



JASON'S **ALIENATED** FAMILY

Alienation Series: Volume One

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Jason's *Alienated* Family

by Ryan Gray

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	4
PART ONE	5
JASON	5
MARCY	5
SUE	6
MOTHER	7
THE MEN	8
PART TWO	10
THE RABBIT HOLE	12
THE FAMILY LECTERN	13
MARK	16
E.T. ATTACKS	18
PART THREE	20
MODERN DARK AGES	20
THREE HOURS IN...	23
KILLED OR BE KILLED	24
THE SUICIDE OF SUE'S SAINTHOOD	26
MOTHER OF MAYHEM	28
NEW SHERRIF IN TOWN	29
NOT ALL GIFTS COME WITH A BOW	31

PREFACE

How can I describe a day like today? The food was almost gone, clean water scarce, neighbors killing neighbors, and the military fighting an unknown enemy for the very survival over our planet!

Yet, I feel more complete and joyful than I have in a very long time, calm even. How do I describe such redemption in my heart amongst so much destruction? Honestly, I don't know if I can. But if I don't try, I might just explode...

PART ONE

JASON

I first remember thinking, "I need a cigarette!" I had quit two years earlier, but now, as I sat in my old rust bucket of a car and gazed across the lawn at the steps leading up to the red brick house, I suddenly felt as though my two-year abstinence from nicotine was slightly overrated, especially when entering the house I grew up in. I popped the third mint in my mouth, trying to ease the sudden, tense craving for a 'satan stick' as my Aunt Reba might have preached.

My driver's side door squeaked upon my exit and then squeaked again when I slammed my old bucket of bolts shut. I had shaved, but couldn't afford a haircut, so mom only had one hair issue to remark on. My faded and unironed clothes were a different matter. "Well, at least my shirt's clean," I mused to myself as I began the long walk to the front door. What did that big, white comedian say? Something about sharing the holidays, with the people who annoy us the most? Yep, well, that just about summed it up. "Merry Christmas, Jason!" I mused to myself, under my breath, as I rapped a knuckle on the red front door.

The reply was terse and impatient, "Come in!"

"Fantastic, mom's already stressed...should have cut my hair myself," I muttered and waded into the abode's ensuing chaos. Beautiful colors, magnificent smells, scurrying bodies of many sizes running back and forth with subtle awkward glances thrown my direction. The scene contrasted itself in a way that could only be described as "my family."

MARCY

"Hey," Marcy purposely bumped me.

So, naturally, I bumped her back, "Hey," I replied with a deep jovial tone.

She shot me an icy glare.

I shot one back just as cool.

She cracked first, busting up, then pointed at me, "You lost, I saw you crack a smile."

"Did not" I raised my hands in innocence, "you just can't ever admit that I beat you."

Jason's Alienated Family

She wrapped her arms around my chest and squeezed me tight. "Good to see you."

I squeezed her back, "You too, little sis."

She let go and looked up at me. "You feel really skinny, what's up?"

I shrugged, "Stress I guess. I haven't sold anything for a while, and people don't want murals like they used to."

"Shame bro, you are so talented."

"Yeah, well, as I say, Van Gogh was only an average artist, so it seems talent means little. Apparently, suffering is how you bring value to work, which means my millions are just around the corner!" I chuckled at myself.

She pushed my shoulder a bit in jest to get me to stop whining. "Knock it off, but what about your writing?"

Yeah, I still write for the post online when they need me to, but with their budgets thinning, they usually get an intern to cover the arts or just ignore that section altogether."

"Hang in there, Jase, it'll work out", she patted my arm, like only my baby sister and biggest cheerleader could.

"Now, look at my new tattoo!" Marcy rolled up her right sleeve to reveal a very colorful and intriguing forearm.

"Wow, your arms are looking good, much healthier!"

"Oh yeah, the doctor's really happy with my progress. But look, what do you think?" She pointed to a 6-inch rainbow, drawn parallel to scars which ended at the inside of her elbow, commonly referred to as "track" marks, the scars were covered by a blooming red rose bursting from the rainbow. "I call it 'Beauty always comes from promises fulfilled.'"

I smiled down at her, "I think it was a great choice."

Marcy flashed me a warning with raised eyebrows while she quickly rolled down her sleeves, she whispered a caution towards my ear, "Stepford wife, six o'clock."

SUE

"Oh, aren't we all so proud of our little Marcy, coming back from the dead so to speak, and finally getting back onto her own two feet." The condescension in her voice was not on purpose, but rather what we could always expect from our "dear" older sister, Sue. We started referring to her as our "dear older sister" since her marriage to Mark more than ten years earlier. However, since the "blow up" of

Jason's Alienated Family

2017 and my refusal to play her games, Sue had only politely acknowledged me. My “dear” sister practically knocked me over with her long frame, cutting between Marcy and myself then “helping” our little sister back towards the chore of the big family meal preparation with one hand on her shoulder and the other on her arm. “Now, Marcy, please be a dear and help finish setting the table.”

As the ladies walked away, I snorted in amusement to myself. As a female in Sue's company you automatically forfeited your right to thought or choice. As a man, the best I could do was hope for a stiff drink and hide.”

MOTHER

“Jason, get on in here!” Too late, my mother caught me. I drifted inside the kitchen to watch the general at work. “Get me the butter from the fridge, please.” Even her social niceties were efficient. I popped open the metallic cooler box and peered inside, as always, everything was spotless and labeled. I took out the butter, shut the door and tried in vain to hand it to my mother.

“Son, does it look like I have three hands?” She shook her head and rolled her eyes, “cut up two sticks and put them in the bowl, please.”

Well, I should be pleased that she at least didn't tell me how to cut them up, where to stand and the timing of each slice and when I should drop them into the gargantuan bowl of potatoes she was mashing.

We worked in silence for a few minutes until the butter delivery had been completed. “Here, take over.” She handed me the masher and slid over to her meticulous spice rack. “Now tell me, how long has been since you have eaten a healthy meal?”

I didn't answer immediately. I knew this question was coming but hadn't decided what the answer would be. I should have known by now. I was never able to get used to lying to my mother, no matter how quirky she could be. “It's been a few days.” Ok so, it wasn't the whole truth, but I was still a man with some pride left.

“Well, you chose your path, and a “starving artist” should be something you are used to by now. Otherwise, you could have stayed at MIT and been designing robotics or something...”, she paused, and we both knew why, although blunt and older, even mother had grown up a bit in the past few years, so she tried to be more tactful. She continued. “...something a little bit more in demand.”

I had absolutely no wish to rehash the same argument we'd had for the past

seven years. So I simplified my reply to a "Yep."

But then she surprised me. She put a hand on my shoulder and spoke softer than her usual tone. "I'm just happy you're here today." I'd be lying if I didn't admit to a warmth welling up in my heart. It was the most affection my mother had shown me since I left MIT all those years earlier.

"Now, mash faster before the potatoes cool and we have chunks of butter making my meal look ugly."

Oh well. I'd take what I could get.

THE MEN

After twenty minutes of battling, I won the gargantuan potato battle and drifted into the lounge. My brother-in-law was watching college football on my folk's wall-mounted plasma TV and sipping an ale. As usual, my dad, Rick, was hiding behind a New York Times, hoping to be left alone.

I went straight to the other side of the room, and dug out my dad's Irish whiskey and poured a quick snoot, downed it, then another and downed that too. I'd learned the hard way to get the booze in my belly quickly before prying eyes could begin any discussion about whether or not I was drinking too much. I poured another, and with my "first" drink in hand, I drifted over to the men and made myself known. "Hey, Dad, Mark." Dad looked over his paper and smiled with a twinkle in his eye and nodded at me, then adjusted his oxygen tubes, and looked to be trying to sit up a bit. "It's ok, Dad." I bent down and awkwardly hugged his head, and couldn't help but give him a quick peck on his head. I wasn't sure if the affection was too much for the old Marine, but since lung cancer had been sapping his strength, there wasn't too much he could do about it.

