

EDDY

And other tales of
Isolation
Damnation
Redemption



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TOWNSEL**

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*Nightmares can hurt you
only when you're alone.*

*There is always a choice
for those with the strength to create one.*

FURY DUTY

I. Call to Duty.

It's still hard to believe that the piece of paper which would seal my destiny appeared in my mailbox only two weeks ago. But appear it did, exactly one year after the last one. Last year, it was a mundane civil case, and I was excused, with the thanks of the court. However, this year would be different.

Seeing that unholy directive plastered across the top of the page brought on that sense of doom that haunts many.

JURY SUMMONS - Your service is required as a prospective juror by the Court ...

I mean, everyone hates jury duty. Don't they?

Well, actually, maybe not. Actually, some seem to get off determining some poor slob's fate. I just know I wanted no part of it.

I read the rest of the summons to find the date to report. Although I shouldn't have expected anything different, I was still alarmed to see that I had been given only one week's notice. I remember Dad telling me that, in the old days, notices were sent two or three months prior to allow the prospective juror to work it out with his employer, or make a plea to be excused due to hardship, that type of thing.

Now, in this era of swift and speedy justice, no such excuses are heard or tolerated. Your boss doesn't like it? *Too bad*. It's going to cause you great inconvenience? *Not our problem*. You have a moral objection? *Tough titty. Buck up, little camper*.

Of course, the short notice was ominous and foretelling of something I suspected would now catch up to me. But I wasn't completely prepared to accept that probability upon my initial receipt of the summons.

Technically, there was nothing to stop me from going to the court and trying to appeal to the clerk's mercy anyway. But that would mean burning extra gas (more precious than gold these days, rationed carefully, and most likely mere months from being made illegal). Alternatively, I could risk my life taking public transportation. This, of course, was the government's preferred mode of getting from Point

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A to B, but that didn't take into account the dangers of riding a bus or train.

I decided against both options, and not just because of shelling out more bucks for fuel, or risking life and limb if I was mugged. No, although there's no law yet against trying to get out of jury duty, misfortune often comes to those who protest performing their so-called civic duty. Even if you aren't a law breaker, a troublemaker could be dealt with as well. More subtly, to be sure, but often more severely.

I don't mind admitting to you now, I was nervous. Petrified, in fact. My anxiety only intensified over the next week until the day came to report.

As you know, a recently reported tragedy in my life made me the perfect candidate to serve on a jury. Especially in a certain capacity.

Like everyone else, I'd been following the Simmons murder investigation, which was nearing its trial date. Although unannounced, which was standard practice to bolster ratings for the big day, it was commonly believed the trial would be conducted any day now. My guess was that it would be conducted in exactly one week. The date I was ordered to report for duty.

Would I be selected as a juror on that case? It seemed likely, given my family history. Nevertheless, I still held out hope that I would be excused from another simple civil suit and would be done in time to enjoy mid-morning latte at Starbucks.

No such luck.

II. Fun and Games in the Jury Lounge.

I reported promptly to the jury lounge on the date ordered, seven days later. I decided evasion was not an option. I also convinced myself I could possibly make something of this loathsome call to civic duty.

With a grimace, I put on my juror badge and took a seat in the back, still hoping I might get overlooked. Hundreds were called in every day, but only sixty-five served. Hope springs eternal that I

would be among the vast majority to be sent back to work, but optimism of that sort is sorely misplaced these days.

Shortly after 8:00 a.m., the courthouse warm-up comedian started his routine. That's what I call him anyway. You know who I mean: The court clerk who describes the process of selection, in a cute and funny way, in a vain attempt to make everyone feel better about being there. Funny how none of these theatrics were necessary in the old days of my parents, but now were considered essential to placate the fears of those commanded to serve.

The court clerk showed a brief film about the punishment for not performing our civic duty (which is still somehow equally cute and funny, although there's no missing the serious threat of punishment). I'm surprised he didn't put on a psychedelic wig and a big red nose. *Court Jester* would be another appropriate moniker for this idiot.

If I recall correctly, the clerk's name was Steve. Yes, that's it. I remember now someone who had been called to serve last year calling him "Steve-O" before getting a warning glare from one of the security guards.

I have to admire Steve-O's ability to perform the same routine, and spew out the same candy-coated bullshit, day in and day out for his entire career as a court lackey paper-pusher.

