

Gas Day

If you were keeping score, I guess you could say that I lucked out. True, it would have to be a finely-calibrated scorecard, on a scale of hundreds of thousands of points, with the luckier and unluckier separated from their neighbors by distances the width of a full stop. But yes, I'm here telling you about it. Lucky me.

I'd just gotten out of my car, at not even nine o'clock that morning. Early, at least for me. The hope of "accidentally" running into a particular girl can motivate a young man in surprising ways.

So it was early. But the main student parking lot, Lot W, had already begun to ripple with heat. I beeped the doors locked and thought, *A scorcher*. Nodded to this little curly-haired, eyeglassed guy a couple parking spaces away who'd gotten out of his car at the same time. I knew him, vaguely, from the posters for the campus radio station where he DJed; his name was Mose. Slung my shoulder bag over my back. And then set out across the lot in the direction of the eight or ten buildings there at the state college's main -- all right, *only* -- campus.

Mose, meanwhile, had zigged over in my direction and was weaving with me through the painted lanes, among the parked cars already crowding the lot. I got the sense that he wanted to make small talk; we didn't know each other well enough for any other kind. But I pretended to be lost in thought, even stepped up my pace a bit as though late for something official like a class and not just

suffering the pangs of sublimated horniness.

I -- we -- had crossed half the distance to the sidewalks and lawns which ringed the lot when we heard it.

You heard it then too, I know. You heard it even if actually in the midst of it, even if powerfully distracted by your other senses (one in particular). You heard it if you were deaf as a brick, even if you had no ears at all, because anyone with a skeleton "heard" it in his or her bones. But here's what it was like for me:

It began as a dull roar, apparently from the direction of the campus. (It took a few minutes to appreciate that it came from *everywhere* at once -- that the sound from the buildings before us had just reached us before the sound from elsewhere.) I broke stride, and Mose plowed into me from behind because he too had heard it and forgotten to pay attention to what he was about. He didn't apologize and I didn't ask or expect him to. We were still listening to it. *It*: the rolling thunder of several thousand feet running in the same direction, across old wooden floors and newer tiled ones. Not all the feet were running, we later learned: some were hitting rooftops and the ground as their owners leapt from greater heights, and others b-b-b-bumping down stairways. As we listened, we heard smaller sonic punctuation marks, so to speak, bangs and pops which we would later understand as windows being flung open or smashed, doors banging into hallways, the pounding of restroom stalls as their occupants fell against the walls in their haste to exit, the frantic-rodent squeaking of wheelchairs.

And then came the metallic clanks and clatters, thumps and booms from behind and around us: dozens of car doors thrown open, banging against their own hinges and against the doors and fenders of cars next to them, one larger bang a moment after one driver simply exited his Jeep without coming to a stop first. After all of which, the slapping sound of sandals and flip-flops and sneakers and bare feet and knees hitting the Lot W asphalt.

Less obvious was the mottled backdrop of sounds, which (as Mose and I later discussed) had been there all along: *voices*. Shouts, cries of alarm and despair, verbal and non-verbal, sudden random wordless vocalizations, grunts and groans and even some screams. Somewhere behind us, a girl shrieked, her voice shattering, "*Jeezus Christ the fuck oh my god oh my god oh my god my god what the fuck---*!" before breaking off in an *Oof!* as someone shoved her silent.

Because, yes, now people were running there in Lot W, too, running into one another and running across the lawn on both sides of the driveway leading to it, their cars abandoned. I said earlier that all the feet were running in the same direction, but that wasn't really true -- at least not in a standard, four-points-of-the-compass way. They were running in the same direction only if you understood *the same direction* to mean *any direction which takes me away from here as fast as possible*: fleeing the spot where they were standing, sitting, walking, at that exact instant.

More: everyone in the world was running, or at least everyone inside a building or vehicle, an enclosed space of any kind anywhere. It wasn't just the sound of thousands of feet running on the campus of our little public college. It was the sound of *nine billion* pairs of feet hitting the floors and ground and snow and puddles and pavements all at once, and the sound rolled from place to adjoining place for probably hours before dissipating. Because it eventually did stop.

And locally -- again, everywhere -- it stopped shortly afterwards: the moment you got outdoors, and only then.

Here is the point where your experience *versus* mine and Mose's most sharply diverged, because you had probably been indoors somewhere, and we -- and the other "lucky" ones -- were already outside. But you, we could *see* you even if we couldn't *be* you: you came to a standstill, stood there breathless, your eyes and nose streaming, chest heaving, shaking your head, hugging yourself, feet

still shifting slightly, shuffling restlessly in place. You were wondering what had really just happened, you would come to tell us -- happened to *you* -- even though you knew what had *seemed* to happen. *The Gas*.