The old tough sod leaned back into his chair and I thought I caught a glimmer of joy in his face. But, it was masked quickly by his usual hardened exterior. He tossed me a manly nod then went back to his paper.

I moved next to Mark and feigned interest in the game he was watching. "Who's winning?"

"They are. Down one touchdown and the play-calling has been horrible, again! Tell you what, this coach was supposed to be our answer when he came over from the pro's, but I just don't see him getting us over the top. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother." I looked over to see his oldest boy, a sandy-haired nine-year-old

Jason's Alienated Family

named Sam, seated at the foot of the sofa, right next to his father. Whether the boy actually liked football, I had no idea, but it was clear that my nephew just wanted to be close to his clueless father. I knew that from personal experience.

I found myself sitting in the seat closest to my own father whose face was now buried in a "Guns 'n Ammo" magazine. He too seemed clueless to the fact that sons just wanted to be near their dads, no matter how old they were. I sipped my whiskey and mused to myself, another year, another family dinner of awkwardness and regrets.

PART TWO

The dinner was almost exactly what I expected it to be. The meal: cooked to perfection, and we all thanked Mother for her hard work. As usual, she waved our praise away with a dismissive hand. Most of the conversation was dominated by Sue and Mark, as they were the successful and “normal” ones of the family. Their children were seen, but not heard, a point of pride to Sue, and a short conversation of dad’s health was squashed by a glare and a grunt from the old man, his only contribution to the meal.

After coffee and pie, we retired to the lounge. Sue pressed Marcy into dish duty, and I let myself be coaxed into helping, feeling pity for my baby sister. We worked in silence for a few minutes as Sue regaled us with photoshoots and school plays. To be honest, I wouldn’t mind having some pictures of my nephews and would have even attended their plays, if I were invited. But Sue seemed more interested in making a statement than allowing her siblings to be a part of her life.

After she left to wipe down the table, I turned to Marcy, “So, where are you staying?” “I have some friends who took me in. They are getting me a job in a coffee shop down the road, helping me get back onto my feet.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Do I know them?”

“Nah, I met them through the center. But, they are very nice people. To be honest, they’ve done more for me than the program at the center.”

“Oh, how so?” Finally, I thought, a human being with a conversation deeper than a mud puddle. Not that it surprised me. Even with all of her problems, Marcy had always been the family member with whom I had a connection.

“Well, these people have no obligation to help or care for me. The wife, Jill, volunteers at the center as a mentor. She wasn’t even my mentor, but when she found out that I had nowhere to go, she and her husband took me into their home. They even paid me to do some house cleaning and walk their dog. Now they’ve found me that job.” She wiped a lone tear from her eye. “They’ve brought hope back to me, bro.”

Seeing my baby sis get emotional always choked me up. I put a dripping wet hand around her shoulder and squeezed her tight, then I took the soapy sponge that I’d been using for washing dishes and smashed it in her face for good measure. After all, I was still her big brother.

Jason's Alienated Family

"You jerk!" Marcy squealed but couldn't hide a giggle. I went back to washing dishes as if nothing had happened, but my sis wasn't done.

A tug on the back of my shirt collar was followed by a metallic hiss. I felt cool fluid drip down my back - it was freezing! "What the... ." "It's ok, big brother!" Marcy slapped me on my back as whipped cream spread all over my back and dripped down towards my waist.

"Oh...you're dead!" I picked up a leftover slice of pumpkin pie and tried to corner Marcy, "This is going into your face, but if you move too much, it'll be your hair!"

"Eww...big words!" She taunted.

That's when Sue butted in, "When will you two ever grow up?"

I froze and tried to hide a chuckle, but Marcy wasn't done. She snatched the pie from my hand and threw a perfect strike. It smacked dead even on Sue's nose and stuck there for a moment before plopping to the ground.

"Oh, crap!" I exclaimed with an enormous grin.

Sue did nothing at first, but seethe. Her face turned beet red and her lips began to quiver. "You...You..."

Marcy tried to get her into the fun, "Come on big sis, we're having fun, I'll clean it up."

"Fun! Fun?" That's when the Stepford wife blew her fuse. "You call this fun! You refuse to grow up! That's why you are such a loser with nothing to do but shoot up all day and look for "fun" ways to kill yourself! Do you know how long it's been since I've even cared if you are alive or dead!"

"Hey, Sue, calm down." My attempts at defusing the situation were shot down.

"No, Jason, no, I will not calm down! You don't get to tell me to calm down!" Sue upgraded her anger to defcon two; something I hadn't seen since she had been stood up by Brian Smoots for senior prom. "Did you tell him? Huh, sweet little Marcy?" Sue's mocking tone also conveyed a sense of frustration and hurt. "How many times have I bailed you out of jail?" She emphatically jabbed a French manicured finger in Marcy's direction, "Hmm...did you tell your little defender about me, the bad guy? And, how many times I have sat with you all night in the hospital from a car accident or an overdose! No?" She turned on me, "Yeah, Jason, I bet you didn't hear those cute little stories, didn't you? Mom had given up on her, so I was the one who had to be there for her as she found yet another creative way to almost kill herself over and over again." Tears streamed down her face. "You think I care that you didn't do anything with your life? You think I care that you bounced from man to man, bringing home every boy that you thought would piss off dad or

upset mom because those overgrown gorilla's barely had any untouched skin left underneath all those tattoos and piercings? I never did! I only wanted you to be happy! But, now I care that I can't get a call after 9 pm without my heart skipping a beat and the first thought being that this must be the one. This is the call where I find out my baby sister's finally dead!"

THE RABBIT HOLE

The word 'dead' seemed to make time stand still. It felt as though the dust particles in the air had been forbidden to move, even half a millimeter, giving the air around me a stale and metallic taste. I actually felt as though my insides would burst if someone didn't say or do anything. But, all I could manage was to hand Sue a towel to wipe the tears and pumpkin from her face. When I finally opened my mouth to speak, I was interrupted by a buzz. In truth, it took me totally by surprise and the vibrating phone jolted me a bit, although I think I did a fairly good job of covering it up.

The house was so quiet, I'm sure everyone could hear the buzzing phone in my pants which made me wince, self-consciously. So, I frantically dug it out of my pocket to hit the silence button. But just as I hit the silence button, another phone in the living room buzzed, then another. Even my mom's phone rang. We all knew it was Mother's phone because it was the default ringtone and turned all the way up. Half annoyed and still in the aftershocks of the verbal explosion, everyone headed for their phones and numbly checked to see what was so urgent.

"This can't be right." It was Mark who spoke first. Then he showed the text to dad. Dad adjusted his oxygen and inhaled deeply and grunted out, "TV." Mark switched on the TV which was still tuned to the sports channel. I was about to suggest we switch it to CNN, but it didn't matter. Even the headlining national football game had been interrupted.

At first, I couldn't quite make sense of what I was looking at. It was a little fuzzy, but distinct enough that it had to be something. The cameraman in control of the picture zoomed out and gave us the sight that couldn't be real. First, was the sight of a military aircraft and about twelve tanks and dark grey machine guns pointed in the same direction. This was alarming as this was all apparently taking place in the Midwest, yet, that was nothing compared to the reason why the military was

there. In the center of it all was a semi blurry disc on the ground. That grabbed my full attention. Dad's television was projecting the image of a metallic gray Flying Saucer!

