

# **Day Gazing**

## **Weird Shorts**

By Carla R. Herrera

Smashwords Edition

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## **Other works by Carla R. Herrera**

Pink Eye

HISS

MentaChip

## **Table of Contents**

[Bunker Test](#)

[The Declination](#)

[Freedom/Stairs](#)

[The Protector](#)

[Harvestman](#)

[Section 133, Division X](#)

[Only the Good](#)

[White Room](#)

[About the Author](#)

## Bunker Test

[Back to top](#)

*Classified:*

Fifty-thousand dollars to a couple with no children and willing to spend thirty days in a fallout shelter, with no outside contact. Call for more info. 555-1234.

Devon read the ad again. "We could do this," she said into the phone. "I know we could do this. It's only thirty days."

On the other end of the line, Eric, her husband sounded dubious. "It would take care of some of the financial problems, but I can't take off work that long. What would we do in a bunker for thirty days? We'd go insane."

"It's not a bunker. It's a fallout shelter. This would give us a chance to learn to communicate better. We could catch up on reading—those books we haven't had time for and get away from everything for awhile—view it as a vacation."

He sounded skeptical, "A vacation with no fresh air, beach, sunlight, or communication with the outside world. Come on. Halfway into it, we would want to bail and then kick ourselves for the lost time. I don't think so."

She laughed, "I know this would work. One month of our lives to set everything straight. You could take a leave of absence."

"Did you call the number?" he asked, referring to the phone number in the advertisement.

"Not yet, but I want to."

She knew he smiled into the phone. "Call it and find out what is involved first. I have to get some work done. Let's talk about this tonight."

Devon dialed the number as soon as she hung up with Eric. A recording answered, "If you are calling about The Shelter Project, please leave your name, age, a brief message telling why you would like to be involved and your phone number so..."

She hung up before the recording finished, then called back minutes later, "Hi. My name is Devon Acton..."

Eric shuffled through the mail on the table and shoved the chair away with his foot. Devon had arranged a meeting with Adam Jameson, the director of the Shelter Project, but he felt uncomfortable with the situation. There were unanswered questions. What organization was this? What was the purpose of the project? He hoped these questions would be answered during the meeting, but was doubtful.

Beginning with the first mention of the project, he thought something sounded not quite right. Devon had been asked to leave personal information on a recorder with no facts provided about the project. Then, someone returned a call and wanted more personal information. Finally they were provided with a website address that gave few details, but required a respondent to register and fill out an online questionnaire about their medical history.

"What are you doing?" Devon appeared in the kitchen doorway smiling, nearly exuberant. She had started this process, expected him to jump in and despite his protests, wouldn't let go. She seemed to believe that all their problems would be solved if they could participate in this endeavor.

"Just looking through mail," he mumbled.

"What's wrong? I thought you would be happy." She reached over the sink and lifted the lever for the faucet while chatting, "We have this appointment to meet with a live person this evening. What's up Eric?"

He snapped his head around to glare at her, “I haven’t wanted to do this from the beginning and you won’t let it go—that’s what’s wrong.” He slapped an envelope onto the table, “I don’t want to do this and feel I’m being pushed into it.”

Devon stood still dimly aware the water from the tap still ran. Absently, she pushed down on the lever shutting off the flow.

“I thought this would get us out of the funk we’ve been in. We’re in debt up to our ears and with both of us working we have almost no time together. The little time we do have is spent online, watching television or going out with friends—probably so we don’t have to deal with each other. We’re falling apart here.” She paused for a moment, for emphasis, “Sorry you feel I’m pushing you into this. That was never my intention.”

Eric turned back to the pile on the table, picked out a couple of discount forms and started another pile.

“You always sound so logical Devon and you’re always right. We know nothing about this project, or who these people are and you act as if going underground for a whole month is another day in the park. Intention? Does it matter what intention you have? Isn’t this all about what you think should be done? You could care less about what I think or feel about this. I’m just along for the ride—your sidekick.”

She ignored the last comments. “I guess I should cancel the meeting then?”

He wouldn’t look at her. “Do what you need to do.”

The bunker or ‘shelter’ as Jameson called it, was located in a remote area of Washington County and contained everything they would need, including food, water and medical supplies.

Jameson chat at them during the van ride to the site, providing information about the Shelter Project. A private corporation funded the experiment to find out if people could survive a month in shelters located across the country. Though the idea was not one they wanted to entertain, “We need to know we can save people if something happens,” he explained.

Eric did not like Jameson at first sight. The short, balding man looked shifty to him. He knew part of this perspective could be attributed to his reluctance to join the project and being pushed into it anyway. Even so, the older man seemed to evade some of the most important questions. When Eric had asked if they would be monitored in the bunker, Jameson skillfully sidestepped by changing the subject.

The van stopped along a dirt road lined with conifer and as they stepped from the vehicle, they realized what kept the first settlers in the area. The red tinged bluffs contrasted with the low laying areas they sprang from. Overgrown with Indian and Switch grass, it created a majestic, but unnatural looking landscape.

A smiling Jameson nodded knowingly looking out on the landscape. He directed them as they stepped through a grassy section into an area that Jameson said was thirty yards beyond the floodplain. The earlier shelter builders had not considered the consequences of building within the floodplain and had come away with shelters that were virtually useless. They could not be considered safe if rising water drove them out into a radiated environment.

He pointed to a small mound in the middle of the clearing, “That’s it guys. I’ll walk with you and get you secured inside, then it’s up to you.”

Eric made his way down the steps and into a concrete enclosure that served as the entryway to the shelter. Inside was a small room with a larger metal door that stood opposite the entry. A yellow sign with radiation warning symbol and a list of instructions was bolted to the wall beside it. Inside the larger door was the main room of the shelter—twenty by twenty feet of living space in concrete.

Devon and Eric inspected the living quarters. The bathroom included a shower separated by a thin plastic wall. A cubicle off the main living area held a table and chair with a video camera which

Jameson instructed them how to turn on to begin recording. They would each record an entry every day away from their companion. Attached to the south wall was a large, black digital clock with red numbers showing the date and time.

After inspecting the area Jameson produced a waiver stating that they had inspected the area and found them acceptable. Eric and Devon signed the agreement, Jameson noted the exit lever, wished them luck and left.

## Video Diary

### Day 1

Devon: “Hi. This is Devon Acton and this is our first day in the shelter.” She appears uncomfortable talking to the camera. “I’m not really sure what to say...” Pushes her hair behind her ear. “We have unpacked everything and organized, now I’m wondering what to do. We usually have the internet and our phones, so I think this may be difficult. Trying to keep busy.” She pauses, “Okay, I’m going to let Eric on now.”

Eric: Eric is looking at the camera, raises his brow. “I hope this is working...” He looks down at the table in front of him then bends forward a little toward the camera. “Hello there. This is Eric Acton and this is our first day in the shelter. I guess you know that.

“I didn’t want to do this initially, but Devon managed to convince me. I’m still not sure, but it’s a bit late to back out. Anyway, I’m not in the mood to talk. I’ll try to record more tomorrow.”

### Day 3

Devon: Hi. This is Devon again. Not much going on. We’ve been sleeping a lot. We talk a little, argue, because we’re both bored.” She looks directly at the camera, “Eric has started writing. I guess that’s a good thing. I think he’s documenting this experience.” Devon looks down at the table and leans over, then rests her chin in her hand, eyes cast downward.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have pushed so hard for this. I think he’s still upset with me, because I gave him an ultimatum. I thought it was the right thing to do. I felt as if we were falling apart and this would be something that could save us. Now I’m not so sure.” She stops for a minute, leans back in the chair, “I’ll let Eric on now.”

Eric: “I feel a little better about the Project today.” He looks up at the camera, “I’ve been writing.” He pauses and looks down at the table, then moves closer to the camera and lowers his voice, looks directly into the camera again, “I’m going to finish that novel I put down years ago. I have the time now.” He pulls away and leans back in the chair. “Anyway, just wanted to say thanks.”

### Day 5

Devon: Looking directly at the camera. “I have no idea what’s going on with Eric. He spends most of the time writing in notebooks he brought. Every once in awhile he’ll get up and move around, but most of the time he’s scribbling. I’m not sure what he’s writing.

She looks down at the table, leans back in the chair, then looks back at the camera again, “I’m sick of this food. We brought some of our own food, but I really want a meal that’s cooked. Something more substantial. Even a bologna sandwich. I’m not in the best of moods today. I’ll talk more tomorrow.

Eric: Eric is grinning into the camera. “Looks as if my wife is having a hard time. She already wants to leave and it’s only been five days. Keeps asking me what I’m writing and says she’s bored.” He looks down at the table, then back at the camera again, chuckles lightly. “I can’t say that I don’t

enjoy watching her squirm. She's always right, you know. She always makes the decisions and never questions how it affects others. It's always her way. Now she's facing the consequences of her decision." He pauses for a minute. "I just feel like this is right. She finally faces what she creates."

