” Jessica said. I couldn’t tell if she was serious.

Instead of taking her serious, I snickered. She raised her hands in the air as if to say, why not? If someone sent a probe to snoop around my neighborhood...well, actually *I* wouldn’t attack *their* world for it.

“It doesn’t matter why. They are here now.” I said. I pulled my arm over my head and heard my shoulder pop. “Ow. So where do we go from here?”

"I doubt they are paying much attention to the 'burbs." Jack said. He walked past me and pointed towards the hills in the east. "Let's go out towards the desert."

"Let's see if we can find a working car somewhere." I said.

Everyone nodded in agreement. I slung my pack and watched the others gather their own supplies, pillow sacks, shopping bags, and anything else they could carry. Jack lifted his daughter onto her feet and she whimpered. He patted her shoulder and pushed her gently towards the embankment.

"Her mother was killed by those machines." He whispered in a hoarse voice. I squeezed my eyes against the visions of people turning to dust in less than a second and nodded.

We walked for nearly two miles before finally finding a vehicle on the side of the road that wasn't burned or crushed. I leaned in and glanced at the ignition. No keys.

Figures.

"Anyone know how to hotwire a car?" I said.

Each in turn gave each other shrugging glances. I threw my arms into the air and buried my head under the console. Ok, fuse box, wires. Ah. I snapped the cover underneath the steering wheel free and followed three wires going to the ignition.

I dug my fingers in and ripped them free one at a time. Does it work this way? I tried to recall what I had seen in movies or on television.

I felt like I was *in* a movie.

I scraped the plastic cover off the wire with my front teeth. Ouch, this was harder than it looked. I gingerly touched two of the wires together. Nothing. I grabbed the other wire and touched. Still nothing. I brought all three together. Sparks! The car coughed in response. I touched the wires again. The car gurgled and cranked. The wires got hot. I dropped them in anticipation of getting a shock.

"Come *on* Jason." Jack said. I fought the urge to give him the one-fingered salute.

Counting in my head to work up the nerve, on three, I twisted all three bare ends together as quick as my fingers would allow. The car rocked and cranked and roared to life. I heard the little girl shout *yay* followed by applause. I gave the wires two more twists and raised my head

They ran over to the car and stopped dead in their tracks when they saw my eyes. My jaw felt slack and my throat went dry.

A machine stood at the top of the hill and stared directly at us.