THE FAMILY LECTERN

"Turn it up!" Sue barked. Mark complied, but as he pointed the remote and increased the volume, I thought I might have seen his hand quiver a bit.... the voice of a female reporter blared out at us. She was rapidly firing every observation that popped into her brain, trying to speak over the noise of the fighter jets overhead.

I overheard questions from my niece and nephew as Sue shoo-ed her kids into the side room. "Mom, we know something is going on, just tell us!" Sue dodged the questions and temporarily pacified their curiosity with a tablet to play video games.

The reporter was saying "That's right, Tom, I'm getting some reports from the Pentagon and NASA that they spotted the space crafts some ninety minutes ago as they passed the dark side of the moon. This specific craft descended just outside of Cleveland only twenty minutes ago, which means that the unidentified spacecraft made it from the moon to Earth's atmosphere in a mere seventy minutes. Every precaution is being made, in case there is some kind of hostility planned by the unidentified object, but the State Department is also going to send an expert along with a team of scientists to each object within the United States to try and speak with the owners or inhabitants of the unidentified objects."

The camera panned back to the object and zoomed in and out which looked rather unprofessional. But after a moment's thought, it dawned on me that the camera was having the same issue our human eyes were having. The shape of the craft was fuzzy as if a parent were taking a picture of young children who wouldn't sit still using an old 35mm camera. Flanking the flying saucer, the tanks, Humvees, and soldiers running around were all as clear as they always were on an HDTV screen.

"It's vibrating?" I mused to myself, breaking the silence.

"What's that?" Marked ask. The whole family turned to me, desperate for someone to explain what the heck was going on! "Um..." I began, trying to find the words to communicate my thoughts, "Just that the saucer, object, whatever it is, is vibrating so fast, that it can't be fully seen by the naked eye, or photographed for that matter."

Jason's Alienated Family

Mark nodded his head in agreement, but then stopped and suddenly grabbed my shoulder frantically, "Why would that matter, why would it do that...What's going on!" Sue slid her hands onto her husband's waist to calm him. He pushed her hands away and turned back to me, demanding an answer...any answer.

"Listen, Mark, I'm just speculating, ok. All I know is that it looks to be vibrating, which is a pretty basic form of power called: kinetic energy."

"Or maybe it's broken and gonna blow!" It was Dad's turn to weigh in.

I turned back to the screen and studied the shape for a minute. "Nah, it's in control." I decided.

"How could you know that?" Sue asked with her usual passive-aggressive tone.

I ignored the attitude but answered the question, "The shape looks to not be moving, which means the vibrations are all synchronized. If it were out of control, it would be fluctuating, sliding back and forth and look almost see-through on the edges. Nope, this is perfectly aligned, vibrating at an incredible rate, with no discernable background noise...which means that whoever built this is incredibly advanced!"

Mom shook her head and interrupted my thoughts, with the same argument we'd been having for over seven years, "I can't believe you left science and now this is happening." She waved a kitchen towel at the screen with her right hand and rested her left hand on her hip with her usual motherly swagger.

I bit my lip and tried not to say anything, but this time, I couldn't. It had been a long time coming, on the heels of the biggest event since...well, maybe since ever, in human history, so I might as well go for broke. "I didn't leave science Mom, I left MIT because YOU were pushing me for a safe computer engineering career that would make a lot of money and bore me to tears for twenty-five to life."

Something poked my ribs, hard, "Ouch!" It was Dad with his cane.

"If you are good at this stuff and you like it too, why quit? You could have just said, 'no computers.'" Now the entire family was momentarily turned from the TV screen and staring at me. I threw up my hands and exhaled in defeat. "Cause...of these, Dad..." I point at the screen. "I wanted to study science we didn't understand yet, but you and mom wanted me to make a ton of money designing the next great TV everyone would watch the discovery on. If I'd be able to study UFO's and unexplained phenomenon, you wouldn't have been able to tear me away, but really, the university was just after software machines with just enough human creativity to debug any program or fix any problem that might threaten to keep the "technology expert" from completing their task. I was being groomed to perfect someone else's genius: another's creation," I paused and took a breath.

Jason's Alienated Family

I continued with a pointing gesture at the ceiling. I was finally taking my turn to stand behind the metaphoric family podium, which I had avoided for so long, in case I didn't get another chance, I'd give them the full ball of wax. "Another's creation, a pioneer who had decided they didn't need a 120 thousand dollar piece of paper, giving them permission to chase after their dreams. If being an operator and factory worker using 1s and 0s floats your boat, then fine with me, go for it. After all, it's the safe move, right? Qualify in the hottest new field like app development, artificial intelligence or robotics. Well, I didn't want to play it safe. I want to explore the unknown, to create something or discover something that no one else had thought of. I wanted to be Tesla, Musk or Captain Kirk, not another lab coat for a giant box company developing an even smaller cell phone!"

"So...you actually didn't switch to art, did you?"

"HUH!" A gasp filled the room. It was dad.

Dad sucked in more oxygen as mom demanded an explanation. "What nonsense are you on about, Rick!"

"I just mean, I get it. He started painting 'cause his brain doesn't work like yours," He sucked in a huff of air as he continued, "It works like mine."

Mom rolled her eyes and was about to argue, but I had unknowingly passed the baton. Now, the podium was dad's, so he cut her off, "Let me finish, Mareen!" The first name and stark military tone from dad wasn't something we heard often, and never towards mom. They locked eyes for half a second before dad continued slowly, "I wanted to keep commercial fishing, I loved fishing. But when you got pregnant, you said it was too dangerous and too unstable a market. So, I sold out and got a job working for your father on the car lot."

"But, you did great, and we owned that lot for so many years and..."

"That doesn't matter! I never liked selling cars, I liked catching and selling fish! I gave that up, and maybe it was the right thing to do, but you need to know, not everyone is as black and white as you are, woman. We all can't perfect things around us by bending them to our will and call it happiness!"

Mother stood back as if she'd been slapped in the face. I supposed that in many ways she had been. "Is that what you all think? I bend you all to my will?" Moist eyes stabbed glances at each one of us. Sue looked down, Marcy covered her mouth in empathy, I realized my mouth was slightly ajar but did nothing to rectify the awkward issue, Mark went back to the TV as a hiding spot, but dad met mother's gaze straight on and didn't blink. After a few seconds of mind-numbing tension, mom burst into tears and stormed to her bedroom.

MARK

We stood in silence, watching the live news report, which, like any big news event, simply repeated the same things over and over again while speculating about anything they can use to fill air time. Not that we, Joe-public, minded. If anything happened, if the spacecraft fluctuated or made the tiniest of noises, we'd better know, immediately!

"If you'll excuse me." Dad hoisted himself up with a grunt and hobbled back towards the bedroom, wheeling his oxygen behind him.

Mark turned the TV back up and commented, "I still don't get how something moving back and forth can make a machine fly."

I scratched my head, trying to think of a simple way to explain the concept, "If you can imagine a baseball..."

Sue put a hand on my shoulder and shook her head, hoping that Mark would not see her. But he did and didn't care. He went back to the TV. "She's right, Jase, don't even try, I just can't understand that stuff. Doctors called it something fancy. Aphantasia or something like that, but what it means is that I can't imagine something I've never seen before.

"I'm sorry, buddy, I didn't know that." I put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't touch me, I don't need your sympathy." Mark kept his gaze on the television. "My whole life someone finds out I have a diagnosed problem and suddenly I deserve kit gloves and special treatment, screw that man!" He stood and mosied over to dad's wet bar and continued his rant. "How about you, Jason? Do you have anything wrong with you?"

A bit stunned, I stammered for an answer.

"You know, pigeon-toed, scoliosis, a third nipple?"

"Mark!" Sue gave him an embarrassed look, but as we'd already witnessed, the combination of our family lectern and the world wide news of substantiated UFOs were giving us all the confidence to say whatever we meant, no matter the cost. Mark pushed through.

