

Lights Out

by Larry Johnson

I was surprised to be in a long check-out line. Usually at this time of the day – and this is my usual time, leaving work early before the commuters clog the roads – I get in and out of the Kwik-Mart in no time flat. But no such luck today, there are lines.

I like to cook, so I do the grocery shopping.

I count the goods in my cart. There are 13. One more than allowed to qualify for the Fast Check-Out lane. I decide not to push my luck and to play by their rules. Plus the perfect ass on the woman in front of me gives me ample reason to linger in my line.

Then the lights go out. Suddenly we are in darkness.

Sounds of surprise rise in a chorus of “oohs” and “ohs” from shoppers in the aisles, then stop abruptly when the battery-powered emergency lights come on. They are powerfully bright lights that shine blindingly white beams from above various corners in the supermarket, leaving broader areas in deep shadows. I am reminded of prison escape movies where the clumsy prisoner triggers an alarm and all hell breaks loose.

The young checker down at the front of my line blurts in brief dismay: “Oh oh.” Silhouetted by muted daylight coming through the entrance doors, she shouts for the manager. Employees who had been taking money or bagging groceries freeze in place, resetting their brains to the surprise, awaiting explanations and their next move.

A person of authority appears magically from nowhere and announces at one of the entrance doors, “Folks, we seem to have a power outage here.” I thrill at his powers of deduction. I expect he will have some instructions, too. He does: “Sorry for the inconvenience. Everything is out, we can't process your purchases, folks,” he proclaims, louder than perhaps was needed, causing an elderly lady back in the meats and cheeses to scream before fainting, “Is this a robbery? Is this a robbery?”

Back to the Man-in-Charge: “Please just leave your carts where they are, we will manage that, and leave the store. Sorry for the inconvenience,” he said again. But he really didn't sound all that sorry.

I complied with his commands, just like the other shoppers,

but not without first taking two candy bars in my cart and shoving them up my sleeve. I can't explain why I did that. I didn't need to. I haven't shoplifted anything since I was 14, and that was on a dare. If I ever have to come up with an explanation for the candy bars, I guess it would be this: I didn't come all the way to this goddamn store to walk out with nothing. Or perhaps: Mr. Take Charge Guy pissed me off, so this was how I get my revenge.

When I go to my car, I see shoppers flooding out of all the other stores in this insipidly typical and garish strip mall. The power outage must be in the whole mall. So I get in my car, and it takes a while to get out of here, since everybody else is leaving at the same time. The parking lot is a swamp of cars.

I get onto the road and drive a bit, and there are cars everywhere moving slowly. This isn't the normal commuter-time traffic. Now I see ahead of me why: the stoplight up ahead is flashing yellow. I lean out of my window far enough to see that the cross traffic is getting the same flashing yellow. I hum a while in bewilderment, cogitating. I am wondering if it is better that the stoplights are flashing yellow, even if it's useless for them to do so, than if they were simply out, and, too, if there were a massive power outage, wouldn't the lights simply be out? So isn't this a good sign that the lights are flashing? Or do stoplights have their own backup batteries? If so, and if all the batteries do is allow the lights to flash yellow, then why in hell have them? Can the city government be that stupid?

A motorist in my lane of traffic must be wondering the same thing, since he gets out of his car and walks up to the traffic light to confront it straight on. To aid him further, after a few moments of standing and staring he puts his hands on his hips and stares some more. People around him start honking. He keeps staring. I am not hopeful he will learn anything.

At subsequent intersections there is the same problem with the stoplights. Traffic hardly moves. People inside their cars look worried or are arguing. Naturally, I am curious if something like a city-wide power outage is in play here, or state-wide, or even something bigger than that. So I turn on the car radio, and nothing comes out. No AM, no FM. My goodness, now *that* certainly got me wondering. I hit all the buttons for my saved stations, I fool with the volume dial, still nothing. So I manually run through radio stations, hitting the whole spectrum, thinking if this is something really important, surely the emergency radio station or whatever they call it will come on and tell me we're at war or the Martians have landed or there has been a terrorist attack, or whatever it is supposed to do. But nothing there,

either. So much for all those times when I had to listen to that annoying emergency radio beep when they rehearsed it. More fucking tax dollars down the drain.

Maybe something is just wrong with the radio. I put in a CD and that works. “HmMMM,” I hum to myself. “HmMMMMMM.”

It takes two hours to get home. Usually it takes 10 to 15 minutes from the Kwik-Mart. The kids are already home from school, they got home before the outage, so I am glad about that. Gracie, my wife, is already putting candles out for later, when it gets dark. She is always a pretty positive and optimistic person. “Hey, this is great!” she says. “No TV, a romantic dinner cooked over the fireplace, no computer games, just us tonight, having to talk to each other,” she chirps. The kids want hot dogs and 'smores. It's going to be a picnic. I catch the spirit. It is like when I was a kid and we got snowed in, and school was called off and we slept late and had hot chocolate around a fire in a fireplace.