My dad told me about the old jury selection process, which often meant you sat in the lounge all morning until most people were dismissed with the court's thanks. At least when there were still Superior Courts that followed proper judicial procedure. *Vamoose, ya varmints. See ya next year. Or not. But y'all come back and see us sometime, y'hear?!*

Not these days. Since the aforementioned swift and speedy justice movement became the law of the land, these courts and the judges don't mess around. Everyone in the jury lounge would know very shortly if he or she was to be sent back to their day jobs, or was going to be led down the hall to a courtroom. By force, if necessary.

That day, the Court officers and staff must have been really anxious to get underway. Steve-O hadn't even finished his closing jokes when his assistant appeared on the sidelines. She was waving her fingertips in front of her throat, signaling *Wrap it up, Stevie boy!*

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Steve-O was flustered that his assistant had used an imaginary Vaudeville hook to pull him off the equally fictitious stage. I imagine his opening remarks are one of the few things he likes about his mundane job.

He mumbled something that sounded like, “You’ve been a great crowd. I’m here all week.” Then, as quickly as he appeared at the front of the room, he was back at his desk.

After all, he needed to surrender the stage to the real stars of the show.

III. Here Come the Judges.

Stepping into the jury lounge were the four of the five judges trying cases that day. They took their places, dead center, at the front of the room, where the court jester performed only moments before. Without fail, five cases were tried each and every day. The fact that the fifth judge didn’t enter the jury lounge with the others strongly suggested a grand entrance was coming. My fears were soon realized as to who the fifth judge might be.

Other prospective jurors sensed this as well. The atmosphere in the room was a mixture of breathless excitement, anticipation and dread. My skin began to crawl.

At first, it looked like half the Supreme Court of the United States had been flown in, just for this auspicious occasion. Of course, I know that Article III was eradicated from the U.S. Constitution long ago. Not just amended or redacted, but *erased*, as if it never existed. It occurs to me again now that much American history has been erased gradually, event by event. Since it was illegal to speak of the now-defunct history of our country, there was no danger of it being picked up by the next generation of Americans. In theory, at least.

But I digress. The end result was the same: There is no longer a Supreme Court either. In fact, there are no longer any appellate jurisdictions or proceedings of any kind.

Justice is now quick and final.

Swift and speedy, the judicial equivalent of fast food.

As such, there is no need, time or tolerance for appeals.

The judges who entered the room were each accompanied by a heavily armed bailiff. The bailiffs looked more like a SWAT assault team than the County Sheriff's deputies of old. These days, it might be more appropriate they should dress like the Secret Service. That's actually what they do, if necessary: take a bullet for the judge. Even more appropriate: Why not just cut the crap and bring back the classic Gestapo uniforms? And the SS goose-stepping and Hitler mustache as well?

The four judges, in turn, each stepped forward. The first was a distinguished but haggard-looking older gentleman. It occurred to me that he looked a little like my dad might have if he was still alive. But my dad would never have become as decrepit and haggard as this man now standing before me.

Although the job of judge prematurely aged many, this judge still had to be pushing sixty-five. No doubt he was facing mandatory retirement. In our new enlightened and efficient society, this meant he would be disposed of quickly, quietly and in a most respectful manner. The contemporary equivalent of casting elderly Eskimos out on an iceberg to die.

Government concerns regarding over-population meant there was no justification in keeping anyone alive beyond that person's period of usefulness. And there are strict government standards for determining if a citizen is still a viable member of society.

America is again second to none in all things of consequence, and the execution of senicide is no exception.

Every judge held a single piece of paper, no doubt the list of jurors to be called for his or her trial that day. This first judge stepped forward and produced his, with shaking hands. As you know, that list had the names of the jurors who would follow the judge and bailiff to the appropriate courtroom.

It's comical really, if you don't mind my saying so. No matter how swift and speedy our justice system has become, paperwork is still inevitable, and a bitch to process. Probably always will be. As such, the fact that the judges had the lists of jurors only minutes after they reported, confirmed that the selection had been made in advance.

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Think about it. How much more swift and speedy can a court case get if most of it is conducted prior to the trial date?

Once in this room and called for service, no one was getting out of it. It was reckless fantasy to believe that I would be excused.