"The point is, all of those abnormalities would be ignored or even joked about. But with mine, I'm only one step from a plague victim. I mean, I don't even consider it a handicap, just the way my brain works," He shrugged and tossed back a double bourbon followed by a couple of thumps from his fist to the counter to help the whiskey makes its way down his throat as he finished, "Or doesn't work. But, cause

Jason's Alienated Family

my brain doesn't imagine what can be, it focuses entirely on what is and never let's go. Is it bad or better? Neither...it's just different. That's why I'm the city's commercial building inspector."

Mark poured himself another and droned on for a few more minutes. By this time, the ladies were both staring at the TV again, but I found myself deep in thought. I had been so quick to judge my brother-in-law as a clueless dad, unable to consider the feelings of his son, when in reality he was just ignorant. Physically, Mark did not have the capability to imagine what would make Sue happy or if his children might be feeling insecure or frightened.

"Give me one, would you, brother?"

Mark set about pouring me a bourbon too, my fourth of the evening, I was feeling it. "End of the world talk, huh, Jase?" Mark extended the glass to me.

"How's that?" I took it from his hand.

"In the twelve years I've been married to your sister, we have never called each other anything but our first names. Now, you throw out the "b" word."

"Yeah, maybe it is the apocalypse. If so, then here's to us." I tossed back my drink and tried to transition to my point as smoothly as possible. The booze made tactfulness tough, "You know, Mark, I'm actually very opposite to you. I can spend way too much time thinking ahead instead of right here, right now."

He nodded his head in acknowledgment of my point, "So?" He wasn't impressed. "So...I need people to give me a heads up when my head's in the clouds and not in the game."

Mark nodded as he sipped on his third bourbon. "That's logical."

I shook my head in frustration then spelled it out for him. "Right now, I would imagine that your wife and kids need you, Mark, to be with them. You need to assure them that everything is going to be ok." To be honest, I tensed after my blunt statement, in case he was offended enough to take a swing at me. Instead, the wheels in his thick skull looked to be shaking the rust from their cogs as they turned and began to make sense of what I had just said. Finally, he slapped me on the shoulder, "Thanks, brother." He slammed down the rest of his drink and headed for his kids. I peered in to see him plop down on the couch with his kids and wrap his big arms around them, pulling them in tight. Neither one tore their eyes from their electronic tablets, but the relief and glow from their faces were unmistakable.

Sue walked up beside me, arms folded, following my gaze. "I know you always questioned why I married Mark. Truth is, he is what you get, no more, no less. At times, he's just dull, but he will stand in front of a train for those kids and me. I

always thought that was more important than brains.”

“Huh,” I smirked.

“What?” Sue took my reaction poorly.

“Nothing... Well, just to say, that the only reason I ever questioned your marriage was because I was a young, cocky jerk who didn't know any better than to judge what he didn't understand. In the last few years, I've been knocked around by the world pretty good.” I turned and smiled at my big sister. “It showed me how good I had it with a sister who always looked after me, especially when I didn't want her to.”

“Yeah, well...” Sue looked away with embarrassment. She never could take a compliment. I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and forced her into a side hug. Sue shocked me when she leaned her head onto my shoulder. It was the most affection we had shown to one another since middle school. I was just about to comment to Sue on how funny it was that as I mature, I seem to go back to having the same carefree nature I had as a child, but I was cut off.

E.T. ATTACKS

“Guys! What happened?”

The TV screen was black and it was almost cracked? What? “Is that a crack on the television?” Sue asked.

I stepped up to it and felt the screen, I rolled my eyes. “So, this isn't our TV. If it was, the crack would look different. This crack is coming from the camera. The operator must have dropped it.”

“Then why is it frozen?”

“Huh?”

“Why is the stupid TV frozen, Jase!” Marcy didn't handle pressure very well.

“I don't know, not for sure.” Actually, I did have an idea, but I was afraid to find out, especially with Marcy in the room and the kids within earshot.

“DVR the last minute,” Mark suggested, as he joined the conversation.

Sue and I turned on him in unison and glared.

“What'd I say?”

“The kids, Mark? What if what we see is scary.”

Mark thought for a moment, then met both our gazes with confidence. “This is real guys, whatever happened, the kids need to know and process it sooner rather

than later.”

“That goes for me too.” Marcy added, “I know you just want to get me out of here cause you think I can't handle it, just like the kids, but I won't go. I need to know what the heck is going on!”

“Ok, Ok,” I relented, “I picked up the DVR control and spun back the digital recording sixty seconds and pressed play.”

The same female reporter was jabbering on about the weather and how that could cause an issue for the jet fighters maintaining a visual on the spacecraft. Apparently, two full regiments of infantry were now on hand to protect us from “E.T” but also to protect E.T. from the public. Thousands of spectators had made their way from all over Ohio, mostly the Cleveland area, and now the freeways were packed and most of the farms near the UFO in the area had become alternative routes and parking lots for any curious earthlings or alien junkies wanting to get beamed up and hitch a ride back to the alien's home planet. I shook my head, as much as I love Star Trek, it introduced a lot of romantic notions into extraterrestrial lore which had no grounding in reality.

“Wait, something seems to be changing,” the statement shook me from my thoughts as a high pitch noise grew from the TV stereo speakers. “The craft is making a high pitched noise and seems to be spinning faster, maybe to take off or...”, that was it. The camera cracked and the screen went black.

Mark threw up his hands in frustration “Well, that didn't tell us anything.”

I stood back and tried to think.

Sue was in the background speculating that maybe the circuits were overloaded from too many camera crews plugged into the same spot, but Mark, as a city inspector knew that was impossible because they would have had generators for external lights, backups and independent power, plus TV crews had power sources through their vans, and they all had smartphones. Cell phones would produce a low-quality feed, but that was still better than nothing.

I leaned back and thought, “I've had too much bourbon to do this much thinking.” Next to me, my mother's thirty-year-old side table lamp shined an interrogative lumination into my face. I reached over to turn it off when it blinked then shut itself off, then back on for a moment.

I turned sharply and glanced around at the TV, lights, wall plugs, computers, cell phones, and AC unit. They all suddenly looked like miniature bombs!

PART THREE

MODERN DARK AGES

“Turn everything off, now!” I screamed, “Mark, get to the garage and pull the mains” Marcy and Sue just stared at me for a moment, Mark, didn't hesitate. Eager for something to do, he hurdled over the sofa and made for the garage door. I pointed to the outer lounge area at my little nephew and his sister, “And get your kids off those tablets!” Still, Marcy and Sue stared at me, completely confused, “Move!” I commanded and sprinted for mom and dad's bedroom.

I burst through the door in time to see what looked to be steam escaping mom and dad's scalps. Their argument had escalated to finger-pointing and whisper “shouts” which could only be perfected by master invisible arguers. They both turned on me and I recognized the look on their faces. If I were still 12, I would have ended up over dad's knee.

But I wasn't twelve anymore, and it was my turn to do something for their own good, “Mom and dad, get away from that wall, now!”

“Barging in here like a young ruffian is unacceptable, Jason-Phillip!” The use of my middle name and hands on the hips indicated that mom meant business, and typically that meant I would back down. But, this wasn't a typical situation. I shot a quick glance at dad and back at mom then did something I'd never done prior nor will I most likely ever do again, I barked out an order, “Move your backsides, right now!” I moved around my folk's bed snatched up my mom's wrist and practically dragged her out of the room. Dad's old marine training kicked in and he brought up the rear prodding mom along with a hand on her shoulder as she complained about being manhandled. It was a good thing dad helped, we hadn't a second to spare. Just as we cleared the door, the explosions began. They weren't too loud, but that didn't make them any less dangerous. Since mom and dad's room was closest to the power lines their lights blew first, then the dining room and living room, “Mark!!” I screamed - suddenly the house went dark.