Day 7

Devon: I think someone needs to check on us. I need to get out of here. I don't care about the money anymore, I just want out. Eric is still writing. He won't let me see what he's writing and I think part of it is about our life. I catch him watching me and when he sees I'm paying attention he starts writing again. What the hell is that about?"

She leans forward and lowers her voice, "I want out of here."

Eric: Looking at camera, furrowed brow. "Devon is having some problems. I think she's done. We should probably call it quits. If you guys are monitoring this from another location, please come and open this up. She really wants out. This morning she checked the door, but found it was locked from the outside. Why would you lock us in?"

Eric looks down at the table, then scoots back in the chair and looks at the camera again, "Please let us out. It's more than claustrophobia. The food—I don't know how to say it. We need something decent to eat. We have plenty of food, but it's all canned and dried stuff and some fresh fruit we brought with us, but it won't last. This place seems to be getting smaller the past few days. We don't care about the money anymore."

Day 9

Devon: Devon is staring at the camera, but says nothing. Five minutes elapse, she looks down at the table, back up at the camera, then down at the table again. Then she says something indistinguishable. Another two minutes go by and she looks at the camera again, moves her face close to the lens. "Let us the fuck out of here! I know you can hear me. Get us out of here now or I'll tear this place down with my bare hands and then report you guys to whoever will listen. I want out of here tonight!"

Eric: Eric is red-faced and anxious, looking directly at the camera. "Please let us out. Something is really wrong with Devon. She's talking crazy and under normal circumstances I wouldn't think anything, but she's seriously upset. I've never seen her like this. She paces constantly and is just in a rage. Screaming about how you guys tricked her into this. Please get us out of here. Please..."

Day 12

Devon: Devon makes no comment on this day.

Eric: Eric is leaning into the camera, head down and whispering something indistinguishable, then raises his head, "...please. Every knife we had. I don't know what we're going to do. I don't know what she's going to do next. I told her it wouldn't work, but she kept on. She pounded them down to almost nothing and then kept on. I think she broke one of her fingers and her right hand is cut bad. I bandaged it with supplies from the first aid kit, but I think she needs medical attention." He looks down at the table, at the camera again and raises his voice, "This is on your head. If something happens, this is on you."

Day 17

Devon: Devon is sitting in front of the camera and looks pale. Dark circles under her eyes, she raises a bandaged hand in front of the camera. The hand looks swollen and is bandaged with some type of fabric. She puts the hand down and leans into the camera sneering, "You're a worm Jameson. What do you think? You can get away with this? Imprisoning people against their will and just leave them to

rot?" She coughs for a good while, then out of breath she leans back in the chair, "You people are going to prison once we're out of here." She turns her head away from the camera and covers her face with her left hand, begins sobbing, "Okay, I know we signed a contract. I'm sorry." She pauses for a minute, sobs harder, then looks at the camera, "I just want out." She begins coughing again, then Eric comes in and helps her out.

Eric: Eric is looking at the camera for approximately two minutes before he begins speaking, "Look, I know we signed a contract, but if anyone can hear this...If anyone is getting this message, we need to get out of here. Devon is sick. I think it's more than the hand. An infection I think." He looks down at the table and covers part of his face so that the camera can only see his hand, "Really, you need to get us out please." He looks back up at the camera fearful, "It's the dampness here. I think the dampness is getting to her. I'm not really sure."

Day 20

Devon: Devon makes no comment this day.

Eric: Eric is staring at the camera, but says nothing. He looks down at the table, back up at the camera, leans in and places his elbow on the table. Leans his forehead on his hand, while staring at the table. Ten minutes elapse. He looks up at the camera again, starts to say something, moves his hand as if gesturing to the camera, then a look of frustration comes over him. He looks down at the table again, leans against it with head in both hands and begins sobbing.

Ten minutes elapse. Eric leans back in the chair and looks at the camera, "Devon has a fever." He places his cupped hand on his forehead, "She's sick. I don't mean a little sick. I mean a lot sick." Now he stands up and begins moving around the space. The camera can see the lower portion of his body while pacing, hands moving, gesturing while he's talking, "Okay, I don't know what to do at this point. If we don't get her out of here, she's going to die. We cannot last another ten days here. She needs a hospital or at the very least some antibiotics." He slaps the camera, then leans in close to the lens with his hands on the table and screams, "Get us out of here now!"

Day 21: (Last entry)

Eric: Eric has turned the camera on, but sits in front of it without saying anything. He leaves the room for approximately thirty minutes, then returns and sits in front of the camera again and looks directly into the lens, "Devon is not breathing. She stopped breathing last night and I keep checking on her, but nothing." He leans forward and grins, "Is this what you wanted? You guys knew one of us would probably get sick. What did you think would happen?" He leans back in the chair, still looking at the camera, no longer grinning, "I think my wife is dead." He covers his face with both hands, then runs one through his hair, while letting the other rest on the table. "I think my wife is dead." He gets up and leaves the room again, comes back thirty minutes later and sits in the chair again, "I think my wife is dead," he says, leaning in close, "There are nine days left here and I think she's dead."

Participants remained in shelter for thirty days and received compensation. Eric Acton is currently undergoing treatment at the Atherton Medical facilities.



## Freedom

[Back to top](#)

The screen blinked twice and Ally's lips moved, but no sound issued forth. The children on the screen, stood with hands placed over their hearts. "I pledge allegiance..."

Afterward, she hurried into the bedroom and lifted the side of the mattress. Hurry, hurry, she thought.

They would be coming. She had made a mistake during last assembly and read aloud.

Hurry, hurry.

She pulled the long white roll from the space between the mattress and box spring and began unfurling it. Then began wrapping it around her body. Voices in the hallway. *Hurry*. Wrapping, round and round.

She laughed when she heard the knock. She had anticipated this. Growing more anxious she stepped to the bedroom window and looked down, then placed the edge of the wrap against the inner sill, clamping the metal rod into place.

Another series of rapping, "Ally Benton! Come to the door. We know you're in there."

This time she laughed loud, "Fuck you!" she screamed and stepped out.

As she fell, she looked at the building opposite and could see her small body, falling, falling on the screen. Someone down there was videotaping. Round and round she went, unfurling and smiling.

"Haha!" She screamed when she saw the letters revealed. That would teach them.

Then she hit the pavement.

Jacob Hinter still videotaping and walking around the scene, got it from each angle. This was the second jumper in a week. Crazy days we live in, he thought.

He panned upward at the banner. There were several symbols. F-R-E-E-D-O-M. He had no idea what they meant.

## Stairs

Eyes wide from fear, Veronica pulled the car to the side of a red brick wall and curbed it. She let it idle, keeping her foot on the brake as she looked at the time on the cell phone screen. Four p.m. The girl was supposed to be picked up at three.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the rear view mirror and winced. She looked frightened, pale and thin. She took a breath and looked away from her reflection to the road.

Worse than late, she had no idea where the school was located. One school was across town, but she didn't think it was the right one. She could not remember seeing children playing in the area. She pulled away from the curb speeding toward the only school she knew and wishing she had taken more information down.

Emily, the social worker had said it was a Lindsey School. Not that that meant anything to her. She would not know a Lindsey School from any other school.

She pulled into the parking lot. A few people milled about, coming and going, but they were adults. She hoped it was because the kids had been let out. Maybe the girl was inside waiting for her.

Inside, turquoise walls bordered in white were adorned with large, elegant splashes of color on canvas. Though it had been several years since she had been inside an elementary school, this did not look like any she had ever seen.

A short, but rotund woman behind the counter and glass window, greeted her smiling. "Hi there. What can I get you for?" The woman rose from her seat with some effort and moved to the window, sliding it open.

She returned the smile, but already her hand-wringing had started. What could she say? Her stomach threatened to heave its contents and she saw the woman glance at her hands. Another smile.

"I'm looking for my daughter," she started.

The woman moved to a door separating them and stepped out, one hand on her left hip. She looked Veronica up and down, grinned sideways as if she found something amusing about her appearance. "Follow me," she said, moving down a narrow hallway.

The floor was shiny red, walls covered with what appeared to be weaved fabric. Again, she thought this did not look like any elementary school she had ever seen.

At the end of the hall, they moved through a door into an open area, an exact duplicate of the office they had just left. A middle-aged woman with dirty blonde hair stood directing a couple of teen boys to move things around. She glanced toward the two women as they entered and nodded at her co-worker, grinned at Veronica.

Veronica glanced at the woman beside her, but she was already moving back through the door. "She'll help you," she said indicating her co-worker and disappeared behind the door.

Suddenly a package was thrust into her hands. She held a large bag of hamburger buns. The blonde woman holding another bag motioned her to follow. "We're having a picnic tomorrow at the park, so we're getting everything loaded tonight. Really appreciate your help."

Another parking lot sat out front and they moved off the sidewalk, across the asphalt, toward a moving truck with two men standing at the rear. "I just need to find my daughter," she said following the woman. "I'm late. Was supposed to pick her up at three."

The woman stopped and turned to her smirking, "Give that to one of the guys, then you can follow me."

She sighed thankfully and handed the buns over to one of the men and followed the woman back to the office, falling in step beside her. "Do you know where she is?"