Having the rejected prospective jurors show up anyway was just for dramatic effect. It was also designed to see if there were any dissenters or no-shows. While that may have resulted in some heightened pre-trial drama, it's very rare. Playing hooky from jury duty has always put one in contempt of court. And that was a whole different ball of wax in this new age.

I took a closer look at the first judge, and decided my initial observation was faulty. There was no real resemblance to my dad. A slight physical resemblance perhaps, but this beaten-down husk of a judge had not a trace of the spirit and resolve that my father possessed.

I asked myself again, *would my dad look like this judge, had he lived?* In a superficial way, perhaps, except for the lack of spirit in this man's eyes.

Would my dad's resolve and strength have been stolen, just as this judge's had been? Would the tyranny of this new nation eventually consumed my father's soul, had he lived to a ripe, old age?

To me, the answer is obvious and indisputable.

Dad's strength would have persevered, even now. Just as I know it did, until the day he was eliminated as a critic of the state.

And that gave me a responsibility to honor his memory. Today, more than ever. I could only hope his strength had been passed down to me.

IV. Salvation of the Father

When he was younger, younger than I am now, my dad did speak out. "Unless I woke up in Russia this morning," he would say, "I still have my First Amendment rights. And my Second Amendment rights too, if someone tries to take away anything I've earned and sweated for."

When things began to change, my mother, other family friends, and even complete strangers would caution him to keep his voice low. Not only did the walls have ears, but everyone and everything, everywhere you went, was listening as well.

But Dad would have none of that cowardly stuff. His defiance only intensified as he grew older and more reckless.

Then, one day, he disappeared.

Just like so many ordinary citizens who opened their mouths at the wrong time within earshot of the wrong people, he was gone. In the beginning, citizens like Dad who openly condemned the erosion of civil liberties were quietly removed physically, and evidence of their prior existence erased covertly.

The official story, which I knew to be a heinous lie: An officer of the State informed Mom and me that Dad had been killed in a horrible, disfiguring accident, his body burned beyond recognition. The officer reminded us that anyone killed in such a grisly fashion were automatically cremated. This, in compliance of ecological and sustainable environment laws, to prevent the outbreak and spread of fictitious disease, and to minimize the unnecessary use of priceless land. Conventional burials are now a thing of the past, and human remains are returned to the next of kin only after cremation and sterilization. The urns are sealed and unbreakable. One has to wonder if they contain anything at all.

Mom chose to accept the lie, although I could see in her eyes she didn't believe it any more than I. Her eyes also told me to keep my mouth shut, or possibly suffer the same fate as my father.

So, for years, Mom kept the urn of what I've always believed to be just another undocumented John Doe cadaver on her mantle. When she passed away from cancer last year, that grisly urn became my property. I wasted no time in throwing it in the garbage. Even if it actually contained the ashes of my father's body, it wasn't him. The urn was just a reminder of his murder, and represented the fabricated account told to us. That was one lie I could dispose of, at least.

In its place, I now have Mom's urn. There are no fireplaces in the tiny two-room apartments making up these new human settlements. As such, there are no mantles upon which to place an urn. I'm forced

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to keep Mom's ashes on my nightstand. At least, I choose to believe those are her remains that are in the generic container.

While I have no doubt my dad is dead, I'm certain it was not the cause of an accident as described by the willing lap dog death merchants of our corrupt system.

I'll never know exactly what happened, other than he was eliminated.

Things have changed since then, and not for the better. As the government control and removal of dissenters became more accepted, then demanded, by the masses, the erasure of dissenters has become public, to serve as an example of what happens to those guilty of illegal speech and thought.

I remember watching an old movie with Dad, *No Country for Old Men*. The scenario in that film is not the same as what is now reality, but the title fits very well. The deterioration of our society became too burdensome and incomprehensible for him to bear. And now that everything is so much worse, as I awaited my jury duty assignment, I wasn't certain I had his strength, or the conviction needed, to make a difference.

But now, as you've seen, I've found that strength and conviction.

V. No Country for Old Judges.

So, I was temporarily mesmerized by the old judge as he made his remarks and conveyed his instructions. He delivered his remarks with the passion and conviction of someone who had just been lobotomized; the antithesis of my father.

Was this judge a man who, in his youth, had values, similar to my dad's? Someone who had similar fears, but chose a different path which kept him alive? Or was he an obedient drone from the get-go, who would soon be put out to pasture in the most horrific manner imaginable?