People everywhere, in whatever their native language, would describe it in similar terms. *Bitter. Acrid. Mustard and horseradish. Metallic. Like something burning.* Nothing in any of the descriptions spoke of putrefaction, excrement, or anything else which might have led to a sort of dull, smoldering disgust. What the descriptions had in common was sharpness, a sense of urgency. Many of you would say you'd felt *pierced* or *stabbed*. No one spoke of suffocation; if anything, you all felt that you'd breathed too much.

And you'd smelled it, felt it, no matter where you were under a roof, surrounded by walls:

Offices, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, bars and restaurants, churches and temples, theaters and shopping malls, libraries, classrooms, brothels. Igloos, barns, silos, warehouses, factories. August marble-and-granite seats of government, grass shacks, research parks, domed stadiums, cabins in the mountains and forests, cabanas at the seaside. In skyscrapers, you fought to get outside, to the ground or roof, flying down stairs, jumping from windows at impossible heights. In elevators, you screamed and clawed at the doors, clambered on your fellow passengers to the door in the ceiling -- where you'd be trapped, unless you could get back in -- and if lucky the doors would soon open, allowing you to join the thousands of people streaming into the turbulent streets. In hospitals, you doctors and nurses abandoned your patients; you patients, if mobile, scrambled screaming for the exits. If immobile, you simply stayed where you were, crying for help, until your voice gave out. Nursing homes and prisons became manically vibrating hot points of misery and sound for weeks, until eventually falling silent. In Kansas and Oklahoma and Indiana, an estimated five hundred people died -- some of them never seen again -- when they fled the

safety of their storm shelters at just the wrong moment during tornado season. Fires shortly broke out all over, as stoves left suddenly unattended tired of burning nothing at all and turned on themselves and their surroundings.

And vehicles, ye gods, the vehicles: if you were "lucky," you were already coasting to a stop when The Gas hit the interior. Otherwise...

Highways became tangled deathtraps, especially if the weather was bad. Few could stop their cars and trucks quickly enough. A rear-end collision might stretch for hundreds of miles. Sudden pedestrians wandered the shoulders and high-occupancy-vehicle lanes, dazed and bloodied. Bus drivers were split about evenly between (a) those who managed to bring the thing to a halt before pushing through the crowds of their passengers or jumping out the windows, and (b) those who, well, didn't.

Cruise ships disgorged passengers and crew to their decks. But with insufficient room to hold everyone aboard, inevitably, many of you fell into the water or died falling from higher to lower decks -- assuming you even made it to the deck in the first place. Over the course of the next few weeks, freighters and giant tankers came to sudden and often disastrous halts, running aground on coral reefs and at oceanside resorts, emptied of crew (if not corpses) even when the cargo was undisturbed.

Subway passengers and operators alike couldn't wait to reach a station. If the side doors and windows could be opened or smashed, they served as the points of (usually fatal) egress, but most of you ran rearwards, to the back door, not even praying that the thing would slow down a little, just wanting to get out, out, *out* -- at which point you'd still be stuck, because you now somehow had to find your way out from underground as well, in a tunnel you now shared with giant driver less shrieking-metal fast-moving monsters.

Luckily, miraculously in fact, at the moment of The Gas there was no one in space. All the shuttles were on the ground; the International Space Station was

at one of those rare points in its history when no one at all was aboard. (Astronauts on the ground, those who survived the other experiences of the day anyway, would eventually write some of the most harrowing accounts of what *might* have happened, what it *might* have been like to be hit by The Gas in zero-G vacuum conditions.)

Not so lucky, of course, were those otherwise in the sky:

Airplanes fell like a rain of asteroids to the ground, the oceans, the prairies and cities, mountains, deserts, and tundras. In some freak cases, automatic navigation systems kept the planes in the air a few minutes longer, before breaking up under the pressure of the wind howling through their doors into their empty fuselages. Other planes, their crews suddenly blinded by the smell, by panic, were just then taking off or landing; even as passengers and flight attendants leapt from the emergency doors, these planes plowed into others and into nearby terminals and hangars and rental-car facilities whose occupants had only just heaved a sigh of relief -- prematurely -- at having escaped outdoors to the tarmac. Black smoke filled the skies over big cities for weeks.

Collateral damage, as they used to call it, was widespread. Most mothers and other child-care types had the presence of mind to scoop up their charges before their minds and compassion were overwhelmed; others weren't so self-possessed, or so lucky. Although domestic and farm animals didn't seem directly affected by The Gas, those which didn't know how to get outdoors -- or simply couldn't -- were doomed by the "shelters" to which we'd confined them. Nearly all plants grown in greenhouses and garages had died within a few weeks.

Words like "emergency," "disaster," and "calamity" didn't begin to cover the extent of what had happened around the world, regardless of time of day or season of the year, when The Gas showed up. Because worst of all, of course -- even beyond the five minutes or two hours or whatever it took for you to get outdoors, weeping and gagging -- worst of all was that the principal effect seems

to be lasting forever. We can't go back indoors for more than a minute. Surgical masks don't help at all. Full-blown oxygen masks, firemen's gear, HazMat regalia: you might as well do without.