The woman glanced at her and pulled the door open. She pointed to an area where several old air coolers sat rusting on the ground. "Can you lift? We need some help moving those..."

Veronica felt her face grow warm. She grabbed the door handle, pulled it open, tearing it from the woman's hand. "Can you help me find my daughter or not?" Frustration sounded and she willed herself not to start crying.

The woman stood back, placed one hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. "I don't think so. Not with that attitude!"

Veronica wanted to strike the smug face. She imagined grabbing the woman by the hair, slamming it into the concrete floor. She turned and walked quickly away. Swearing under her breath as she looked at the time on the phone again, she hurried. She had wasted thirty minutes here and cursed herself for not calling Emily to begin with. She had not wanted to appear in need of help. If she called, maybe the social worker would think she was too stupid to raise a child.

The responsibility felt like too much. The girl was like a weight around her neck, dragging her under. She looked across the parking lot trying to spot the car, realizing she was on the wrong side of the building.

Moving down the sidewalk, she came to a set of concrete stairs. Ascending them, she was suddenly overcome with fatigue and sat down, broke into long sobs of frustration. The thought of the girl waiting for her moved her once again, but she felt herself sinking, drowning. The stairs seemed too tall, had grown too steep.

Still seated, she turned and attempted to crawl up the next step still sobbing. A young man approached and stopped not far from her. He fumbled with his car keys, looking uncomfortable. He was small and thin, a shock of dark hair tumbled from his head. A binder stuck from under one arm as he wrung his hands, played with the keys.

Then he moved again into the parking lot to a small turquoise car. He opened the driver's side door, hesitated still eyeing her. "You'll make it," he said, "just keep moving." Then the door slammed and he was pulling from the space.

She continued to stare at the empty space and a strange thought worked through her.

What if? What if she was someone else for awhile, she wondered. What if she had grown up in the perfect family and had none of the problems that plagued her life? What if she could do everything other people who grew up like that did?

She stood, looking around attempting to get some idea of where she was. Why was she wasting time like this? She was not weak or stupid. She looked at the phone again, opened it and hit the code for Emily's phone.

"Hello?" from the other end. A small woman's voice. A kind voice.

"Emily, I'm in trouble. I've made a huge mistake and need your help."

## The Declination

[Back to top](#)

Since the Declination, they had hardly had a good night's sleep. It was always too cold and the lack of food kept them edgy. The boy glanced at the hand held mirror on the bar stool, but his sister grabbed it before he could peer into it again to investigate the changes still occurring.

"I was going to look at that," he said.

"I know," she answered, shimmying it under her rear end. "That's why I grabbed it. You don't need to keep looking."

"But I want to see. I want to know what's happening."

She glanced at her mother, huddled at the other end of the sofa. She had one eye open and it appeared to be the one that was clouded. Her own eyesight was fading. "Mom. Can you help me out here?"

Her mother lifted her head. "Listen to your sister," she said, feebly. Weakly. "She's trying to do what's best for you."

The boy grunted dissatisfied, but said nothing. Instead he clutched his arms around himself and placed his back against the lower part of the sofa. "I hate this place. I'm hungry."

The girl thought about taking the mirror out and looking at it, but then thought it just wouldn't be fair. If she was to keep it from her brother she would also have to keep it from herself.

"We're all hungry. You should be thankful we have enough to keep us alive. You know what's happened to some. We can't allow ourselves too much because others will know."

He nodded his head, but pouted. He knew too well. They had seen what happened to neighbors. Some had boasted a pantryful and they had paid for it. Some of the hungry resentful had come and raided the pantry, killed the family. And it wasn't a quick death either.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew. Everyone had heard the screams and pleading. But the boasting family's food had been parceled out to everyone. A can of beans here, a bag of rice there.

"Yes, I know. Like I said, I hate this place. Why did it have to change?"

His mother lifted her body now and scooted herself into a sitting position. Some of her hair had fallen out during the night and a large clump hung at the side of the sofa. She did not see it.

"It's not something anyone could help," she said. "Scientists said this happens every two million years and it's a natural phase. It's about evolution Honey."

The woman looked miserable. The girl wished she could do something to put everyone out of their misery. She didn't believe the scientists. Though she had also heard the news reports, she thought they sounded too convenient. It was more likely that they had dumped some horrible poison into the environment and couldn't recall it, so they had to make up some stupid story that sounded plausible.

"I don't see how evolution keeps us from having food and playing outside." Her brother looked as angry as she felt. But lately, he always looked angry.

His brow had grown a deeper ridge. The sides of his mouth was naturally down turned, but the new jutting of his jaw caused him to appear as if he were always in a defiant mood.

"You know the stores have closed down. No one can work like this. It's too painful. That's why they give us food sometimes. Enough to keep us alive anyway. And can you honestly tell me you want to go out there," she pointed to the window, "and play?"

He grunted again, but said nothing.

Her brother's whole head had grown so much that they thought at one point his neck would not support the weight. That one morning they would wake up and see him laying there broken and twisted. They feared waking every morning, but somehow, he had adapted. His neck was fine. The muscles grown strong enough to support the extended cranium.

This truly was a declination. They had descended from the human condition. She had seen documentaries about people who lived in third world countries and how they suffered. The hardships

ranged from horrible deformities in one region to barren landscapes causing famine in another.

They had it all.

She glanced at her mother who was ran one hand over her face. Feeling for more changes. "You know, it wouldn't be as bad if we didn't have to worry about those men. I'm always afraid of what they're going to do."

Her mother nodded, noticed the clump of hair on the edge of the sofa and swiped at it causing it to float to the floor. She made a choking sound and turned away from the sight. "I think they are testing the people they take," she said weakly. "To see if changes are accelerating or slowing down."

Her brother turned his large head toward the woman. "Why do they have to wear those black suits then? I think they wear those to scare people. And how come they look almost normal? You notice they don't have huge helmets to fit their heads. They have normal sized helmets."

Her mother shrugged. "I don't know Honey." She kept calling him Honey, as if by refusing to use his name would change the facts. This was not really her son. This deformed child. This was Honey.

The girl looked away from her mother to the bleak scene outside the window. On occasion they would see someone limp or waddle by. Solitary figures seeking something; perhaps food, or something else. Most people stayed inside and looked out the window.

"I think some people have different changes. I think they wear those helmets so they don't scare people. Maybe some of their changes are worse."

"Like Dad." It was just a statement of fact, but a fact that silenced them for a short time. They knew how bad the changes could be. The Declination was different for everyone.

Before the changes had started the government attempted to cure them. Planes had flown overhead spraying what everyone believed to be the healing agent. The news anchor in that report, with his over-extended, bloody eyeball, nervous twitches and squeals between words, told them the healing agent only accelerated the changes. It had made things worse.

Since then, different government agencies sent in black suited men on occasion. Some people said it was not testing they were doing, but eating. People in the military or whoever had the weapons and the suits could take someone on occasion, because they had cravings that could not be satisfied with canned beans and pickled sausages.

"Mom, you know we can't stay here. Right?"

Her mother glanced at her with the one good eye, the other now white. She gave a slight nod. "I don't know what we're going to do. Maybe they can fix things," she said.

The girl sighed. It always came to this. Her mother avoided doing anything because she continued to think someone else would do it. "No one is going to fix it," she said, anger sounding in her voice.

"We could hide somewhere if we could get out of the city. We could find a cave even. Anything would be better than this." She shivered, pulling the blanket closer around herself.

"If we could get to that state park and find someplace to set up, we could fish. We could learn to trap animals. We would have plenty of food until all of this is over."

"And we could swim too," her brother piped up. He always sounded excited by this idea.

"I could make stick spears and catch supper for us every night."

Her mother tried to smile, but the result was gruesome. Her lips peeled back from her gums and even her gums had receded causing the teeth to look extraordinarily large. She nodded.

"That sounds like a fine idea," she said. "But let's rest a little while before we set out okay? I'm so tired. And we'll have to get a few things ready too. You two are going to have to fill your backpacks with the things we'll need."

She scooted down on the sofa again and lay her head on the arm. "Let me rest for a few minutes while you two get ready."

The girl smiled, thrilled by the idea of setting out, looking for a new place to live. A warm cave somewhere. Fresh fish every day. Clean, running water. A nice fire to curl up to at night.

Truly, truly, she thought, this was Declination.

## The Protector

[Back to top](#)

Charlotte Davis peeked from the window of her tiny apartment and looked down at the parking lot below. She could barely make out the dark figures around a vehicle and making so much noise. The car was destroyed. The windshield had all but caved in and the body of the machine now sported huge craters in its once smooth metal exterior.

She reached over and turned the kitchen light out so the people below would not see her. She didn't know whose car it was, but it didn't matter. *This was just wrong. Plain wrong.*

The crime rate added to her anxiety about living in the area. Stockton had actually made it into the 'Top Ten Cities to Avoid' in Forbes Magazine. She had never liked the city—too dirty and terminally bent upon expansion—with hundreds upon hundreds of intersecting streets and subdivisions that ran into each other and encroached upon nearby Lodi.