One thing was certain: Reducing population is a high priority. Less people makes for easier control. The elderly, and dissenters of all ages, are right at the top of the list for elimination.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

I had been taking a commuter flight from my home base in San Diego to the San Francisco branch at least twice a month since the crisis began. Profits in the Northern and Central California offices had fallen off sharply, and it was my job to light a fire under the branch manager's ass to get those numbers up.

I'm especially pissed this trip, because my supervisor required that I take a less expensive flight on a cheap-ass airline. Christ, you can't even get a little bag of peanuts anymore because of all the crybabies going on about nut allergies. Didn't the human race survive for a hundred years before someone concocted allergies to everything? Now, all you can get are pretzels.

So now, instead of First Class, I'm downgraded to Coach. No alcohol for me unless I pay for it out of my own pocket. At least, when the flights got to be less than half full, I could stretch out and take an entire row for myself. Oh sure, if the flight was really empty, the flight attendants would make us bunch up anyway. For weight distribution, they claimed. I seriously doubt the plane would fall out of the sky if I didn't sit next to some three-hundred pound slob with B.O. strong enough to choke a pig.

Of course, the one consistent nowadays is the pain in the ass with checking a bag. I know, it's time-consuming and overkill to check anything for an hour flight up north. The only item I check is my briefcase, which is always securely locked, to protect its contents.

I'm always tickled when TSA asks if someone else has had access to my briefcase. Oh no sir, no ma'am. Other than riding in the baggage compartment, that briefcase never leaves my side. In that sense, it's like a loyal dog, often at rest, but ready to come to my aid at a moment's notice.

So, fine, I'm a team player and agreed to travel using the cheap seats. But, I insisted that two things didn't change. First, I would still rent a car. There was no way in hell I was getting into an Uber, getting on BART or cramming onto a shuttle these days. You never knew who would end up next to you. Second, and more importantly, if business threatened to result in overtime, I would check into a nice

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hotel and return to San Diego the next morning. I absolutely do not fly at night. Flights are sparsely populated during daylight hours, but the puddle-jumpers are filled to capacity after sundown.

I'm the regional manager for all of California, the result of another recent promotion. Only a month prior, I was pushing papers and hating life before getting kicked upstairs to administration. I had no problem with advancement due to turnover. Whatever continued to add to my excessive and unwarranted salary was just fine with me.

Truth be told, it couldn't even be defined as turnover, since existing employees, like me, were all taking up the slack. As vacancies were created (and this was becoming more frequent), they were not replaced. Existing management and staff were simply reshuffled and reassigned.

Some of us had to take up the slack in other ways that were not acceptable. Not all existing employees were pulling their weight. For example, the branch manager I was going to reprimand again today was definitely losing brownie points as a team player.

No, I can't say there's really any real turnover any more. There were rats deserting, and those left behind were trying to keep the ship afloat.

I was a prime candidate for such rapid advancement, and it took a national crisis for it to pay off. I've always thrown myself into my work, even though it's never stimulated my intellect or creativity. An exceptional work ethic doesn't hurt either. Still, my job was just how I killed time until I could pursue my favorite sport.

If I'm being honest, it was always easier than trying to have a fulfilling social life, let alone a healthy relationship with a woman. But I know myself. While I long for these things from time to time, it's just easier to seek instant gratification. And competition isn't as tough these days.

2:55 p.m.

I recovered my briefcase at baggage claim. I always felt naked without it. If it wouldn't impede my easy access to its contents, I'd handcuff it to my wrist, just like in the old spy movies.

From there, I walked across the terminal to get my rental car. The clerk at the Budget Rent-A-Car looked tired. Haggard, even. But very cute. Hopefully, she'd be on duty on my return trip tomorrow. I'd hit on her and pour on all my charm now, but I was running behind for my meeting. However, there was always time for a brief introduction while the paper work was being filled out.

"As you can see, my name is Caleb Reither," I told her. "Are you working tomorrow morning? Maybe we could grab lunch before my return trip."

Unfortunately for her, her nametag prevented any chance of anonymity.

"What do you say, Stephanie?" I pressed.

She was exasperated, but that never bothers me. You know what they say. Ninety-nine woman out of a hundred will shoot you down. Oh, but No. 100! That's the sure thing worth waiting for.

