

Chapter 1 – L.A. Exodus

John - June 2027

“And let him that is on the housetop not go down into the house, neither enter therein, to take anything out of his house; and let him that is in the field not turn back again for to take up his garment. But woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter. For in those days shall be affliction, such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created unto this time, neither shall be.” Holy Bible, St. Mark, chapter 13, verses 15 through 19.

As we prepared to leave, I wondered if we should just stay where we were and wait out the tribulation. I could scavenge for supplies and perhaps find fish in the small lakes, and hunt some rabbits in the hills nearby. We still had some basic supplies in our house—flour, rice, sugar, salt, dry beans, some canned food. But most important, unless we were burned out, we were in a reliable shelter. I agonized over the decision, but could not show any sign of second thoughts to my wife Joan, lest she collapse from the weight of uncertainty.

We had survived the age of the Protectorates and now we worried about marauders. We heard of the turmoil inside the city and feared the diseases would spill over into our area; however, we had been spared. Because our home was in an arid valley, there was no threat from mosquitos. We were very careful with sanitation so we avoided the problems caused by poor conditions.

By the time the cities were falling into critical decline, most of our neighbors had disappeared, either by forced relocation or they escaped to other parts of the country. The smallpox was contained within the cities and did not spread outside because anyone trying to leave was shot by the Protectorate or those patrolling the escape routes from inside the barricaded city. The fear spread to everyone who lived near the city. The gangs effectively kept the city’s inhabitants inside long enough so that they couldn’t leave. We would watch as thick smoke rose above the mountains toward L.A., making it look as though the entire city was on fire. At night, we could see a red glow just beyond the mountains to the south. It burned for weeks. In the end, no city dwellers survived.

The problem we faced was the tsunami effect. When the Protectorate disbanded, it was like water rushing out away from the shore. Then, the marauders rushed in to fill the gap. Unlike the Protectorate, the marauders were not the least bit organized. They operated in a distinctly disorganized fashion. They were usually comprised of small groups of only three or four, and infighting was rampant. If we were discovered, our lives—and everything we owned—would be forfeited. If they attacked, we could expect no help from anyone. We were on our own to repel them or to die trying.

So, all in all, we could be fine for another few months. Nevertheless, this was the deadline that I had set with the rest of the family in the east. It was the first day of June 2027. If we stayed longer, we might not have enough time to find and build a decent camp in the mountains before winter. All the same, maybe things would get better and we wouldn’t need to escape at all. No... that was just foolish. If we stayed any longer, we might not make it to the mountains at all. What if the roads were still blockaded? What if they were still heavily patrolled? What if we were ambushed trying to leave? I knew we had to go right then. We couldn’t wait any longer. It was time to bug out.

So, Joan, her sister Rhonda, and I began to assemble our belongings—the few things necessary for long-term survival in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. That is, if we made it that far. That was not a fear I shared with anyone else, however. It was my sole burden. If my wife and sister-in-law sensed any doubt or fear from me, they'd want us to stay put, which I knew would guarantee our deaths by starvation or murder.

With great trepidation, we filled our backpacks with the items I had meticulously stored for this eventuality. Likely, the three most important items were our micro water filters, firearms, and ammunition. First water. You can only live about three days without water and it must be drinkable. There was so much pollution, and even though a water source might look clean, it could still be deadly, filled with microbes, protozoa, or infectious bacteria. The micro water filters I had purchased more than five years earlier ensured we would have clean water for years.

Guns were our next most important stockpile. They provided protection and an ability to hunt for food. I chose a simple bolt action Remington .22 rifle, a semi-auto Smith and Wesson .22 handgun, a .22 semi-auto Ruger handgun, my old Marlin 30.30 lever action carbine, a Taurus .45 semi-auto handgun, and a Remington 20 gauge pump shotgun. At the last minute, I reluctantly decided to take the AR-15 I bought for my wife about ten years earlier. I felt reluctant because of the extra burden of another rifle and ammo. But, I knew it was much more useful than the .22 or the 30.30 when it came to self-defense.