“What?” Mom whispered in shock.

For a moment, no one moved nor said anything. Sudden empty and unexpected silence. Sure we've all seen the grid go down before, but not with exploding light bulbs and the sounds of massive cherry bombs chasing the power-lines down

the street.

A cell light emerged from behind the kitchen. It was Mark climbing the five steps from the garage. "Did I get it in time? As you can see, I turned off my phone in time."

"I think about half the electronics were saved. Good job, bro." I replied.

"Shoot!" Mark whistled, "This is bad."

"Yeah," I confirmed

"What?" Dad sucked a healthy dose of oxygen in, "What in tarnation just happened!!"

"EMP" I answered, as I turned my cell phone light on so I could guide mom to a chair. Fortunately, I had turned my phone off earlier. It was so old that if I left it on longer than 30 minutes, the battery would be dead. The life of a starving artist had its advantages.

"What's an EMP? Not all of us are nerds!" Marcy quipped.

I gestured to Mark as I turned to tend to dad, "Mark, do you mind?"

Mark handed his make-shift flashlight to Sue so she could look over the kids and make sure there wasn't any bleeding from the glass explosions.

Mark excitedly explained, "Electromagnetic Pulse. Basically, it's an electronics bomb. Set it off and all electronic circuits blow up!. It's like being in a real live science fiction movie! UFOs, and EMP! So exciting"

"Accept this is for real Mark!" I snapped back while checking dad out, "Clean water, food, communications, and protection all wiped out in an instant!!"

"Ah, come on Jase, it can't be all that bad?" Marcy asked.

"How'd you know, son?" Dad asked, curiously.

"The TV stopped working, but the picture froze. The TV crew would never air a frozen picture, which meant everything stopped at once. Also, right before the picture froze, the UFO started making an incredible humming noise. I remember reading about an EMP big enough to be weaponized. It would have to have a massive charging system. It made me think, what were these guys waiting for. I think they've just been sitting there charging this entire time, waiting to wipe us out!"

"Sons of..."

I cut dad's salty language off, as I knew Sue wouldn't have any of it and I wasn't in the mood for another fight, "Dad, do you have a map of the U.S.?"

He rolled his eyes, "Ptss...do I have a map of my country? That's a dumb question. You should be telling me how big you want it and in which color."

Jason's Alienated Family

I didn't miss a beat, "The size of the kitchen table and any color that isn't dark." Ten minutes later, Dad, Sue, Mark and myself all gathered around the table. We had lit old camping lanterns and wicker oil lamps. The glow from the flame reminded me of our backyard camping and the spooky stories dad would tell us while we made s'mores from our "campfire" which was usually made up of three or four candles. Those were the joyful times when a sugar high was the goal, and sleeping in a musty old green tent was the most fun we could imagine. Now those same faces stared back at me, wrinkled, tired and scared. I couldn't help it though, they all needed to know what I was thinking.

"Ok, look, here we are, right down here in the middle of the country. Now, just over here, just outside Cleveland, as the crow flies that's at least 700 hundred miles. So, we know the EMP made it at least this far." I pulled out dad's old geometry compass he kept with his maps. I drew a circle representing 700 miles around Cleveland, then pointed at it. "That's why we are in trouble. DC, Chicago, New York, Philly, heck, pretty much the entire eastern seaboard in the dark, just like us. That's not including almost all of Canada's major cities, in the dark right alongside us, all in one fell swoop..."

Mark finished my thoughts off for me, "They beat us without us ever seeing their faces!"

"It's strategic," Dad added. "There are about 50% or more of our military bases and command centers in this area." He turned and walked away shaking his head.

"Where does that leave us?" Sue had rejoined the conversation after lighting some candles and helping mom find extra flashlights.

"Bottled water, canned foods, and shotguns." Dad bellowed in our direction over his shoulder.

"Now dear, don't get overdramatic."

"He's right, we need to start gathering any basic supplies we need, right now." Mark glared at the map as his brain kicked into overdrive. "No electricity means gas, water, and transportation all down. It will be weeks or months until they can figure out how to get food to the cities. The hospitals will have some generators if they weren't blown from the EMP, but the lack of gas affects them too. We need to stay hydrated, well-rested and on a strict ration of food from now on."

Marcy giggled, "You're acting like we just fell into the path of the apocalypse." Sue chuckled along with her, but dad, Mark and I just stared blankly at them, waiting for the reality to set in.

"What about school for the kids, or Sammy at home, he needs to be fed!"

Jason's Alienated Family

"That's forty-five minutes drive on the freeway." It would take me ten to twelve hours to walk if I'm flying, maybe I can do it in seven with a bike, but that's if the looting hasn't started."

As if on cue, a metallic crack jolted our attention to dad. He had finally begun to unload the canvas bag from earlier. He started by loading a black 12 gauge Mossberg pump-action shotgun. He checked that the safety was on and then handed it to me. "You remember how to shoot?"

"Yeah, Pop, I do." I begrudgingly admitted as I felt the mahogany stalk in one hand and the cold steel of the barrel in the other. I wasn't a fan of guns, but I knew that didn't matter right now, protecting my family did.

"Well, this is just great", Mom snorted. "We lose electricity and in under an hour, start arming ourselves like some sort of backwoods militia."

Dad shook his head and whistled, "I wish. Those backwoods militia boys have a slightly better chance of surviving this thing than we do, sweetheart." Then he pounded a magazine of nine-millimeter bullets in his palm to check them before locking them into a black Glock and handing it over to Mark. "There might have been a time that I'd let you kids take the chance to be foolish and not protect yourselves, but with my grandkids here, I'll be dam..." He stopped and collected himself then looked at Sue. "I know I don't show it, but I love those kids of yours just as much as I loved you and Marcy and Jase. If we have to plug someone to keep them safe, that's what this family will do!"

Mark checked over the Glock 9mm to remind himself how to engage the safety and reload. He hadn't touched a gun since marrying my sister, a gun-free home was a part of their arrangement. That had been a big sacrifice for Mark, as he loved to shoot and spent six years as a military MP before going back to school and meeting Sue. Dad tossed him an extra magazine, "I know you hate guns, honey, but we are going to be safe and not sorry, ok?"

THREE HOURS IN...

"It's just as bad as we thought." Mark and I shared a glass of water, then set our weapons down on the table.

"Report," the old Marine was in his chair, armed with a flashlight .38 special and a 12 gauge double-barrel shotgun in his lap. To emphasize his point, he had replaced his favorite "Chief's" cap with his Marine's Vietnam Vet cap.

Jason's Alienated Family

Mark chugged some water, then spoke first, "We're in the best shape on the block, thanks for Jase's quick thinking. Everyone else has a complete-blown circuit breaker panel. Some glass cuts, one guy caught a shard in the eye, but that's the worst of it."

"Communications?" Dad hurried Mark along.

"All dead," I butted in, "but for one old guy with a shortwave radio."

"Samuels?" Dad asked.

"Yep, that's him," I confirmed.

"Bout time that old coot is good for more than just stealing my tools. What'd he say."

"Says there's military chatter all over the country, the national guard's getting called up. Thankfully only a quarter of the military was on alert with the EMP attack, because of the holidays, so we're still in this fight. But the E.T.s' weapon is still greater than the military without the use of their planes, tanks and personnel carriers."

"Add to that, the police are completely overwhelmed." Mark jumped in, "We are definitely on our own."

"Just a matter of time now, probably 24-48 hours." Dad thought aloud.

"Until what, Dad?" Sue, listening quietly until this point, jumped in.