Charlotte had moved to Stockton more than ten years ago when the fruit company she worked for in nearby Manteca offered early retirement. The company consolidated, shed underachieving plants and eliminated costs by throwing several people into unemployment. She had worked in the same office with the same people for twenty-five years, but was suddenly cast into an ocean of bleak prospects. And at her age, opportunities were limited.

Though she had not liked her position, it had provided security and in a world as insecure as this was, she needed that. She was out of work for six months before she found another position in Stockton.

She did not need the money. There was plenty to last through retirement, but she needed the structure and the feel of day to day normalcy that a job provided. She moved to the city and took up residence in a cute apartment on Benjamin Holt Drive. A nice area she would have no trouble in. But that was then. Now the area had become overrun with thugs, gang bangers and all manner of riff-raff. But crime was not limited to her neighborhood. It was everywhere and she refused to move and leave her job.

Moving away from the window and into the living room, she checked the double-bolt lock. Tomorrow she would go to a pawn shop. She had already decided to buy a taser for protection, but she knew nothing of them; how to use them or what the effects were.

The next morning Charlotte took the bus to downtown Stockton and almost wished she had stayed home. The area reminded her of a destruction zone or some part of a third world country in which the inhabitants were desperate shadows seeking life. Dark, fragile figures reeking of fear and need, slinking through streets looking for a fix or whatever means they could use to get it. Faces she looked into appeared vacant. Only a deep, angry hunger lingered there.

April chill sliced past her outer layer and she shivered, pulling her jacket closer. She had looped her purse around her neck and shoulder allowing it to hang on her side, but kept one hand on the strap.

She stepped off the bus on Weber Avenue near Hunter Street. The once beautiful Hotel Stockton stood in front of her, towering over the area, taking up a whole city block in white sculpted stone, abandoned rooftop gardens and vacant offices. She knew that during the 1970s and 1980s the building had been used as a human services office, but before that, during the early twentieth century, the place had been magnificent. Other buildings in the area were much taller, but could not match the impression this building made.

In front of the abandoned building sat two bus benches: one taken up by two young people—a man and woman of indistinguishable ages looking incredibly pale, dressed in layers of colorful rags and sharing a blanket between them. Both wore sunglasses in the dim morning light. On the other, a man lay across the full width of the bench, his green jacket pulled close, his face turned away from her toward the back of the bench. She glanced past them toward Hunter Street where the pawn shop was supposed to be.

Charlotte was a small woman with short, curly, sandy colored hair. She had an average face with large, hazel colored eyes. She was not beautiful, but neither was she offensive to look at. She was average and could blend in with the surrounding landscape. For most of her life, she despised this curse, but as she matured, she appreciated the fact that in many situations she appeared nearly invisible to other inhabitants. This was one of those times.

Walking East on Weber, she turned South on Hunter. The pawn shop was between an alley and a Mexican restaurant with a sombrero painted on the door window. A sign boasting burritos for a dollar and ninety-nine cents sat on the sidewalk outside.

Stepping inside the shop she found herself surrounded by metal shelving with a hodgepodge of items. The shelving towered over her. Topping the shelves, lighter items of fishing poles and lamps, blenders and toasters. The bottom shelves held metal toolboxes, a gas generator and gardening tools.

She moved down the aisle toward the back of the store, where two men stood behind glass display cases talking and bent on some organizing task. On their side of the counter against the wall, guns and musical equipment hung from metal hooks. Inside the glass cases were jewelry and handguns. Diamond rings and small .38s. Green and gold boxes of brass and copper bullets.

She looked at the man closest to her. A short, middle-aged, balding man with tufts of silver and black hair lined the side of his head. His ears were large. They reminded her of a cartoon character, the tops pointing outward and away from his head. His face was the red lined face of a long-time alcoholic with small craters marking the side of both cheeks and forehead and a large brown mole on the side of his nose.

He turned toward her, "Hello, hello," he sang. "And what can we do for you Beautiful Lady?"

She almost rolled her eyes, but stopped herself and gave him an uncomfortable smile. "I want to buy a taser," she said haltingly, trying not to sound desperate.

He glanced back over his shoulder grinning at his partner, then back at her again. "We have a lot of tasers. Do you know what kind you want?"

She shrugged, "I want something powerful. Something to protect me. I saw The Zapper advertised on television the other night and that looked pretty good."

He sobered and looked serious, walking toward the far end of the display and waving at her to follow him, "We have all different kinds. Come and take a look."

Stopping at the very end, he pulled open a door at the back of the case. She looked over and through the glass, spotting a longer handled species that looked as if it would fit perfectly in her hand. The gold writing on the front of the black plastic frame named it The Protector. It looked impressive. "Let me look at that one," she said pointing at it.

He smiled and pulled the gadget out of the case, placing it on the glass in front of her. "Good choice. This is one of the more powerful tasers. It's typically used in law enforcement, but we got lucky." He grinned at that and winked at her as if they shared some kind of secret.

Charlotte reached over and held it in her hand. It felt perfect. The weight was just right and it fit her palm perfectly. It felt as if it had been made specifically for her. The length was good too. She wouldn't have to be directly in the path of an attacker to use it.

She looked through the glass at the other tasers. Some were smaller and there was one very large one. She turned her head sideways, feigning doubt, "I don't know... How powerful is it?"

His eyebrows shot up, "This is one of the most powerful things on the market. Like I said, it's used in law enforcement," he said again, sounding as if he were trying to close the deal.

She continued to look through the glass and spotted what she thought might be a less expensive model, "That one looks more like my price range," she said pointing at it. "I can't afford much."

He shook his head, "Hey, I can give you a deal on this. That thing," he tapped the glass above the taser she had indicated, "that's not going to do the job. For a little lady like you... Well, let's just say you want something a bit more powerful."

She wasn't sure what he meant by that, but nodded anyway and bit her bottom lip. "How much?"

He pulled the white slip out The Protector had been sitting on and turned it over. It was priced at over a hundred dollars. Charlotte blanched when she saw the price and shook her head, "No way. I can't do it."

He shook his head, "No, no, no. That's what it usually sells for." He raised his eyebrows again and grinned wide, "Today we have a very special asking price for pretty ladies like you."

She smiled. "How much?"

"Sixty-five dollars," he said firmly. "And that's the lowest I can go. No haggling on this one."

Charlotte let her eyes wander to the less expensive model under the glass again, but didn't respond for a couple of minutes. She looked back at The Protector, then shook her head, reluctantly. "Alright, but that's still more than I wanted to spend."

His eyes lit up, "I'm going wrap this up for you and put a couple of new batteries in it, so you can use it right away."

He snatched the gadget from the glass and moved back to the register, "You got yourself a good deal Lady. You need to practice with it though."

Charlotte could hardly wait to open the package and look at her prize. She sat at the very back of the bus and took the box from her purse, carefully placing it beside her on the seat and debated whether to open it there or not. The batteries were inside the thing, so she could start using it straight away. The man had also included a small charger for The Protector and told her to plug it in as soon as she got it home.

She could wait no longer and opened the lid, lifted the small black device from its setting and grabbed the charger attached to the cord placing it in her purse. The man had told her to practice using the gadget so that she could get comfortable with it.

Again, she had the feeling The Protector had been made just for her. It fit in her palm perfectly and was weighted so that though she knew she carried something, she could hold it for a long while before it became something more than an extension of herself.

There were few people on the bus. Nearest her, were a couple of young people interested in only each other. Two seats up was an older man who looked as if he needed a shower and a meal. A young man in a hooded sweatshirt with a backpack next to him sat near the middle of the bus.

No one paid attention to her. Knocking the empty box to the floor of the bus, she waited until the next stop at the corner of Main and El Dorado. Moving to the seat behind the older man she waited to see if anyone would sit in the seat across from hers and breathed a sigh of relief when no one did.

Feeling The Protector in her hand, it now felt more weighty, as if the thing knew that it was about to be employed. She checked the trigger, at first fumbled, nervous about using it, and heard the buzz. Her skin prickled and a slight vibration coursed through her hand.

Her throat constricted and her stomach churned. She glanced around, saw that no one was watching and with a quick motion her hand was over the seat in front of her depressing the trigger. The man jumped at first, then slumped against the seat.

She pulled back and shoved the gadget in her purse, then leaned forward to look at the man. He pressed up hard against the back of his seat, eyes rolled to the back of his head, his body jerking as if attached to a live wire.

Then he went limp and she saw that he was unconscious with just a bit of drool at the side of his mouth. She took a clean tissue from her purse, leaned closer, wiped his mouth and let the tissue fall to his side.

Now she knew the thing worked. She knew how it worked and could employ it when needed. Still, she would have to work at feeling comfortable with it. She might need to practice more.

That evening as she watched her regular program, she found her eyes drawn to the thing sitting on the table, plugged into the charger. Perhaps she could find a place to practice—like shooting ranges—



but for tasers. She doubted it, but the idea of practicing thrilled her. She would no longer be afraid walking the streets. In fact, if anything, she would be the one they should be afraid of. Charlotte smiled, clicked off the television and headed for the bedroom, looking forward to the next day.