The ammo was the heaviest portion of our packs, but there was nothing we could do about that. Without ample ammo, you might as well leave the guns behind. I stored over one thousand rounds of .22 long rifle, only two hundred rounds of 30.30, two hundred rounds of .45 ACP, and four boxes of 20 gauge six shot, four boxes of 20 gauge 4 shot and finally about four hundred rounds of .223 for the AR. It would be heavy, even distributed between the three of us, but it was necessary.

Our packs were heavy—heavier than you can imagine. Joan and I joked about how useful it would be to have a pack mule. I tried to help distribute the heavier items in mine (me being the mule). We included some extra comfort items—toothbrushes, a hair brush, a few alcohol wipes, and a quart Ziploc bag filled with trail mix, another with beef jerky, and a couple of apples for the trail. It would have to do.

We loaded our packs, guns, and ourselves into our car for the last time, and said goodbye to our home, its safety, our comfortable beds, and we were on our way. At the time, I was determined not to look back, for fear of turning into a pillar of salt and perhaps causing more panic than I could already see in Joan's face. I knew this was not going to be a vacation, and I needed to stay calm and positive for the women.

Joan had been depressed for a long time and the added anxiety of never again seeing her babies and grandbabies was almost more than she could bear. She was almost robotic in her actions, speaking less than usual and having anxiety attacks that sometimes caused her body to shake. At one point, as we prepared for our departure, she sat on the floor and refused to move. She wouldn't let me help her up or comfort her. She had moved way beyond crying and wanted to give up. Yet, somehow, she summoned the strength to go on. It's what we humans do, despite the most horrific circumstances. What she didn't know, however, was that she was stronger than me. She just didn't hide emotions as well.

Rhonda, on the other hand, was always quiet, and rarely showed joy for anything, unless it was taking verbal jabs at me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her smile. At the young age of thirty, her husband of only five years had died of cancer. She never seemed to recover from that devastating loss and melancholy took up a permanent residence in her psyche.

At the time, she was alone and unable to support herself, so she came to live with us. Joan and I tried to include her in everything we did and the decisions that we made, but she remained withdrawn and uninterested. Joan and I struggled to fight the contagious energy that depression has a way of spreading to the people around it.

Surrendering to the unknown, I had resigned myself to the fact that we could only live day by day through the grace of God. We existed or perished at His will, as long as we did everything in our own power to survive. He knew the plan, His angels protected us, and we gave thanks to Him. I controlled nothing except the simple preparation for the trip and the knowledge He allowed me to gain in advance of the need. As the family leader, I was determined not to succumb to the temptations of comfort promised by the Protectorate, the city gangs, or the so-called Rebels. No one was to be trusted, other than ourselves and the Word of God.

However, we would not be martyred. We would fight to survive, die trying, or endure until we were taken by His angels. It was better to become exiles and hermits than to join any community dwellers. Whatever lay in our future or whatever our fate, we would face it together until the world was righted or ended forever. I recalled a passage from the writings of John Muir: *“In God's wildness lies the hope of the world - the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness. The galling harness of civilization drops off, and wounds heal ere we are aware.”*

In the months preceding the Black War, I saved as much gas for our getaway as possible and calculated that we had enough to make it to our destination. I had planned an escape for years without knowing when the time would come, but convinced it was inevitable. After all, I was an engineer, someone who paid attention to the most miniscule detail of planning and execution. I had listened to the warnings of survivalists and preppers, read the biblical prophecies, and noted all the reports of wars and rumors of wars. After the Black War ended, I knew time was short, but I hadn't foreseen the impact the Protectorate would have on the country.

As we began our journey, we had no idea what we might encounter—more than nine months passed since we had been on any highways. So, we headed north on highway 14 and cut across back roads to reach Interstate 5. Cars littered both sides of the interstate, left behind by others trying to escape the chaos of L.A. before the blockades, and who unfortunately ran out of gas along the way. There was no sign of anyone. We wondered what happened to the occupants of all the cars, but also grateful that they had disappeared. It simply made things just a bit easier. I was suddenly reminded of the movie *The Day After* from the 1980s, where people who were trying to make it into Kansas City after a nuclear missile strike, abandoned their cars on the interstate only to die of radiation poisoning. It was an eerie scene.

We progressed along the interstate, our moods somber and cautious. I wondered if everyone had been taken by the gangs or killed by marauders. There were no corpses, so they hadn't been killed and left alongside the road to rot or be picked apart by birds and other scavengers.