Whatever The Gas is, wherever it came from, it's evidently here for good -- and it may be in us as well as in our walled and ceilinged structures, because wherever you bring the two together you get only blind, unreasoning panic from the smell, Lord, the smell...

Well, Mose and I, together with the handful of others in Lot W not fleeing anything at the moment, ignorant of The Gas and even, for a while, unmindful of the sun's heat and the sweat pooling on every horizontal square inch of flesh-- we stood there trying to take it all in. We'd come to a halt in one of the broad aisles between rows of spaces, and by now he was standing beside me. We each turned our head a little to look at the other, and of course we sort of thought the word *terrorists* in each other's direction.

And of course it didn't have anything to do with terrorists (the terrorists themselves had been driven out, shaken and weak-kneed, into the open). Our first clue came from the girl a ways behind us who'd been knocked silent in the middle of her calling-upon-God rant. She ran up to us from behind, and I turned around when I heard the feet running in our direction, was already starting to wince, to duck from an expected blow -- when she pretty much leaped at me, threw her arms around me, and started to sob.

It was *her*, the girl I'd hoped to run into while I drove here, whistling under my breath, at that early time not even fifteen minutes ago this morning.

"Whoa!" I said, too freaked out to be happy. If it had been a Hollywood romance, at that moment I might have held her head in my hands, stroked her purple-streaked hair, and kissed her on those knockout lips while the music swelled behind us (and, presumably, other things swelled below).

But it wasn't a damned Hollywood romance, and my arms were pinned at my side. I'd dropped my bag at some point, and it lay at my feet, where it would probably be swallowed up by the softening asphalt if I didn't retrieve it within an hour or two. I managed to twist my arms free, and I grabbed her wrists and I'm ashamed to admit probably pushed her backwards a little. "Whoa!" I repeated. "Slow down! The hell's going on anyway?"

Her voice was catching in that weird hiccup-y way it does when people try to talk while crying uncontrollably. Her nose was running, unchecked, and her eyes oscillated wildly as she looked back and forth between me and Mose.

"You mean you didn't smell it?" she said at last.

(This was just the first of dozens of times we'd hear that question over the next day, until the reality of the had-vs.-hadn't-smelled settled in.)

Mose said, "Smell what?"

The girl -- her name was Jennifer, we learned, although she preferred the more poetic "Bird" -- paused as though gathering her strength. By this time, others (both the had- and hadn't-smelled) had started to gather, to sort of coalesce around us. The group numbered maybe a dozen by the time Bird finally spoke, her voice quavering.

"Smell *that*," she brought out. "I can't smell it now but it was *awful*." Several heads nodded among those gathered; the eyes of all the nodders, like Bird's, were bloodshot and teary. "Like, you know how it tastes when you drink straight lemon juice? Like that, only it was a smell. Like that smell, mixed in with ammonia---"

"And bleach!" said a guy behind her.

"Bleach *nothing*, straight *chlorine*," said one pretentious asshole.

"---came out of nowhere," Bird was saying, "All I knew was I had to get away."

By now my attention was moving around the group, distracted by the soft

sounds of cellphone ring tones and buzzers, and by people turning away to place calls of their own. Suddenly it was just Bird and Mose and me standing there, stunned by circumstances, our own phones silent, no one to call or be called by.

"Are you---" said Mose.

"---you okay now?" I finished. Maybe some deep primitive male-female thing was kicking in, I don't know, but I know for sure I honestly did want her to be okay. I wanted whatever it was to have passed, to have shaken everybody up but not to linger. And that was the moment when the first wave of the stampede from campus hit the parking lot.

They came from across the whole width of the grounds, and I'm sure they were hitting the entire perimeter and not just what we could see. But among those running and now swarming around us we saw faculty and other staff, students young and old and in-between, people of all races and cultures and lifestyles for once blending together if not harmonically, exactly, then at least in synchrony with one another. They all seemed to reach their cars at the same moment -- impossible, I know; Lot W was a *big* lot -- because it seemed at the same moment that they all began to cry out as they yanked their car doors open and clambered inside for a split-second before tumbling back out again. If I hadn't heard it myself, I'd never have believed that such a diverse group would be able to simply *cuss* with such common passion -- and diction.

So by now our numbers had really swollen, maybe fifty, seventy-five people within an area maybe a couple dozen yards across. Again, hands went to pocket and purse and a certain proportion wandered off to reach (try to reach) loved ones and employers, and -- I don't know -- I guess pastors and shamans, too. The rest of us, the chronically or temporarily outcast, social misfits and the phoneless, we all drew closer together. Eager to share or, in Mose's and my case, to be shared *at*.

Bird positioned herself between Mose and me. But she sort of edged

marginally closer to me, and I took advantage of the opportunity to drape my arm around her tank-topped bare shoulders, tight-lipped and, y'know, *concerned*. But maybe just a little bit of the old ulterior motives kicking in, too. I mean, what do *I* know?

[To be continued?]