The morning dawned in Stockton much like the thousand before it, but this day Charlotte had a spring in her step. She wore jeans to work instead of her regular slacks and a few co-workers made comments about how well she looked.

She rarely drove, but this morning she had moved her Hyundai out of its parking space. She brought extra clothing in case she needed them. The Protector sat snugly at the bottom of her purse with a package of tissue over it.

The day moved quickly and before she knew it, she was back in the car driving down Pacific Avenue toward the Stockton Royal, a theatre that had been spectacular in its heyday, but had now gone the way of old, unkempt buildings with peeling plaster and more repairs than they could afford to make. Now the place showed older movies for a dollar per seat. Sometimes they showed art house movies or had sci-fi marathons. Tonight they had a double feature: Nosferatu and the original Bela Lagosi film of Dracula.

Charlotte stepped inside and purchased a container of popcorn with a small soda. She made her way up the red-carpet at one side of the theatre and chose a two-seater up a couple of steps from the main seating arrangement.

Despite the disrepair and age of the building, there was a feeling of being in a place that was once plush. The chandelier in the lobby spoke of old elegance. Across the massive wall on one side of the theatre, a gazelle sprung from its hiding spot, blue sky behind. Footlights along the border of the carpet only allowed enough light to see where one walked.

Only five other people had purchased tickets and they sat entranced. A grim looking Bela Lagosi swept down steps cape fanning out behind him.

She looked up at the projector window and saw no one at the helm. In her younger days she had worked as a projectionist and knew that unless there were problems, that spot would remain empty.

No one sat at the back of the theatre, so she would have to move forward, closer to the screen. The Protector sat firmly in her right hand, fully charged and ready.

Charlotte left her purse, popcorn and soda in the place she would return to. She sat behind a young man who took no notice of her. She could have been a mosquito and got more reaction than when she moved behind him.

She glanced up at the projector booth again, saw it remained empty and quickly pulled the trigger, reaching over the seat as she did it. He jumped once, made a small, throaty sound and fell limp.

She pulled the seat down and sat leaning forward watching his face. As the man in the bus had done, the young man's eyes rolled to the back of his head and he appeared to convulse, moving jerkily, back pressed hard against the seat.

No one else had even glanced in their direction and she rested her arms on the seat in front of her, moved her lips close to his ear. "Sorry about that," she whispered. "I have to get some practice in. You should be fine in a few minutes."

She went back to her own seat and watched to make sure the young man recovered fully. When she saw him sit up and look around, she felt a sense of relief. At least there was no long term damage, she thought.

Saturday morning Charlotte felt brightened by a sun that broke through the slate sky. She stood on the concrete slab of apartment patio, leaning against the iron railing, looking across the parking lot toward the old oaks in the courtyard. Birds sang and squirrels scampered.

She had two days of leisure to squander and decided to spend those days as a hedonist. Walking to a nearby bagel shop, she purchased a couple of slugs, a large cup of latte and strolled home easily, contemplating the past week's events.

She felt easy, comfortable and without worry. She wanted to make plans for the future. Suddenly, with the force of an explosion inside her head, she knew her future was not mapped. There were choices to be made. She stopped in the middle of the crosswalk with this consideration. Never before had she envisioned that possibility. She had always ridden the wave. Went the way the wind blew her.

Just as suddenly as the thought struck her, so too did the behemoth of a vehicle traveling at a velocity that doubled that of the actual speed limit in the area. The collision of human and machine put Charlotte at a slight disadvantage and she was picked up, traveling through space, her coffee and bagels moving in another direction.

Her head rested against the crimson stained concrete curb that had snapped her neck. The new Hummer that hit her had continued its journey, the driver barely braking upon impact. He had sensed the danger of stopping and put the pedal to the metal, moving away from the scene before anyone had the sense to take his license plate number.

Emergency services made record time, arriving at the scene in less than ten minutes. Gawkers stood outside stores, shaking their heads while traffic was re-routed and slowed to a crawl.

A small, middle-aged woman walking along the concrete path, stopped for a moment, taking in the tragic scene. On the grass strip alongside the concrete, she noticed a small, dark object. Golden lettering along the top of the object sparkled brilliantly in the bright morning sun.

She glanced at the emergency crew packing up, but no one had seen the taser. She bent over and snatched it up, quickly placing it in her bag before anyone noticed, then continued on her way to the bus stop.

## Harvestman

[Back to top](#)

mosquito hawk taps  
nervously at window pane  
escape within reach

The mosquito hawk is a slender-bodied non-stinging insect that feeds on mosquitoes and other insects. Mostly mosquitoes. She knew this because she had read it from the dictionary at one time, but could not remember the genus and species. Did it matter? In any real way, did it really matter?

How could it?

But there it was. That gap in knowledge, once so easily recalled. A pain, sharp white--mental and emotional--in the gut. Reminded her, she was slipping. Nothing worse for a writer than that gap. Pretty soon, or soon enough it wouldn't be so small. It would be a chasm. A fucking gulf that could not be bridged with assurances of "everyone forgets things," or "I just have too much on my mind."

No. That wouldn't be enough. It would be obvious.

This was age creeping up. That sly gypsy sidling up beside her, seductive in his own way, but oh so destructive. Whispering in her ear, "It's okay to take it easy. Really, it's okay."

And how much disappointment did one need in a life? Was there ever enough? Does it get better with a little self-delusion?

She made a small movement with her body, sitting up straighter in the chair. Thinking, thinking, attempting to recall some obscure fact she had read about global population shifts. How to reduce populations quickly without alarming the public. Something like that. The title was different. The solution was food. Yes!

It was in the food. What had they done? She tried to remember. Grasped longingly for the answer, but the more she sought, the less tangible it seemed. She let it go. Let it go, she thought. I don't give a damn. Then it was there, sitting on the table in front of her, staring her in the face. Slapping at her. Fucking gypsy.

Not the mosquito hawk. Daddy Longleg. The grandpa longleg. The great-fucking-grandpa longleg. She almost laughed aloud with the realization, but caught herself. She covered her smiling mouth, not allowing a sound to escape and sat back in the chair relieved.

The chemical makeup of the venom was the answer. Phalangium opilio. The harvestman. Harvestman indeed. He did his job well.

She moved forward tapped it out quickly before it disappeared again.

The Phalangium opilio is a spider-like arachnid, with long, thin legs. One of the most poisonous insects on Earth. Enough venom in one tiny bite to bring down an elephant.

With a bit of tinkering, they brought down almost the whole of the human population. Ninety percent. Those who haven't died are blathering idiots. Or nearly so. Alzheimer's induced.

She smiled at that. At least she had that much. She looked at the contraption in front of her, trying to understand why she sat there. What had she been doing?

She read the first sentence. Mosquito hawk taps. The mosquito hawk. Yes. She knew this. It was an insect that fed on other insects. She could not remember the genus or species. God. That fucking gypsy.

## Section 133, Division X

[Back to top](#)

The man with the brown fedora sitting at desk nineteen appeared engrossed in what he read. He was a small man with small features. Even the sagging skin under his dark eyes appeared smaller than what most elderly folk sported.

He wore the hat even when he ate, because he didn't want anyone to see how far his hairline had receded. They could guess, by God, let them guess, but they could never know for sure. Not unless he took the hat off and there was no way he would be motivated to do that in public.

No way Jose.

He glanced up and away from the document he had been reading and saw that Josh Peterson across the room, was doing the exact same thing he had been doing moments before. The reports. The reports that came in daily had to be processed as quickly as possible. So here they sat, analyzing and processing in a windowless gray room.

He guessed that processing was the worst job of his division, just because the sheer volume of work that came through the door. He would never know now, because he had never had another position and had aged to the point that he no longer wanted one. He would retire from this job and that was just fine.

Peterson was young enough to get away from the drudgery. He had a chance. The young man glanced up and caught his eye, smiled slightly and averted his eyes back to the document he was reading. The boy was focused. A good worker. And given time could probably hold any job in the division with the right training.

Grunting under his breath, he thought about telling the boy to go. To run as quickly and as far as possible. As far as his legs would carry him, away from this work, this division and section. Move away from the whole place.

He laid the report on the desk, took his wire-rimmed glasses from his face and closed his eyes for a moment, opened them again and stretched his arms, careful not to knock the hat from his head.

Division X had been in the processing business since before he could remember. The analyzing didn't start until after the processing business had begun. At first, they had just logged report information into the computers and at the end of each shift the bundle of information went to the analysts in Division Y. Now, Division X did the whole thing. Analyzing and processing. They no longer needed computers except to execute commands. Division X had become the executive branch, so to speak.

He replaced the glasses on his face and glanced at the clock on the far wall above the doorway, sipped from the water bottle in front of him. Only ten minutes before shift end.

Turning in his chair toward the monitor, he began executing commands. First, as always, the deviants. The worst of the mental degenerates who would attempt to thwart the system. Would take the most perfect life from nearly everyone in their society and devolve it into a monstrous thing from the history books. Democracy. Scoffing, the fedora stiff and erect on his head, he grit his teeth punching in the numbers and letters and hit the enter button harder than he should have. Good riddance.