After dinner, my neighbor Ray comes by, aided by a flashlight. I try to avoid Ray, who is actually a pretty OK guy, but I hate his dog Rex. Rex barks all the goddamn time and prefers to crap in my yard instead of Ray's. I have talked to Ray about this, he apologizes, but he never does anything to change Rex's poop preferences. I have been thinking about collecting a bag of *my* poop and dumping it in Ray's yard, see how *he* likes it. I may yet do that.

Anyway, Ray knocks on the door and opens it without waiting for me to open it. “Hey, Ralph,” – that's me – “what do you think is going on?”, he asks. “You got any news on this power outage? You guys got any D cell batteries?”

I do have some D cell batteries and can't use them for anything now since two months ago I gave away a toy keyboard I bought to learn how to play piano (failed experiment) that took D cell batteries, but I don't feel like giving the batteries to Ray, so I say no. I tell him about my car radio and how it didn't get anything. He frowns at that and leaves, telling us to come over to his house if we are short on anything.

Me and the wife and kids play a round of Monopoly by candlelight, then go to bed early. It is too early for me; usually I need a dose of local TV News at 11 to make me sleepy, you know, the usual car wrecks, drive-by shootings, floods and lost cats. So instead I take a couple of shots of cognac to loosen me up, then I hit the sack. I make some moves on Gracie but she says not tonight, so I drift off to dreamland.

At 7:00 AM the next morning we are awakened by speakers blaring from something moving, probably one of those trucks politicians use to assault people with pleas to vote for them. The message, whatever it was, was both too loud and too garbled to figure out. I suspect the message had something to do with the power outage. Gracie and I can figure out only a couple of words but can't piece them together into something that makes sense. Ray would probably know what the message was, but I don't want to go over there and ask him.

The phones are not working, either, I forgot to mention that they went out at the same time the power did. At least that was what Gracie told me. So I see no reason to even try to go to work today. What would be the point? None of the computers would be working. None of the phones would be working.

Around noon, I open the blinds that cover our living room windows from people who would otherwise be able to stare into our house. I am surprised to see a number of people standing around in the street outside in groups that got bigger and smaller, then they rearrange themselves into new groups. They look bewildered, like people who want to know things. Ray glances my way and reacts with recognition; it is too late for me to duck out of sight. He is heading towards our house.

I meet him at the door before he can barge in. "What is it, Ray? What's going on?"

"Damn, Ralph, that's just it. Nobody knows," he says. "One guy drove all over downtown this morning, people just milling about everywhere, he says the cops have nothing, they are taking up pre-planned positions in case of an emergency like this and to prevent looting. But they have no idea what's happened or going on, or at least they weren't telling this guy. Their communication equipment is all down. This could be it, Ralph, we could already be in World War III. Jesus." Ray looks pretty excited, in a way to suggest he hopes this is true, that The Final Days may now be upon us. I have seen strange altars in his house.

I picture that in my mind, World War III, including the Roman numeral. Really big wars get Roman numerals. I wonder why not World War IV. Don't all the wars since World War II deserve the name World War III? And who is it who gets to name wars, anyway?

Then Ray leans into me and lowers his voice to almost a whisper, looking conspiratorially around, making sure nobody is

watching or listening, and he says: "Listen, Ralph, you have to take this." And from beneath his shirt where it is snugly tucked, he pulls out a revolver and hands it to me. It is heavy. I have never held one in my hand before. Six bullets fill the revolver's cylinder and stare at me in silent menace. Ray tells me not to point the gun at myself, and how the safety works.

"Ray," I say, "I wouldn't know what to do with this. If it comes to our having to use guns, we've already lost if whatever is happening is some kind of war." I try to give it back to him, but he turns around and quickly runs back to his house.

I close the living room curtains and lock all the doors in the house. At 5:30 PM, the loudspeaker truck comes by again, and because we are awake and closer to the street this time, Gracie and I can hear the words, though barely distinguishable through the over-woofered sound: "Folks, do not panic. Everything is under control. There has been a major accident in the power grid. A power surge prior to failure knocked out a lot of computer systems. Be patient, this will all be fixed. We will update as we learn more." The truck moved ahead slowly enough through our neighborhood so that even though we got only the middle of the message when we first started making sense of it, we also eventually heard the whole thing through when it was repeated. Whoever's voice made this recording, he surely sounds a lot like the famous movie actor, Jimmy Stewart. Maybe he actually did record this message years ago, in case of an emergency like this one. His voice is calm and reassuring.

I peeked outside again, this time from a small gap I made in the living room curtains, and I saw several cops on foot and in cop cars surrounding the truck, pushing any neighbors away from them who came too close, telling them to step away from the truck, saying there was at the moment no more information to add.

An old lady across the street did manage to get close enough to one cop to give him a thank-you kiss and a twenty dollar bill.