“This is so bizarre,” Rhonda commented. “How long have these cars been abandoned like this?”

From what I could see, it did not appear they had been mined for their resources. A car was full of materials that could be used for survival needs. Engine parts could be used for a multitude of purposes if you possessed the tools and the knowhow. Seat cushions could be used for sleep comfort, tires could be used to fashion shoes, and wiring could be used as cordage.

Joan looked out the windows and shook her head. “I don't like the look of this. Where did everyone go? What happened to them?”

“I guess they were trying to escape like us, but they ran out of gas. We’ll probably catch up with some of them by the time we make it to Bakersfield,” I replied, trying to sound casual. There was no need to cause alarm, but I didn’t particularly like the look of things, either.

Just then, I saw some movement up ahead. Someone ducked behind a car that was off to the left in the median strip. I slowed a little, trying to see if it was a bird or a human.

“Joan, get your rifle ready. I think someone is up there on the left, behind that blue car. Get in the back seat quick and roll down your window.”

I pulled out my .45, anticipating a confrontation. As we neared the blue vehicle, I sped up in an effort to avoid any gunfire and reduce our risk of being hit. Just as we passed the car, I saw that the person in question was a female and she was underneath the blue vehicle. She didn’t seem to regard us as a threat or even pay much attention to our presence. She was focused on draining oil from the abandoned car.

Suddenly, everywhere I looked I could see people underneath or inside abandoned cars. Like insects coming out of the woodwork, human scavengers appeared, and I watched as they stripped down the metal, drained oil and any remaining gas, and removed the rubber. Mining the gas and oil was easy, only requiring an ice pick, knife or screwdriver, and something to catch the liquid. All you had to do was puncture the oil pan or gas tank and drain whatever remained. The gas could be used to fuel another vehicle, bartered for food, or supply fuel for fire. Either way, with hundreds of cars left for the picking, the picking was easy. That is, unless someone else was willing to challenge your rights to it.

“That’s a lot of people,” Joan said.

“Yeah, and I hope they don’t mind us passing through!” I added.

There was a group of about eight or ten people gathered by a red pickup truck. They appeared agitated by the actions of someone in the group. As we drove past slowly, a shot was fired and one person fell to the ground. I sped up, trying to get away.

“Joan, get back up here and trade places with me. You drive, and don’t slow down. If someone tries to flag you down, don’t stop, not even if they stand in the middle of the road. Rhonda, keep your head down in the back seat. Try to get down into the floor as low as you can.” I took her AR and readied a second 30-round magazine.

As I suspected, someone was coming up behind us, driving that red pickup truck. They were approaching fast. There was no doubt in my mind that they did not have good intentions. The days of assuming best intentions were long gone. I leaned out the window and fired five quick rounds at the grill of the truck. Life had never presented the opportunity for me to fire a gun from a moving car, so it didn’t surprise me that my aim wasn’t very accurate. Fortunately, one round hit a tire, causing the truck to veer off into the median and strike another abandoned vehicle.

“Joan, keep going, don’t slow down.”

She was crying and gritting her teeth, but she didn’t take her foot off the accelerator. “Are they still coming?” she asked, her voice quivering.

“No, I think I hit their tire and they wrecked. Do you see anyone else up ahead?”

“No.”

“Do you want to trade places again?”

She looked into the rearview mirror and nodded her head. It was at that time that two motorcycles came up on both sides of our car. The riders began to fire at us with their shotguns. I could hear the pellets pepper the fenders and doors. Rhonda had slid down into the floorboard of the back seat where she sat crumpled, her lower lip trembling and her eyes wide and full of fear.

“Stay down, whatever you do,” I told her.

The riders fired a few more times. The sound of the blasts grew distant as we pulled away. I could still hear the buckshot hitting the back of the car. Leaning out the window, I tried to steady my arm, which was trembling from fear and adrenaline. I fired eight rounds at the rider on our left side. One of my shots hit him and he went down with his motorcycle. The other rider was coming up fast on our right side. My heart was racing and I had no time to think before he fired a shot that broke out the rear passenger window, and shards of glass sprayed across Rhonda. I fired through the rear glass until it shattered and broke away. I then began to fire at the motorcycle, which was still trying to get up beside us. Luckily, the cars littered along the side of the road impeded his progress.