"Mr. Reither," she said. "Thank you for the offer. But who knows where *any* of us will be tomorrow?"

I wasn't put off in the least at her indifference and dismissal.

"Well, you think about it," I said, as she handed me the keys to my Ford Escort.

She didn't respond as I left. I imagined she was already bracing herself in case she found herself subjected to my charms again the next day.

I admit, I do enjoy the hunt. Even the rejections turn me on, just for the sport of it, if nothing else. Of course, hooking up with every hundredth object of my affection makes it all worthwhile.

3:10 p.m.

Christ, I was running really late this trip.

I found my shitty Ford Escort, shook my head in disgust, and planted my butt on the torn vinyl seat. I placed my briefcase in the passenger seat, for easy access.

I always took the Octavia/Fell exit from the 101, then turned onto Market Street.

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3:30 p.m.

I made the drive in less than twenty minutes, making even better time than the last time I made this trip. Not long ago, at this time of day during the work week, the drive from SFO to the branch office would take over an hour. Oh, make no mistake. There is still a rush hour in every major California city. And now, there are new, more dangerous impediments in getting from Point A to B. But, by and large, less people and reduced population means a more swift and speedy commute.

Timed stoplights along Market Street did manage to delay my arrival at the office. I guess it was a pipe dream that that they would be replaced with demand lights. Not a priority. All the same, it was maddening. I caught every single red light. There were maybe a dozen other cars on the street, and I had to spend an eternity at every intersection, waiting for non-existent traffic to navigate the deserted cross streets.

3:40 p.m.

Eventually, I reached the office's parking garage, and pulled into the Third Street entrance. I usually chose this entrance because I preferred Gene (or was it Zeke?) to the other attendant on the other side of the garage. Gene did a better job than most at hiding his contempt for me (just another suit). These days, getting a little respect (or at least, not hostile disrespect) from a blue collar nobody was always a plus before heading upstairs to chew out a branch manager whose numbers had fallen way off.

In addition to Gene's unusual absence, there was something else different in the parking garage since my last trip. Not only was there no Gene, but his booth was locked up tight, the door padlocked from the outside. It was possible he had only called in sick, but I had a feeling his was a permanent absence. If so, building management (like my company) wasn't in a hurry to fill the vacancy.

I'd have to take a ticket from the machine, I suppose. This was a chore I found very inconvenient and annoying. No matter how

carefully I pulled up to those infernal ticket distribution gadgets, or how diligent in angling my vehicle, I could never reach the big brass button on the ticket machine without opening my car door.

This was a real pain in the ass. One of many I have to deal with in a given day. As always, I opened the car door too quickly and rammed it into one of the big cement poles that surrounded the ticket machine.

Why the hell they couldn't get a replacement parking attendant when the regular guy is sick is beyond me. No matter what's going on in the state, it's no excuse for not doing business as usual, as far as I'm concerned.

I pressed the damn button a half dozen times, while I hung halfway out the car door trying to reach it. Sorry, Charlie, no tickee for you! After muttering a few choice expletives to myself, I noticed the parking gate arm was up. The entrance to P1 was unblocked. Screw it. I'll straighten it out with the receptionist, and I was in a rental anyway. Let them tow the damn heap if they wanted.

I parked in a spot right next to the elevator. It was easy. In fact, I never had this kind of luck getting a great space up front. But that day, the garage was nearly deserted. Of the few cars within my range of vision, several looked like they had been there for quite some time. Cobwebs had taken root, connecting the undercarriage to the concrete below. Deserted, most likely.

It appeared parking enforcement, along with manning the gates, was no longer a priority. It didn't seem I would have to worry too much about getting cited or towed.

I retrieved my briefcase from the passenger seat, and pressed the button on the key to lock the car. Hardly seemed necessary in this ghost-town garage. But, again, old habits, you know.

I got on the elevator, and took the short four-flight trip from the parking garage to the building's main lobby. From there, I walked over to the elevator bank serving the tenant offices. Both elevators appeared instantly when summoned, and I had both of them to myself. No annoying assholes swinging their backpacks around and hitting me in the gut, or lazy jerks too lazy to walk up or down one flight of stairs. Good luck was mine, at least so far.

FEAR OF OPEN SPACES

ag·o·ra·pho·bi·a

A form of anxiety disorder that causes an abnormal fear of open spaces, crowded public places, or leaving a safe location.