He glanced up and over his desk, checking to see that no one noticed he had abused the keyboard. A couple of people glanced in his direction, but most everyone was busy with their own tasks. Peterson glanced at him again. He smiled uncomfortably and reddened. His hat softened and sank further on to his head. He turned back to the monitor.

Section one hundred and thirty-three had always referred to the small geographical area located in the most northwest territory of International Corporate States. Just recently, that area had expanded to include the southwest territory, once named Southern California after the division of the states.

Second commands were reserved for those miscreants who dared to abuse the social system to the

point of nearly breaking it. The most aged who clung to life with a vice-like grip. They believed that somehow, someone or something would come to make them youthful again. A drain on the system, they continued to use up beneficently provided healthcare and food rations, draining the life blood from the system. These were the most selfish of the lot, depending not only on a benevolent system, but abusing their families. Constantly with the hand out. Adios Muchachos. Thank you very much. He hit the enter key.

He glanced up at the clock again and saw that five minutes had elapsed. Peterson stood under the doorway with two other employees; a security investigator and one of the supervisors. The boy glanced in his direction and he nodded, but received no acknowledgment. Instead, the young man looked past him, over his hat and turned back to the others speaking in hushed tones.

The last time a scene like this had presented itself was when an employee had been identified as an infiltrator. He raised his brow, but turned back to the computer again, determined to finish before the day ended. The fedora felt light on his head and he brought the brim down slightly to secure it.

Tapping his index finger on the desk beside the keyboard, he was unable to get the idea of the infiltrator out of his mind. Division X was the most clandestine operation of the Corporate States. It was the heart and mind of the system and made everything else work. Without Division X, overpopulation and poverty would rule the states again. They had evolved into something better through trial and error and this was the best system. Better than any other before it.

How an infiltrator from outside the Corporate States penetrated not only the geographical area, but the Division X compound was mind-boggling. Planning of the infiltration would have taken years, not to mention considerable resources to cover her identity. She passed the psych scans and security checks. Had become friendly with other employees, learned the processing system and over a period of several years, had even gained entrance to the inner sanctum of analyzing and executing commands. And when finally identified, she had even appeared surprised by the accusation. Denying evidence presented and went so far as to accuse the reviewers of fabricating the story. As if oppositional forces against the system didn't really exist.

Four minutes before shift end, he typed in the last of the commands. The most feeble of the system. Not the aged, but the ill and dying. Those poor souls already given a death sentence and in the throes of denial, believing a cure would suddenly be found. This was the group that bothered him the most. Partly, because it included the handicapped children of healthy, productive people and caused those families enough pain to warrant loss of work, possible draining of mental health facilities. This was a touchy one. To be analyzed with extreme care. His hat hung forward as he pondered the list.

He finally hit the enter key lightly, slightly ill. A moment later as he turned away from the monitor, he felt bouyant from a job well done. His hat sat comfortably on his head and he pushed the brim up slightly, smiling to himself.

One minute to spare, he sipped from his water bottle again and glanced up as young Peterson approached his desk. He sat back tall, a satisfied smile on his face. "Hello there Josh. How was your production today?"

Eyes narrowed, the young man's lips pulled back into a sneer, "How was Your production today, Fellow Brown?" He hissed the last part, as if the facial expression wasn't enough to impart his dislike for the older man.

Taken off guard, Brown sat up straighter, feet firmly on the floor, tense. "What do you mean Josh?" He attempted to sound unconcerned, but the words stumbled out. Sweat broke above his brow.

The investigator appeared directly behind Josh, smiling casually, appearing unruffled and cool in his dark uniform. The man was young and handsome. In his thirties, he appeared as a rugged, soft-spoken type. Dark hair, soft, brown eyes. The kind you would see on the digital these days, with the community hanging on every word, urging them on in their mission, helping them to find and beat the bad guys.

His mouth felt dry and he reached over to his water bottle again, sipping. He attempted to replace

the shocked expression with an unconcerned smile. Best not to give any indication that he was nervous. Nervousness was a sure sign of guilt.

He stood up, pushing the paper pile on to the metal insert at the rear of the desk. The shredder whirred quietly. "Josh, I'm not up for playing today. I've just finished a full day and want to go home."

A hand was extended in his direction. "I'm Inspector Andrew Nathan, Fellow Brown." He sounded friendly enough and really was soft spoken. Brown took the hand, squeezed slightly, "What's going on here Inspector?"

"Why don't you sit down. Let's talk for just a minute." Brown sat back in his seat and noticed others walking past on their way out of the facility throwing uncomfortable glances in his direction. Some looked displeased, scornful even.

Pulling on his shirt collar, he asked again, "What's going on here?"

Security boy glanced back at Josh, "Can I get a seat please? I need to speak with Brown in a comfortable position." He looked back at Brown and held up his hand, index pointing upward, "One minute."

A moment later, Josh was back with a chair. "Thanks Josh. Why don't you let me speak with Brown alone. I'll only be a few minutes."

Peterson glanced at his co-worker contemptuously. "I'll be right over there," he pointed to his desk across the room, "In case you need me." Nathan smiled and nodded, turned back to Brown as he sat.

"So..." he started, leaning back in the chair and crossing one leg over his knee, one hand resting on the desk. "How long have you been working here Brown?"

"You're security and don't know how long I've been working here? What is this?" Insulted by the question, he sounded sharp without meaning to.

His response was ignored. Nathan raised one eyebrow and took a small device from his breast pocket, typed something into it, moved to the next question. "Is it true that you analyzed and processed only three lists today?" He sat forward, leaning in toward the older man, smiling in anticipation.

Over the years, the lists had become longer. They were analyzing now also, which made the task of processing twice as long. He nodded, "Yes it's true. The lists are longer now. I go through each carefully." He thought for a moment and added, "I take pride in my work and make sure each is gone over thoroughly."

Nathan sat back in his chair scowling, typed into the device again. "Are you aware of the population of Section one thirty-three?"

Brown nodded feeling confident. This information was televised every night before the power out. "Last night it was one-hundred and fifty million."

"Are you aware the average analyst in Division X processes at minimum, seven lists?"

Brown had not known this. He sat up straighter, uncomfortable again. If that was true, his production was below fifty percent. "No. I was not aware of that. Someone should have told me. I could have done something to step up production."

A loud "thwack" sounded behind the security investigator and suddenly the man fell forward into Brown's lap, pushing him back into his chair further. Peterson stood behind the man with a weapon in his hand, reached over and pulled the corpse from him, throwing it to the floor.

Brown's hands went to his face, "Please!" He was pulled to his feet. "Come on Buddy, let's get out of here. You're free. It's over."

He looked up when he heard the sound of running through one of the halls overhead, a couple of shots fired somewhere in the building. He cringed. What was this boy talking about? The computer behind him exploded and he yelped, throwing himself forward, almost fell, but regained his balance and hunkered down afraid he would be hit.

Several people he worked with and had known through the years passed by, smiling, congratulating each other. Some had weapons. *Contraband*. An older man with silver hair, ready for retirement held a small gun in his hand, sauntered by glancing at him, raised the gun hand in greeting. "It's over Brown.

We're free."

Peterson stood watching him for a moment, a look of sympathy crossing his face. "Brown, I'm sorry about earlier. I had to play along until it was time."

He waved the boy away. "No, no. It's alright. What's this business with the guns?"

Peterson turned to face the doorway, in the same direction Brown was facing. A few people looked confused, lost. "We had no other choice. We went over the plan several times and this was the most efficient way of getting the most people out safely."

Brown nodded as if he understood. "Okay then. I guess we're free now." He smiled at that, but had no idea what it meant. He wished Josh would go ahead and leave him alone now, but the boy continued to watch him.

"Brown?" he hesitated before continuing. "You believe in this system don't you?"

The older man lifted one brow. "Does it matter now?" Shaking his head, he answered his own question. "I don't think it matters. We're going to re-invent the wheel, go back to a system of democracy that's new and improved, though it retains the same fundamental flaws of the last system. That has nothing to do with me. I'm retirement age Josh. That's all that concerns me." He glanced at his former co-worker and grinned, gathered his jacket from a hook on the wall, glass crunched underfoot.

"Josh, maybe you should have someone clean that up." He indicated the former security investigator. Then turned back to the young man, curious. "By the way, what was that business about? Him questioning me like that."

Josh stabbed him with a dark look. "You were considered for one of the command lists. Production was low and you've aged past the point of re-training. Your name was to be added to the next batch."

The young man glanced at the security investigator and added, "You were one day away from volunteer elimination. For the good of society, right?" He spat the last part out and Brown smiled at him.

"I guess I'm lucky you and your friends came along then."

He stepped quickly toward the doorway, pausing a moment, knowing something was amiss without knowing exactly what it was. He glanced back at the young man. Young Peterson surveyed the gray surroundings, shattered computer monitors, sheets of elimination lists scattered about the floor.

His hat had fallen sometime in the chaos and lay near his desk. He hadn't noticed that it had taken leave of his head, but now felt naked without it. The thought struck him as funny and he chuckled as he bent to retrieve it.