Joan kept her cool and kept her foot on the accelerator, though I knew how terrified she really was. One of my shots found its target and the rider hit an abandoned car. As we moved ahead and watched the motorcycles and their riders grow smaller in the distance, I exhaled. It felt as though I'd been holding my breath the whole time.

The gunfight was over and we were still alive, though I was trembling and my heart felt like it was going to rip through my skin. No matter how many times I'd imagined such a scenario, it didn't make it any less nerve-wracking.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked. My voice shook. It was impossible to hide my fear, even though we were now safe. I was thankful that we didn't freeze in the moment or give in to the horror of it all. I was relieved by my ability to do what had to be done, without hesitation. One never knows how they'll handle such a situation until they're in the thick of it.

The women were crying, and both were only able to muster a low whimper. We were all shaken to the bone. My adrenaline was pumping. Had we made it, or was this just the beginning of what we were about to experience? I found myself second-guessing whether we'd made the right decision by heading out like this.

Joan remained focused on her driving, and we made our way down the interstate. Cars and trucks were scattered haphazardly for several miles, sometimes blocking one of the lanes. She drove around them, one lane and then the next. As we approached Bakersfield, I noticed that the abandoned vehicles were getting closer together. We drove on, not seeing any more scavengers, but I wasn't about to assume safety and grow complacent. We soon came to a complete road blockade. Cars and trucks were strewn everywhere. Joan slowly maneuvered our car from one side to the other, careful not to get too far off the edge and become mired down in the soft soil. If we got stuck, there was no telling what our fate would be.

I turned back to Joan. “Get ready. I'm not sure what is going on up there, but be ready for anything.”

“Got it,” she replied, not taking her eyes off the road.

“Rhonda, get down in the floor again and keep down until I say differently,” I instructed. I imagined stopping and then being attacked by marauding gangs who would steal our provisions and tear our car apart. My mind wandered briefly, recalling a point earlier in our trip when I spotted a column of black smoke a short way ahead. At first, I hadn't been sure if it was a house near the interstate or just a large bonfire. As we neared the smoke, we saw that a car was burning in the center of the northbound lane. It was engulfed in flames and all four tires were burning. We could feel the fire's heat through our closed windows, and it blistered the paint on our car as we passed.

There was still no sign of anyone, but I had a suspicion and nagging feeling that we were being watched. Just as my paranoia turned up a notch, a single gunshot rang out. I couldn't tell where it came from, but I was glad it missed our car.

"Joan, duck down!" I yelled, expecting more shots to be fired.

She sped up and hit the bumper of a car that was partly blocking the road. She accelerated as fast as possible, first weaving one way and then the other, avoiding the road's shoulders and trying not to run off into the median or the ditch on the right side.

As we neared the outskirts of Bakersfield, before Interstate 5 and route 99 split at Wheeler's ridge, we exited the interstate and stayed to the back roads. This was the route we preplanned, and our emergency food caches were along this path. There was no sign of life anywhere—no cars, no people, no animals. I felt myself relax a bit, but kept my guard up, ready for danger to find us at any moment.

We made it a few miles past Bealville when our gas ran out. We had still seen no one. I didn't know if that was a good or bad sign, but as long as we were undetected, I wasn't going to worry too much.

By now, it was almost dark; only about an hour or two of daylight remained. We shouldered our packs and walked the road, which followed a valley through the edge of the surrounding mountains.

Progress was slow. With the heavy packs, we could only walk about thirty minutes before taking a short break to catch our breath. We didn't talk much along the way—no one had the extra energy to talk. It took all our effort and energy to put one foot in front of the other. I thought about the drive down the interstate and was glad to be in a less populated area, safe—at least, temporarily.

The late afternoon sun did not relent and my shirt became drenched with sweat. Beads tricked down into my eyes, the salt causing it to burn. I worried about blisters, about what was in store for us down the road, how the women were holding up.

Joan carried the AR-15 strapped across her chest and under her pack in the back. Rhonda carried the .22 rifle in the same fashion and I carried the 30/30 and the shotgun. My .45 was on my belt and the .22 handguns were stored in my pack.