I.

This day begins just like every other.

I expect tomorrow to be no different.

Like many nine-to-fivers, despite what may be going on in the world, I'm absolutely useless until I have my morning coffee. In my overstuffed pantry, there are twelve thirty-ounce canisters of Folgers Classic Roast. This may seem excessive to a lot of folks, but it's less than half of what I received after my last grocery delivery. You might be surprised at how quickly I burn through my java. I use it mostly to wake up in the morning. But occasionally, I sip it to stay awake during nights that are especially unnerving.

In the corner, by the nearly useless apartment-sized refrigerator, I have stacked thirty-eight cases of water, each containing thirty-two pints, neatly arranged in four rows of eight, like little soldiers standing at attention in formation.

I suppose I was short-sighted in buying it this way, instead of getting gallon jugs. In this packaging, it seems like I have more plastic than H₂O. But, like so many living life in the fast lane (hardly), I enjoyed the convenience of grabbing a personal-sized bottle and chugging away. I used to dump my empties into a blue recycling bin. After completing this simple task, I didn't give the ultimate destination of the empties another thought. Of course, trash pickup was the first service to fall by the wayside. Now, it's all I can do to cram the crushed dead soldiers into one of few remaining Hefty bags to the point of bursting. Same for the other garbage I produce.

In my three-story walk-up apartment, there isn't a lot of space for trash storage. Two bedrooms, one bath, a cooking area that barely qualifies as a kitchenette, and a very cozy (cramped) living area. Nine hundred square feet of luxury urban living, accessible via indoor

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stairwell and hallway. The interior entry gives me a little added security and peace of mind.

My apartment has become a multi-room prison cell of self-exile, my sanctuary and escape into my irrational, vicious-circle phobia.

For the time being, I'm putting my refuse into the guest bedroom. No need to preserve the room for its intended purpose for sleepover visitors, as my participation in slumber parties is now years behind me.

Nor is the room useful for its former function as a home office. The laptop, printer and other devices that require electricity are now becoming relics of a bygone era. The other day, I turned on the laptop just long enough to check the charge level, and enter a few words into my personal journal. After I typed a few new paragraphs, the battery level slipped from eighty-two percent to eighty. I would have to begin rationing my computer time, because once the battery died, there was no guarantee it would be resurrected.

Fortunately, the smaller bedroom has a window just large enough to allow most of the odor to escape into the brisk winter air outside. I don't know if the ventilation it provides will be sufficient come high summer in the city.

The window in the second bedroom remains open, 24/7. With great emotional difficulty, I was able to approach the window to open it, and push out the screen. The rattle of the bent screen when it fell to the walkway three stories below drew the attention of some unwelcome visitors, but they dispersed after several minutes of complete silence from the third floor.

I was able to rig a pulley system leading outside the open window, extending several feet away from the building. I use it now to transport a metal bucket containing my human waste, ignited to burn a safe distance from the outside wall. I'm sorry if this is a bit crude, a little *TMI*, but I'm quite proud of my ingenuity in concocting and executing this system. Especially, since I am terrified to the point of hyperventilation every time I have to dispose of my pee and poop.

Otherwise, I open the bedroom door only long enough to throw more plastic bottles and garbage inside. It's unlikely an intruder will try to scale the three stories outside to gain access to my crappy little

apartment. All the same, I installed a deadbolt on the door. If someone wants to break into my guest room from the outside window, and haul away my trash, more power to him. But they won't be able to move from my second bedroom into the apartment, unless they bring an axe with them too.

I don't see a lot of people anymore, so I'm not too worried about a burglar, rapist or murderer paying me a surprise visit. And I know the others that shuffle up and down the streets are incapable of scaling the wall like Spider-Man. Of course, the front door was even more secure, with two deadbolts and a regular turnkey lock.

Since the entry to my apartment is accessed from an interior hallway, there is no window in the living room. Aside from the aforementioned second bedroom window, there is a large window in the kitchen, looking out onto the dying city below.

There is also the large window in the master bedroom, which I blocked with my enormous upright armoire. While the daylight (and, along with it, the threat of the outside world) peek around the edges of the dresser during the day, I simply leave the room every morning when the intrusive muted sunlight starts to make me nervous and fearful. Fortunately, from dusk until dawn, the complete absence of outside illumination gives me sufficient peace of mind to get a decent night's sleep.