He placed it back on his head, "Maybe no one will notice."

Josh glanced at him, curious. "What?"

"Nothing really. Just a thought that maybe no one will notice the difference now that we're all free."

Hat firmly on his head, he stepped back to the doorway and went through it, leaving Division X behind.

## Only the Good

[Back to top](#)

Tania woke one morning and found everything bad in the world gone. Someones or something had wiped it all away.

The morning it happened, people stepped outside to clean air, cars that no longer worked and abusive spouses absent. Water from the tap that morning tasted especially sweet.

Though most people retained memories of people who committed crimes against them, they bore no ill-will toward them. Murderers, rapists and con men were gone. No one knew where.

The news commentary that morning was sunny and confusing. Isreal and Palestine had come to an understanding. There was no war in the middle-east. People of third world countries were celebrating their good fortune in the streets. Food and clean running water were plentiful.

In Tania's neighborhood, people nodded to each other, waved and gathered on the sidewalk speculating about what could have happened. Some religious believers thought it may be the sign of the coming of a new messiah. Others thought aliens had taken over the Earth.

Everyone was concerned, but enjoyed the peace and lack of worry for the moment, because they had no idea how long it would last.

When she woke, the first thing she noticed was the feeling of peace and quiet. She had no headache. She felt good. The sun shone through slats in the window blind. She could hear birds singing outside and she smiled for the first time in a very long while.

When she stepped into the kitchen, she knew something had changed. There was nothing physically different, but in some peripheral sense she felt something amiss. She made coffee, looked out the window and saw neighbors gathered on the sidewalks in clusters. They were chatting, smiling, but with confused looks on their faces.

No cars passed. The hum of traffic from the freeway was absent. She waited for the coffee to brew and then poured a cup and stepped out on to the stoop. A neighbor who noticed her, waved.

"Here's another one," someone said.

She stayed where she was, but asked one of the people standing on the sidewalk, "What's going on? Is it a holiday?"

People were smiling at her. "No holiday," someone said. A stooped old man with a long nose spoke. He still donned pajamas and wore brown slippers with faux fur poking out the edges on his feet. "We should be celebrating though."

"What's going on?"

"All the bad is gone," someone said.

"There's no war on the news," another someone said.

"It's a new world. Blue skies above and only the good remains," said another someone.

"Only the good," repeated another.

Tania sipped her coffee and sat on the stoop listening to what people said about the change. "But how?" she asked.

She had not meant to ask it aloud. Speaking more to herself than to another, but an older woman who heard sat next to her. "Some people think it's an alien thing. Politicians missing, planes grounded and the oil drills all over the world have stopped. Cars no longer work. Everything that was bad with the world has either been stripped away or stopped working entirely. It's a good thing."

Tania smiled at the woman despite a brief apprehension. "Well, I don't see space ships dotting the sky. Little green men are not wandering the streets. Maybe it is something from another world, but I guess if it benefits us we can't see it as bad."

The woman shook her head. "No we can't. It's only the good we live with now. I hope this lasts. I think it can be no other way."



No other way?

Tania wondered what that meant considering when she went to bed the hum and throb of the never ending evening traffic still existed. Planes still flew overhead. Of course there was another way, but it had all changed.

"Maybe I'm dead. This could be some form of after life."

The woman next to her smiled. "That would mean I am also dead and I refuse to believe that. I feel very much alive."

She nodded understanding, looked down at her coffee and realized she felt the same way. Alive. Very much alive.

"Only the good remains," she said, repeating what someone else had said. She felt it was true.

"Yes," said the woman next to her. Softly. "Only the good remains."

## White Room

[Back to top](#)

Michael opened his eyes to a soft glow. It took his eyes a few minutes to adjust and he guessed from the quiet and sterile environment he was in a hospital room.

The bed under him felt hard. His hand moved to touch the surface and he sat up suddenly with the feel of it. White surrounded him on all sides and for a moment he wondered if this could be a lucid dream. The environment had a surreal quality with no shadows to delineate floor from wall, or wall from ceiling.

Nothing appeared to indicate it to be a room, but in his mind, it had to be some form of enclosure to appear without shadow. He moved his legs as if to swing them from a bed, but realized when his legs did not fall that he had been laying upon a floor. He kneeled, keeping his hand on the floor in front of him and felt light-headed. He attempted to shake the cobwebs from his mind and searched his memory for information on how he got here.

Sitting back on his haunches he looked down at his clothing and saw that he wore white, the same shade as the milky environment around him. He touched the thin fabric. Probably Lycra, he thought.

He remembered talking to Amber. Was it just a few hours ago? How long had he been here? The last thing he remembered was standing outside his apartment and kissing Amber before she went home to check her cat.

He cleared his throat and the sound made him jump, but fell limp upon the white around him. No echo. *This place is solid.*

"Hello?" his voice sounded weak and he tried again, louder this time. "Hello!" he shouted, "Is anyone there?"

His call was met with silence. Nothing came back and he wondered if he were still alive. Surely he would know if he were dead. Standing cautiously, he felt unbalanced with lack of evidence of solid floor. Though he knew he stood upon a surface, the source of light refused to allow shadow to mark it against any other surface. A chasm could be standing before him and he would not know it. He could slip into the infinite white and fall forever.

His hand out before him for stability, he walked around the area slowly, inching one foot in front of the other until feeling secure enough to put his hand down. The floor was solid and hard as he moved across it.

He stopped and put his hand up in front of his face. It appeared in stark contrast to the area around him. "Hello!" he shouted again, letting his hand drop to his side. Still no answer.

Moving again, hoping to find a wall, he held his hand out in front of him, just in case. He didn't want to smack into a solid surface. If he did find a wall, perhaps he could find a door.

Michael walked in what he believed to be a straight line, placing one foot in front of the other so as not to change course. He continued to walk across the milky floor for what seemed a very long time.

Time had no relevance here, so what seemed like hours may have just been minutes. He stopped for a moment to ponder that and also wondered where the light was coming from. The room, or chamber or whatever it was, was well lit. Looking up he saw nothing. The white appeared endless, directionless, sound proof and now felt deathly. There was something terrible in the harshness of it.

Walking again, he continued to think about circumstances that would have brought him here. There was nothing he could think of. He had been a fairly average person. Had made his way through college, worked for several years at the same firm, had just began seeing someone regularly. He had never done anything particularly unlawful. Most of his friends were from college and like him, had average lives. They worked during the week, spent the weekend playing video games or watching rented movies, worked out a few times a week and were either married or seeing someone regularly.

Suddenly his hand hit a surface. How long had he been walking? He brought his other hand up and

felt along the wall. It was definitely solid. He smacked it hard, smiling. "Ha!" he shouted to no one in particular.

He placed one hand over the other, moving them both along the wall, attempting to find any kind of bump or break in the surface. Continuing this, reaching up as far as he could with both hands, running his hands along the wall all the way down to the floor.

What if he had to use the bathroom? Did the person or persons who put him here even think of that? Probably not. Eventually, he would also get thirsty and need something to drink. What about food?

A sharp sound directed behind him. He turned and saw a dark spot in the white. It moved quickly and was gone, but something remained there, several yards away in the whiteness.

He moved toward it sprinting across the space, "Hey!" he shouted toward the spot, heart sounding in his ears. "Hey, is someone there?" His voice sounded pleading, fearful even.

He stopped just short of the platter laying on the floor. The cafeteria platter was a plain green color, with a baked potato, green beans and a piece of roast chicken on it. A plastic bottle of water sat in a round indentation. He looked around the area, but there was no break in the white. No door. No evidence of where the person had come from or gone to.

It appeared as a harsh, flawless frontier, stretching endlessly before him. Putting his hand out again, he turned and walked away from the platter, opposite the direction he came from. "Hello! I know someone is there!"

"Can you please tell me why I'm here?" he asked.

He had tried to keep the panic from his voice, but failed. Why would they not answer him? What had he done so terrible to be in this place? Would he die here?

He continued to walk with his hand outstretched and looked back at the platter. At least there was a spot that he could judge distance from now. Then the sound again and he turned toward it and saw the platter was gone.

"What the hell is going on!" he screamed.

He held his head, attempting to stop the throbbing that had begun, then sat down for a moment and tried to convince himself to breathe, realized he was breathing though it had become ragged.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated only on his breath. Inhaling, the breath filled his lungs, expanded his stomach—upon exhale, his stomach pulled inward, pushing the breath out. He did this several times, before he finally found himself calming, slowing his heart rate. The panic had subsided, though not completely.

He thought about his situation. Someone had placed him here. This much he knew. They would provide him with food and water, which meant they did not want him to die in their custody. But then again, they had taken the food and water from him, just when he thought that it marked a spot in distance for him.

That stopped him for a moment. It bounced around in his head. Why would they not want him to think something marked space for him? That was too mind-boggling. How could they know what he thought? "There's no such thing," he said aloud.

He looked at the white again, feeling self-conscious now. Whoever it was, was watching. He knew that much and put his head down, looked at his feet. Again, he felt himself slipping into panic.