"Looting." Dad shot back.

"Ah, Pops, I think we'll all have to wait just a little bit longer than that."

It happened that fast when we pulled out of Saigon. We American's think we're better than most folk, just cause we are so educated and rich. The fact is, we haven't tasted true devastation in 90 years. You'll see folks who were PTA moms, and Dads who coached soccer, shooting each other over food and medical supplies in a matter of weeks."

"Come on Dad, people are better than that," Marcy argued.

"Sweetie, I love you, but you don't know what the hell you don't know. If given the excuse, folks become rotten inside and feeding your starving child is about the best excuse a body needs to become savage."

Sue swallowed hard, "So, what do we do?"

Dad sucked in a deep drag of oxygen, "Prepare to defend ourselves."

KILL OR BE KILLED

Two days later was when it first happened. We first heard shoots, just as the sun

Jason's Alienated Family

started to set. Mark jumped up from a nap and grabbed his 9mm and I followed suit with the shotgun. Peering outside, we saw no one on the street and heard nothing but a slight wind. "Where do you think?" I asked.

Mark didn't say anything, but just pointed, a front door a few houses down and across the street was forced open and barely hanging on by one hinge. Two more shots flashed in the front room.

"Let's go!" I demanded as I stuffed more 12 gauge shells into my pockets and a lead pipe into the back of my belt. "No!" Mark stopped me with a strong hand to the shoulder. I sometimes forgot that he was a linebacker in high school, six years in the military and outweighed me by at least 30lbs. "It's too late to help them over there. We don't know how many there are. This is our defensible position. If we don't let them surprise us, we will have the advantage."

"But those are our friends!" I spat back with disgust at Mark's cowardice and cold-hearted pragmatism.

"He's right, son," They're most likely dead and if they ain't, you rushing them, will certainly force the looter's hands to kill 'em, so they don't gotta watch their back."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this, from the two of you...listen to yourselves!"

"No Jase, you listen to me, 48 hours ago, this country was fundamentally changed. We are no longer the wealthy powerhouse we grew up knowing. We are at war, in our own backyard. It's not the strong who survive, it's the smart, tough and vicious!"

"Son," My dad continued, "Trust us, you've never been here before, Mark and I have."

"Long ways from Vietnam Pop, and you Mark, you were an MP, not a soldier."

Mark rolled his eyes and went back to his "post" peering out the window. "Yeah, I wasn't a combat soldier, I just had to chase down out of control trained killers who were drunk, high or psychopaths. Don't think for a second, I had it any easier than a combat soldier."

I threw down my weapons in disgust and stormed off.

"Easy!" Dad snapped, "We need that scattergun."

Out of habit, I stomped to my old room, which was now my mom's sewing sanctuary. I slammed the door on my way in. Truth be told, I wasn't angry with Mark or my father, I was angry because I knew they were right and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't fly in to save the day, without putting the rest of my family at risk. Maybe I would if it weren't for the kids. "Ugh!" I groaned and punched a nice knuckle sized dent into the drywall. "Ouch!" I shook my hand, angry twice. Once at the apocalyptic situation and again at myself for being stupid enough to

almost bust my hand by acting like a kid who had been grounded. I plopped onto the carpet and leaned against the guest bed and for the first time since all this madness began, acknowledged the weight of the shock, terror, and fear. I cried, like a monsoon was released in my soul, I bawled like a baby missing its mom. Eventually, sobbing gave way to heaving, which gave way to heavy breathing and finally an incredibly soft whimper, until I drifted off to sleep.

THE SUICIDE OF SUE'S SAINTHOOD

POP, POP, POP!!! I jolted awake, to the sound of gunfire inside the house. Unfortunately, all my weapons were out in the hall. The same direction where the gunfire came from. I got low and crept along the hall towards the kitchen. As I turned the corner, my ears came upon scuffling, grunting and breaking furniture. Although I could make out a mass of moving bodies and chaos in the dark, I couldn't tell who was who and what was happening. There were five, maybe six bodies, fighting for control of weapons or an advantage to finish off their advisory. I noticed one figure, quite a bit smaller and slight in size, struggling under the weight of a much larger man, the smaller figure squealed, "No! No!" It was Marcy, I moved in to boot the attacker's head when someone clubbed me. Thankfully I didn't blackout, but I was stunned. I barely managed to turn around, in time to catch another blow from the pipe, my lead pipe. I wrestled with the faceless intruder desperately, I battled to stay in the fight and to keep conscious.

MARCY! The sight of the man on top of my little sister popped back into my head. Enraged, I growled like a beast and drove the attacker through the dining room and his head through a double-pane window. His skull opened it, and my knee into his groin took him down to waist level. I turned and rushed back to help Marcy, but the attacker managed a grip on my pant leg and tripped me up. As I fell to the hardwood floor, my head just past the opening to the kitchen, I saw a big hand coming down into Marcy's face.

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!" A banshee-like scream I'd never heard before, pierced the night, and a woman's foot caught Marcy's attacker between legs from behind. I could almost hear the crunch from ten feet away. After four years of high school soccer, Sue still had the kick. But, big sister wasn't done yet. Sue stood over the big attacker as he coddled his groin and rolled back and forth in agony. Sue picked something off the kitchen floor. A soft but distinctive 'click' let me know what it

Jason's Alienated Family

was. She screamed a wild unhinged rage at the moaning attacker and drilled three bullets into his chest and one into his skull.

Answering the savage call of my big sister, and remembering what Mark said about the vicious surviving, I turned on my attacker. He was trying to stand up before me to regain control in our little war. I let him win that little contest. Instead, I wanted the war. I grabbed for the solid oak chair next to me. As he lunged over me, I surprised him by jabbing the back of the chair into his throat, crushing his windpipe. He dropped to his knees, and I finished the job by clubbing his body with the big chair, which became heavy chunks of wood and eventually, splinters showered over his lifeless corpse.

“That’s enough.” I turned on the hand that darned touch, me, with an elbow to the face. Fortunately, Mark turned enough so I missed his already broken nose. “Son of a...I already have a bruised face, man! Jeez!”

“Sorry bro....sorry.” I gasped out in a half-mad voice I didn’t even recognize.

“It’s ok, your adrenaline is pumping faster than you have probably ever felt.

“Marcy!” I cut him off and rushed to my sister. She had a black eye and busted lip. Mom was already holding her and sobbing. Surprisingly, of all of us, Marcy was the only one not upset by the assault. “It’s ok guys, I’ve handled worse!” None of us cared, Mom, Sue, Dad and I all group-hugged around her and cried. Even dad was sobbing.

Sue drifted from the family hug and peered over the corpse of the man she had killed and spat on him, then swore at him, over and over as she kicked him again and again. Mark had to drag her from the dead man as the former PTA mom and gun control activist had been forced to face her worst nightmare. The need to kill. “Why’d he do it, why’d he just not stop...Why?” Sue begged her husband for an answer, all he could do was hold her and let her cry it all out into his chest.

Eventually, I had figured there were four of them, dead in our kitchen, living room and dining room. Dad had got one with the .38 as they broke in, Mark another with his bare hands and some help with a cast iron pan and a butter knife, mine with the dining room chair, turned scrap wood, and Marcy and Sue had sorted out the big guy full of 9mm bullets. We won this fight, but then came the next struggle. Where do we put the bodies? And would anyone come looking for them?

“I frickin hate E.T,” I growled aloud to myself as I got to work cleaning up...

MOTHER OF MAYHEM

"Dang it!"

Everyone turned to see Dad leaning closer to the left arm of one of the bodies. He had a patterned blue and red tattoo on his arm. It was the intruder I had killed.

"I think that's Roger from down the road."

"You know this guy?" Mark asked.