At night, I can convince myself that what I *don't* see can't hurt me. When pitch black darkness covers my surroundings like a shroud, there is nothing outside to fear. The threats lurk only during the day, when I can see them through the ever-present fog and ash, murky but somewhat illuminated.

This is the main reason I so desperately need my java first thing in the a.m.

I have a cheap little dinette set near the kitchen window. On it, I keep my precious Keurig coffee maker and my spinning rack of K-Cup Pods, filled to capacity, less six. I can still use the Pods, and do when I'm feeling especially low. But without electricity, the Keurig is useless and gathering dust.

Next to the Keurig, I keep my old-fashioned beat-up metal coffee pot, just like the cowboys used over an open campfire. I sigh to

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myself every time I pick up the coffee pot, bypassing the Keurig, unable to prepare a fancy brew. Again, I settle for the hot, dark sludge like they used to serve to the drunks in the homeless shelters.

Sitting in front of both coffee makers is a portable gas grill. I bought this and the archaic coffee pot when some friends invited me to a camping trip. *We're really going to rough it. Here's what you'll need.* Now, the prospect of spending a weekend out in the open, in the woods, was about as likely as camping on the moon. I bought the supplies, intending to give it a try, but I chickened out. My friends weren't surprised, and we drifted apart not long after a few more incidents of me flaking. Nevertheless, I'm glad I at least bought the coffee pot and portable grill, as they became huge lifesavers.

Getting too close to the kitchen window makes me very nervous. But, without electricity, the natural light does come in handy in a dark, dank apartment. My eyesight isn't what it used to be, and I need clarity of vision when it's time to make my brew. Especially when I've adopted a coffee percolating method that's straight out of the nineteenth century.

That's my common sense talking, for the time being. But there was a growing temptation I was finding more difficult to deny. I could still take my bathroom door off the hinges, and nail it up to cover the kitchen window.

Then, the outside world would be entirely blocked, making it easier to convince myself that outside and all its hidden dangers didn't exist at all. I could fool myself into believing that nothing in the open spaces could hurt me.

It's very tempting to block that kitchen window.

II.

There was a bratty boy, a real terror, who used to live in this building. Randy Cooper. Ten years old, and freakishly huge for a kid his age. He stood eye level to my peephole (when I could gather my nerve to look through it), which meant he was already over five feet tall. But he also tipped the scales at over two hundred, and did not carry that weight well. Even for a kid who was still well short of his

teenage years, his excess tonnage resided disproportionately in his overly ample belly, tree trunk arms and legs, and jowly, vicious face. His long matted hair, along with his grime and sweat-stained clothes, confirmed that he had yet to embrace the concept of personal hygiene.

Little (huge) Randy Cooper was the type who could assume the role of bully when he was in control, or have the role of victim thrust upon him when he wasn't. He was the personification, possibly the reincarnation, of those who picked on me when I was a kid.

Randy Cooper recognized the victim in me. He seized the opportunity with the gusto of a zealous hunter, in it for the *hunt* and the *sport*, as well as the *meat*.

He would sneak up to my door, with the stealth of a feral cat stalking its prey before pouncing. When he was sure it would have maximum effect, he would quickly turn my locked doorknob, scaring the crap out of me. At that point, we both knew who was in control, and I would succumb to absolute terror.

While he twisted the door knob savagely, the Cooper brat would chant his vicious taunts right outside my front door.

Psycho! Nutcase! Crazy shut-in! Bonkers Barbie!

I no longer wanted to look through the peephole at him. When I did, I was greeted with a hideous, horrible single eye looking back at me. Then, when he knew I got an eyeful, he'd back away from the door so I could get a better view of his little show, like a sinister song and dance man entertaining a captive audience of one.

I would try to ignore him, but my panic always took control. I screamed for him to shut up and go away. But, of course, this was about as effective as trying to scare ants away from a picnic by pouring sugar on the ground.

“Go home, and leave me alone, you little brat! I'll call the cops!”

The juvenile delinquent just laughed, knowing full well I was too terrified to open my door to anyone. If I ever had to be removed from my apartment by force (for a fun trip to the loony bin perhaps), the remover would be dealing with an insane phobic, driven out of her mind.

Psycho! Nutcase! Crazy shut-in! Bonkers Barbie!