He looked up again and wanted to stand, but felt he might lose his balance. The totality of the situation made him wonky—mentally and physically.

"I don't know why I'm here," he said, speaking directly into the white. "It doesn't make sense for me to be here. What purpose?"

No answer greet him. Only the endless white darkness, silence and more questions.

Of course, he knew they had a purpose. Perhaps this was an experiment he had stumbled upon. This was some kind of illegal human experimentation. He had read about things like this. The Central Intelligence Agency had done things like this in the 1960s.

"I haven't done anything wrong!" he yelled. "What's wrong with you people?"

He forced himself to stand and looked at the area where he believed the platter had been. He put his hand out in front of him and began walking again. He knew if this was an experiment by some government agency, his chance of survival was slim at best. No one survived things like this. Those agencies, they always covered their tracks. They would eliminate him when the experiment concluded. He would be thrown out like yesterday's trash.

He continued to walk in the same direction, placing one foot in front of the other for some time, before he realized he had to be going the wrong way. A door had to open somewhere close to where the platter had been placed. He turned right and moved in that direction for awhile keeping his outstretched hand in front of him.

Perhaps he could reason with them. Maybe strike a bargain. "I'm not going to say anything to anyone," he said, sounding desperate, even to his own ears.

"If you would just tell me what you want..."

The whiteness remained unbroken and silent. He continued to walk and felt a twinge in his lower back. Touched it with his free hand, exerting some pressure on the ache, but continued placing one foot in front of the other until he felt himself tiring.

He knew he had been doing this a long time and wanted somehow to keep track of time and space, but there was nothing allowing him that luxury. If only I knew what time it was, he thought. If he could mark time that would tell him how long he moved or sat still.

"Please..." he pleaded. "Please, help me understand this." He sat down again feeling relief immediately. "I'm so tired."

Too tired to move, he lay on the floor with his hand under his head. He didn't know how long he slept or lay there, but when he woke, a clear plastic bottle of water sat in front of him. He continued to lay there and looked at it, wondering if it was drugged. Despite the idea, he reached out and pulled the lid, sating his thirst.

It wouldn't matter if it was drugged. I'm going to die here, he thought. There is no point prolonging this. He put the bottle back on the space in front of him and lay back down.

People would miss him. Both parents were still alive and though they did not speak daily, he had regular contact with them. Amber. She would miss him. They spoke daily by phone and had been spending their weekends together. His co-workers would miss him. In his five years at the firm, he had only missed six days. Surely someone would investigate his disappearance.

He sat up and looked around. The whiteness continued as it had before—a perfect, terrible thing. Its maw grinning wide, swallowing him totally in nothingness.

"People are going to miss me."

What kind of people do something like this? Was this their day job? What kind of person would take a job like this and continue? Only someone who could find nothing else, or someone who really enjoyed their work. He blanched at that.

He looked up, "You people are sick!" he yelled.

The perfect whiteness smiled back at him, mocking. Then suddenly, his own voice came back to him, "You people are sick!" and again it said, "You people are sick! You people are sick..." Over and over.

He smiled, realizing he must have hit a nerve. Someone did not like the statement. Perhaps it rang too true, he thought. But the recording continued, "You people are sick! You people are sick! You people are sick..."

*This proves me correct.* Then suddenly it stopped. He looked up again, expecting something, but nothing else came. Silence replaced his canned voice.

He stretched his legs out before him and leaned over, attempting to stretch out the soreness in his limbs. He must have been walking a long time. He looked at the water bottle beside him. Still half of its contents remained. He stood, grabbing the bottle to bring it with him. An idea was forming, but something prevented him from allowing it into his conscious mind. It felt like something at the edge of

his vision, barely glimpsed before it disappeared.

He began the process he had before, putting his free hand in front of him and walking in one direction. Nothing indicated he walked in a particular direction, but he continued anyway, almost immediately hitting a surface with his outstretched hand. He leaned against the wall with his whole body and smiled. Finally, he thought. He slapped it with his free hand feeling some relief. It was real.

Michael reached above his head and swept his hand downward stretched as far as it would go along the surface. He moved slowly, running his hand from above his head to just below his hip. A doorway would be within this space, somewhere along the wall. He knew this. But his ability to find the doorway depended upon the size of the chamber; for this chamber could be as small as a ten by ten room or as large as an amphitheater. He had no concept of its size.

He continued slowly, running his hand along it, keeping his face close to the wall, unwilling to move away from the surface, as if it would disappear if he let go of his position. He worked undisturbed for what seemed like hours when he found a small indentation. The palm of his hand brushed up against what he felt was an almost imperceptible ledge. He could not see, but felt the slight groove of the thing and ran his hand upward along its length, then down and outward.

He held fast to it with one hand and moved around the area with the other. There was nothing else perceptible and he felt desperate to find something of significance that might take him out of the whiteness. Another sudden sound caused him to turn in the direction from where it came. With a whoosh came another dark spot in the white. It meant he would have to leave the security of the wall to view it and he was reluctant to leave his position. He ignored the spot, but it nagged at him. Still, he continued his mission attempting to find a portal.

The ledge ran from the floor to far above his head, probably to the ceiling, wherever that was. He began knocking on the wall around the ledge, hoping to hear or feel something different. He did this for the whole length he could reach and found nothing.

Perhaps I have gone insane, he thought. Maybe this is what insanity is like. To be stuck mentally in an area, but in reality his body would be sitting in his apartment, drooling and mumbling incoherent things.

He knew this was not true, but he found the thought intriguing. True insanity, the person would constantly go over the same thoughts, unable to break from them, though still acknowledging the world around them to some degree. It was something close to a catatonic state combined with utter misery.

He moved slowly along the wall again, sweeping his hand up and down its length, but at the corner of his vision the dark spot behind him beckoned. He wondered if it was the platter of food again. His stomach rumbled, but even worse, he had been holding his bladder for some time. He wanted to relieve himself, but was reluctant to do so without the convenience of a urinal. Eventually, there would be no choice.

He stopped for a few moments and sat with his back against the wall, exhausted. "Why are you doing this to me?" he asked.

"What have I done?"

The white glared at him, but remained silent. He closed his eyes and leaned against the wall placing the water bottle he carried on the floor next to him. His thirst returned and he drained the remaining contents, deciding to hold on to the water bottle. If nothing else, it would serve as a makeshift urinal, he thought.

The past couple days had been good. Amber had spent Friday and Saturday night with him and they had planned to go to the aquarium. She had left him on the apartment steps with a kiss telling him she would be back after she fed her cat and bought breakfast.

He remembered watching her bounding down the stairs, smiling, but then the memory ended. Even the simple act of returning to his apartment was gone.

This had to be government. No one else had this kind of technology. Unless it was some kind cult that had stolen the technology. He smiled at that and then jumped when suddenly what sounded like a

church hymn burst upon the silence and flashes of a gold cross marked the floor, ceiling and wall behind him.

The sound was so loud it pained him and he covered his ears. . “What the f—”

The music stopped suddenly and was replaced by a canned giggling. The gold cross had disappeared. He lowered his hands from his ears and sat forward. “What is wrong with you people?” he asked again. “Were you fucked up by lousy parents or are you naturally this way?”

He stood, angry. “Or no. Maybe you just can’t stand the idea of another happy person in the world. Just had to screw up a good thing.” He was on a roll. “What a pathetic piece of shit you are.” He slammed his hand against the wall. “What a piece of shit. I really feel sorry for you. I’m sorry you feel so lousy about yourself, but you really shouldn’t bring others into it. It’s bad decorum and really rude.”

He smiled bitterly now, “I wish you nothing but death and misery. May your children be born with two heads.”

The giggling started again, but lasted only a few seconds, replaced by silence once more. He sat back down, drew his knees up and leaned against the wall. The dark spot that may have been his dinner was gone now. He hadn’t heard anything, but considering the circumstances that was not unusual. He laughed at that.

Technology was a beautiful thing, until it was used against innocent people. For things like this. And I’m not getting out of this, am I? He knew the answer.

He glanced at the water bottle that had fallen over on its side and snatched it from its place, removed the lid and placed it on the floor next to him, then poked his thumb into the plastic, attempting to tear it. It would not tear, so he twisted with both hands moving in opposite directions and continued the motion for awhile until he felt the plastic give.

Inspecting his work, he saw that a small hole had been torn, but he needed to tear it in half and worked his index finger into the hole, pulling upward finally causing the plastic to split so he could pull it apart. He sat the lower half next to the lid and held the upper half in his hand, hanging over his knee. He leaned his head back against the wall again, took a deep breath, exhaled and lifted the plastic above his other hand, then brought it down across his palm, slicing deep enough so that it drew blood.

“Shit!” he whispered. “Shit, shit, shit!” he didn’t realize it would hurt so much; but with the deed accomplished, blood running freely, he reached up above his head and smeared the wall with his hand print.

## **About the author**

Carla R. Herrera lives and works in Northwest Arkansas. She is author of *Pink Eye*, an indie novel that can be found on Smashwords and a writer of weird short stories that can be read on her blog at <http://broke-artist.com/>