It's been three weeks now. The loudspeaker truck has stopped coming by, and for that we are grateful, because it was always blaring the same goddamn message, day after day, twice a day, the message unchanged since we first heard it. Nobody knows anything.

We are down to a few canned foods and some stuff past its expiration date from the freezer. I went back to the Kwik-Mart on foot a week ago, but it was closed, as were all the stores in the mall. The

power was still out everywhere, as far as I could tell. I looked into the Kwik-Mart windows, and there was nothing on all the shelves, and all the doors locked. On one of the windows was a home-made sign with the picture of a lost cat, and under that was the address of its owner.

I had never given a thought before about how quickly a family could run out of food. There was always the Kwik-Mart 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. It was always just there. There were stores everywhere.

The kids are out and about most days, looking for food in garbage cans, though that's getting harder, and for anything edible in the way of bugs and plants. My son Mark got a Boy Scout survival merit badge, and dang it if that is not now coming in pretty handy. We have learned to squish things up, boil them, then add sugar so it doesn't taste so bad. You'd be surprised how many things taste OK once you put in enough sugar.

I went over to Ray's four days ago to see if he had any food to share with us. But he had his doors all covered with tape and had hung a sign on a picture window: "Trespassers WILL be shot on sight." I rang his doorbell, and all I heard was his dog barking, barking incessantly, with nobody inside to tell him to shut up, the way they usually do in Ray's house. Maybe Ray and his family left town in time, before all the armed gangs put checkpoints up so they could carjack, rob and rape people. Or so we thought. We heard about those things from the people out on the street, the people who collected news or rumors from other neighborhoods nearby, who in turn got their information or stories from adjacent neighborhoods, and so on.

There was a time people jokingly called a system of communication like that "the Arab telephone." That was years before Arabs really scared people.

I am no longer sure now how long the outage has been going on. We have yet to see anything that looks like a repair crew. The sound truck has returned, again with the same old message, but no longer is it accompanied by cops. People hate the sound truck. I hate the sound truck.

Years ago, I liked watching those futuristic movies with Mel Gibson driving across the desert towards some dystopia where the bad guys hide water and fight off anybody who tries to get at it. Me and Gracie and the kids still have plenty of water but little else. I think we are now two or three months into this hell. A while ago I broke into

Ray's house, not caring now whether he was home or not, and sure enough, he wasn't. He must have figured things out early and escaped. Ray and his family left Rex with some dog food and water, which must have been hard for them, I guess, leaving him. Their cupboards and fridge and freezer were all picked clean. I took my gun with me while breaking into Ray's house, just in case he shot at me and then I would have to shoot back at him. Anyway, all that was there was Rex. And there was me with my gun. Me and Gracie and the kids were hungry. I guess I don't have to tell you what I did with Rex.

Our neighbors long ago stopped meeting on the street outside. Everybody's car has either been stolen or stripped down to nothing and the gasoline sucked out. When people still used to come out on the street there were rumors of black and Mexican gangs roaming the suburbs, stealing what they could get, and in some cases, taking over people's homes after killing them. We haven't seen any gangs yet. We don't know how our cars have all been stolen or ruined, or by whom. Whoever does that knows how to avoid being seen or heard. We have to come up with our own theories about these people, now that nobody ventures outside of their houses anymore. I discount all talk of an Alien Invasion. Aliens would have no reason to be shy if they were this powerful and successful.

I really have lost all track of time by now. I am always tired and hungry. It's all been one long nightmare, and Gracie's watch, our only timepiece, stopped working about two weeks into the outage, a long time ago. We walk mostly at night now, with lean backpacks filled with just the few things we cannot part with and are not too heavy. I still have the gun, but only three bullets are left. I got lucky a few weeks back. The guy was alone in his house, shooting at us when we approached. I figured – correctly – he was protecting some kind of stash he had. I missed with the first bullet but hit him square in the forehead with the second one. His body is now in the trunk of his car out in the garage, far enough away so we don't smell him. Looks like we have food and things to drink now for a couple more weeks if we ration it all and make it last. The guy has, or rather had, an OK house.

But the guy has no candles, so our days are pretty short. We learned a while ago that the gangs spray-paint a code on houses where they have already maimed and pillaged. So we painted a couple of those codes on this guy's front door, and that worked like a charm. Cars drive by the house, slow down for a few seconds, and then speed off again.

There is one hopeful thought in all this: If some country or

alien force has taken us over, there's still no sign of them anywhere.
You'd think we would have seen some of them by now, wouldn't you?
Isn't that alone cause for hope?

We hid from the gangs for quite a while, mostly in sewers, moving only at night and away from the rats and packs of dogs, but the gangs have now been overtaken by random masses of unorganized people everywhere, running around crazy. People have been eating people, I have seen that with my own eyes. Money has no value, of course, not anymore, and gasoline won't get you food anymore, either, because nobody has a use for it. For a while you could get food or cigarettes for gasoline, but not any more.

The power is still out. I haven't seen the sound truck in months.

I have to say: Things don't look so good.