"Yes, we watched his kids one weekend when his wife was sick and he was out of town."

"Why would they do this?!" Sue demanded to no one in particular.

"They have young kids, maybe they were desperate for food or milk, but don't know why they wouldn't just ask." Dad turned, "Honey, what you think? Dear... where did you go?"

We turned our lamps and flashlights around the room to see if we could find her. She sat, on the sofa, with no light, knitting a sweater.

"Woman! What in the heck are you doing?" Dad demanded.

"I'm only doing what I have been told to." Mom's taunting tone was clearly not meant to be ignored.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Dad growled.

"It's nothing, go about your business, make sure all the blood is out of my carpet, if you can, please."

Dad growled in her direction, so Mom paused her knitting long enough to 'reluctantly' explain her feelings. "Over the past several days, I've learned about how mean and selfish I am, only concerned in controlling my family, their movements and forcing them to be happy...my way."

"Oh, that's not true." Marcy refuted as she held a cold, wet cloth to her face, "There are times when you can be an overbearing mom, but you're still the best."

"NO, no...Jason said it all, and you all said nothing to contradict him. Message sent and received," Mother mockingly saluted at us, then buried her face back into her knitting. "I will be a dutiful and helpful grandmother from here on out."

"Moreen Angelia Busecky, you get off your high pity horse right now or I'll pull you over my knee!"

"How dare you!" Mom gawked at dad's insult, not the threat of corporal punishment, but using her maiden name was a big no-no.

"I married a woman ten times stronger than myself and twice as smart. We have been together for 40 years. Wife, you have the temperament of a bulldozer, and

Jason's Alienated Family

sometimes you don't know how to turn it off. The fact is, it can be hard to deal with...but that's the part of you I respect. And I love all of you. Right now, we need that bull-dozer spirit of yours more than ever. If you ain't willing to step up and be the mom we all know you are, just because we told you off one time, then...you can go back to being Busecky!"

"Quite the speech, Pop," I smiled with agreement and patted my dad's shoulder. CRACK!

Like lightning, dad smacked me across the face. "Ow! What was that for?" I asked while rubbing the sting from my very red right cheek.

"For enjoying watching me dress your mom down! Don't care how old you are, your ma is queen, don't you forget it!"

I almost quipped again but didn't want to risk dad using any more oxygen. So I defaulted to my highschool responses, "Yes, Sir, sorry mom."

This seemed to tip the scale in dad's favor. Mom stood, and shed her temporary regression as a Bushecky "push-over" and took charge. She straightened her skirt and brushed her blouse.

"Well, if our neighbors have already begun looting, and we have many more weeks to survive in this chaos, then there's only one thing to do."

"What's that mom?" A possible plan was emerging, and Sue, the administrator, was intrigued.

"We organize."

Mark was unconvinced, "Moreen, folks won't listen just because you ask them to, not in this state of mind."

Mother snatched up the 12 gauge Mossberg, opened the action and peered inside and then flipped the safety off. She turned and glared at us all one by one. "Who says I'm gonna ask...and Mark," Racking a shell into the shotgun, she gritted her teeth as she walked to the front door, "call me Mother!"

NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN

Mom walked to the front of our lawn, stood with the 12 gauge cradled in the nook of her elbow and waited. Only a few days ago, the idea of anyone of these homes having unkempt lawns was unthinkable, but the preceding days had shifted everyone's priorities to one singular focal point of convergence: survival. Whereas barely a week ago, one's yard was a source of pride and enjoyment, now the lawn

Jason's Alienated Family

was good for little more than a hiding spot for security measures. The human mind was an impressive and adaptive machine, but with these new mindsets of survival, the brain could also be dark, sinister and brutal.

As instructed, Mark and I carried all four bodies out of the house and laid them neatly in the front of the uncut green grass. The rest of the family gathered on the front porch, while Mark and I flanked Mom, armed to the teeth and showing it. It was only 6:30 am, barely 40 minutes since sunrise, but I had a feeling most of the neighbors were awake and watching.

We did nothing for a good ten minutes. "That should be enough." Mom said aloud to herself. She then raised the Mossberg 12 gauge and discharged two blasts into the air. I had no idea where she learned to shoot, but she looked almost as comfortable with the black rubber stock against her shoulder as dad did.

"Everyone, get yer butts out of your house and come here now...I won't ask twice" Mom's demand was not quite a scream, it was much more authoritative than that. It seemed to originate from her below her diaphragm and was delivered with the umph I could imagine a drill sergeant would deliver.

Slowly but surely, all the neighbors emerged from their homes. They approached, pensively, but with enough fear and curiosity to keep moving forward. Most were armed with some sort of club, but only a few carried firearms and none had even close to as much firepower as we possessed.

After they had gathered into a semi-circle of awkward silence, Mom looked around the group, then shook her head in frustration and shouted to her left at a house across the street, three homes down. "Sally, if you don't get your skinny butt out here right now, I'll come in after you, and you don't want that, child!" Slowly, the door opened, and a thin blonde emerged carrying a baby with a toddler in tow.

The woman walked down the street, tears dripping down her face, rage set in her jaw, desperation in her eyes. The closer she got to the group, the more obvious the situation became. She had sent these men to take what we had, no matter the cost. Mom didn't care, she was never one to mince words, "This neighbor of mind, this 'friend,' a woman I've known for years - I've even babysat her little girl there - this person who knew me, sent her husband and three others to attack and steal from us in the middle of the night. Now, we didn't know who they were, just that they were intruders and trying to steal from us and one even tried to kill my daughter, Marcy." She pointed at Marcy, observing from the porch. My little sister emphasized mom's point by stepping closer and pulling her hair back, her left side was completely black and blue and her lower lip was split and swollen in two places.

Jason's Alienated Family

Mom continued, "This will not happen again! Until this crisis is over, from this moment on, there is one law, mine! I'm in charge of this neighborhood until the crisis is over, and that's final!" Mom raised the big shotgun with one tiny arm and pointed it at each individual in the group as if it weighed little more than a pencil. It was a complete show of strength and domination, mom had always been the queen bee, but now it was time to put weight behind her words. "These bodies show you that we have already had to kill four times, and for my family if I have to, I'll kill again and again and again..." She ended the statement with 12 gauge pointed at the head of Sally. She tried to match mom's glare but couldn't. The younger women blinked and looked down.

Immediately, as though playing the role of her life, Mom snapped her fingers and Sue stepped off the stoop and handed Sally a sack full of groceries. Mom wrapped the gun in her arms and softened her tone with a measured portion of sadness, "Child, all you had to do was ask."

NOT ALL GIFTS COME WITH A BOW

It's been two weeks and the war of the world rages on.

The neighborhood belongs to us now. But, you might also say, that as their leaders and protectors, our family belongs to the neighborhood. Today, I overheard two young kids from down the block, musing about my family. One thought that we took over because we were better armed, the other, a bit older and wiser, disagreed. "They took charge because they work together as a unit. They're smart, tough and won't hesitate to kill to protect their own. There's no force on earth that can stand against that, not even with a tank!"

Incredible! Fifteen very long days ago, we were a dysfunctional family, loathing the idea of a family holiday meal with the same disdain as an IRS audit. Now, the neighborhood has recognized what I myself thought was never possible. For the first time since I was in 7th grade, my family was functional. I don't know if I ever will ever see one of these hostile extraterrestrial beings and to be honest, I hope I don't. But if we did meet, I'd have to thank them. For you see, although it did not come tied in a nice, bright, red bow, it seems that my family was the only recipient of a gift from the flying saucer.

JASON'S
ALIENATED
FAMILY

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- JOIN OUR MISSION -

VISIT

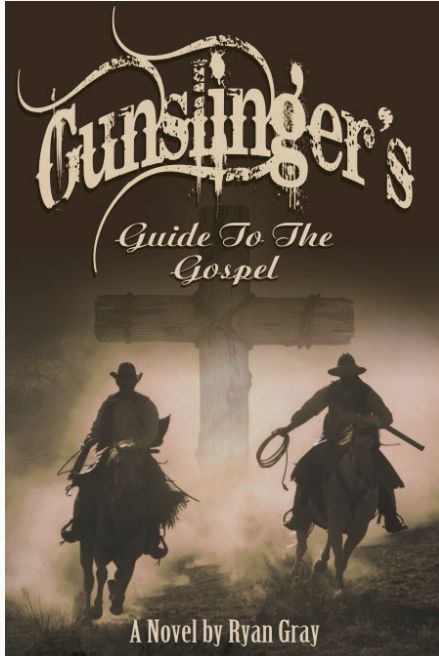
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GUNSLINGERS GUIDE TO THE GOSPEL

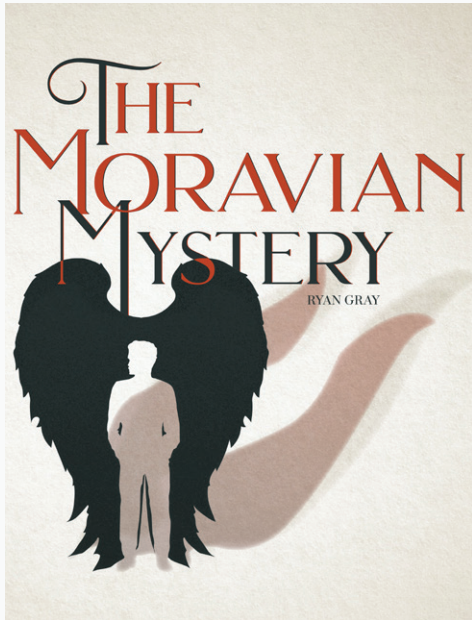


What if the right friendship could change your life forever? An aging gunfighter is about to find out.

Flint is an over-the-hill gunslinger in the old West: tough as nails and afraid of no one. He killed his first man before he could shave, has no family and few friends. He'll never attack innocents nor shoot a man in the back; so, compared to many hired gunman, he's actually a good person. However, after the past couple days, the gunslinger's world and way of thinking has been turned upside.

It all started when a wily mountain man, who throws a quick blade and is a crack shot with a rifle, invited the old gunfighter to ride with him. The rumor mill claims that if you tangle with "the Boy", you'll earn yourself permanent residence in boot hill. Surprisingly, the Boy offers Flint a partnership and something he secretly craved for since he was a small boy. The Gunslinger's Guide to the Gospel is a story of an unlikely partnership between two tough frontiersman. One willing to leave an old life behind to chase after the unknown in search of peace and forgiveness—the other, to share his secret of peace and forgiveness with anyone he meets.

THE MORAVIAN MYSTERY



A grieving, hungover detective is assigned to a mysterious attempted kidnapping case. An overworked single mom is the victim and only witness. Together, they stumble upon a truth both thought only existed in fairy tales.

Story Excerpt

Saul's jaw dropped slightly and he leaned back, he studied the other man's face. He looked like a different person. His eyes were clear, his teeth even looked healthier, not the usual rot left by smoking crack, and his smile had changed. It was warm and genuine. However, that is not what shocked Saul. Zac had the same brilliant glow, the glow he had

seen on Barney's church people.

The detective stood quickly, almost stumbling to the ground. He didn't understand what was going on but needed to space himself from it.

Saul stumbled out of a side door, into an alley. He leaned his back against a wall next to a dumpster and planted his hands on his knees, as he breathed short concentrated breaths trying to make sense of what was going on.

Suddenly, a loud baritone voice barked out, "Shut it! I don't want your excuses, only results, the boss had plans with that woman... and her boy. Now, she's found some protection, we're gonna have to start over with someone else."

No ways! I can't be hearing two thugs talk about Jennifer and some conspiracy for their boss, could I? I'm not that lucky! Saul thought. The detective was completely hidden behind the dumpster, so he could not see the origin of the voices.

The voices continued, "But, Shameless, I'm telling you. I didn't see them coming, and they had such power. There's been nothing like it around here in over a 100 years!"

Shameless? Must be the Irish mob or some stupid nickname. But what does the other yahoo know about what happened here a century ago? Saul pondered this as he slipped his Glock 22 from its holster. With his other hand, he texted his partner Bobby his location and to bring back up.

A massive thud interrupted his thoughts. "Lascivious, you know nothing of control or power. Stop your whining before I drag you by that long tongue of yours to the boss and he eats you alive!"

RALPH'S WAR



At Gettysburg, Ralph lost a piece of himself. The only place he'll look for it is at the bottom of a bottle. Just as the traumatized soldier sinks to his lowest, Ralph is faced with a choice – rejoin the fight or watch his cousin be gunned down in the street.

Story Excerpt

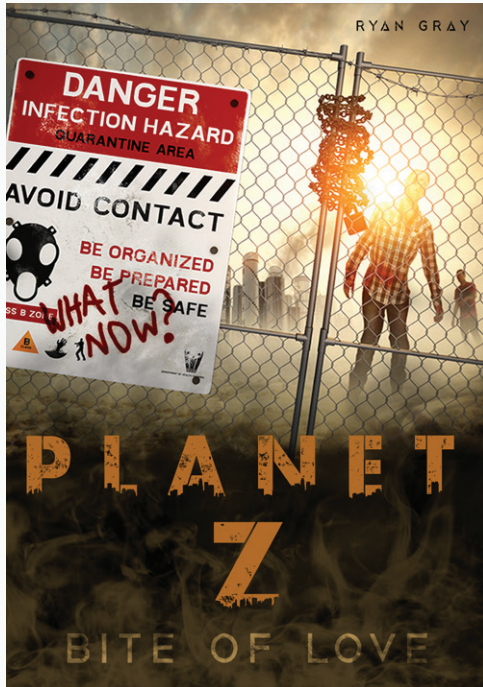
Ralph stared. The words stung worse than a bullwhip on a wet back. “Why are you saying this, Bill?” Ralph managed.

Bill exhaled and looked down at his feet, “Cause, I just want my friend back. But, don't rightly think he ever come back from the war.”

Like a youngster avoiding a whoopin, Ralph avoided eye contact by looking the opposite way, but was open enough to hear what his cuz had to say, “What do you mean by that?”

“Don't know, really, cept maybe you never left the war, cause you're afraid to fight the next one. Fact is, we all gotta fight one war after another. You might think your problems come from failing at the “Charge” or maybe you think your battle's with the bottle. Fact is, the greatest war there is, is in here.” Bill thumbed his chest with his fist and looked his pal in the eyes...”

PLANET Z: BITE OF LOVE



An allegory that I was inspired to write from my career as a non-profit social worker and Christian missionary. My intention was to challenge the reader to examine their lives and consider how they may give back to their community. Reaching out to individuals needing the same helping hand that they may have needed in their own lives. It further examines how in order to help others, we have to often give a ‘piece of ourselves’ in the process.

Story Excerpt

The year was 2179 and the place, Planet Z. The outbreak was originally thought to be a new malaria strain until it was proven that mosquitoes were not to blame. To put an exclamation point on how wrong the scientists were, the clinically dead reanimated and went on a terror spree, devouring anything and anyone in sight! Within a month, the police force and military fell to the infection. The cell phone towers and satellites went offline less than three months later. With communications dead, so was all hope of a cure. The world as we knew it, was gone.

Except in the heart of one man.

To him, the world was not gone, only lost. The first of the “Freed” had already been lost to time, but the story told was passed on to every Freed-man or woman...