The women were already starting to complain about being tired and thirsty, so I knew we were not able to get very far tonight. I tried not to get irritated as I felt my goal to walk much farther slowly dissipate. I had to check my expectations—now was not the time to have any.

After walking for about five more miles, we came to a turn in the road where the trees and underbrush off to either side was fairly thick.

"I think this will be the perfect place to stop for the night," I announced, ready to shed my pack.

"Agreed," Joan said with a sigh of relief.

There was still no sign of anyone, anywhere, not even a house in the distance. The only problem was that there was no water. We had filled our water bottles before we left our house and used it very sparingly just to be safe, but it would have been nice to top off our supply.

Tonight, there would be no fire and there would be no food, except some jerky and trail mix. I set up the tent, unrolled the sleeping bags and the women went right off to sleep. I stayed outside to stand guard, with the AR-15 across my lap. I wanted to listen closely to see if I could hear any movement or car noises coming up the road. It remained quiet during the night. To occupy myself, I took inventory of our packs. Our supplies consisted of the following: my bible and my journal, a couple of Bic pens, two pencils, and my reading glasses. I went through the

mental checklist of all the tools we had with us, our food and shelter, and other provisions that we had deemed necessary for our time out on the road.

For fire starting, we carried five Bic lighters, three one-quart Ziploc bags filled with cotton balls (great fire starters), three balls of fine steel wool (fire starter for damp wood; it burns really hot) and a small jar of Vaseline (used on a cotton ball in the rain or with damp wood). And finally, a couple of candles.

Our tools were plentiful and consisted of a machete, a filet knife, three multi-purpose pocket knives, three lock blade pocket knives, two sheath hunting/skinning knives, a small hack saw (could be used as a bone saw for butchering a deer), a multi-purpose tool, a knife sharpener, a small flat file, a small tri-angle file, a small folding backpack shovel, a larger camp shovel that attached to my pack, a folding camp saw, a wire saw, a hatchet, three aluminum mess kits (Boy Scout version), a four quart and a six quart aluminum pot and a coil of 5/8-inch braided nylon rope, about one hundred feet long.

And leaving no detail untouched, we had a variety of fasteners which could serve many purposes—six lag bolts, 1/2"x4" (for anchors in rock cracks or trees to anchor a shelter), twelve #16 nails (anchors in trees or filed down for spear points), four 4-inch long eye hooks, three tubes of super glue (to close small wounds), one hundred feet of #550 paracord, a small ball of brown twine, twenty-five feet of twisted nylon twine (a single thread can be used as sutures for large wounds or to repair and sew garments, deadfall snares), twenty long zip ties (lashings or tie downs), a pack of multi-purpose sewing needles (a curved needle can be used to close large wounds with a strand of nylon twine), a roll of braded picture hanging wire and one hundred foot roll of green floral wire (great for dead fall snare triggers).

I knew there would be a good chance that we'd need to catch fish in order to eat, so we packed a spool of 50# test black nylon fishing line and a spool of 20# test monofilament fishing line (which had multiple uses, really), three yo-yo reels, thirty-six #6 fishing hooks, twelve #4 and twelve #50 fishing hooks (for trot lines).

To ensure we always had some sort of shelter, we carried one plastic tarp 8'x10,' a 4'x4' 3mil plastic sheet (solar water well), a three-man hiking tent, three sleeping bags, and six reflective Mylar emergency blankets.

Lastly, and most importantly—food. We had been meticulous with our food preps and had four-one quart Ziploc bags filled with dried brown beans, our collapsible water bottles and filters, four-one quart bags of rice, two quart bags of flour, two bags of beef jerky, two one-quart bags of macaroni, a quart bag of raisins and dates, a quart bag of dried peaches, a quart bag of dried apples, a quart bag filled with individual tea bags (which can also be used to stop bleeding and to relieve bee stings), and a quart bag filled with salt, pepper, sugar, and honey packets collected from restaurants before the collapse. I also packed the heirloom seeds I had collected over the past few years. I didn't know where we were going to end up, but wherever it was, being able to plant crops would be extremely important for our long-term survival.

The Ziploc bags could prove useful to store other items later on, so I packed a few extra. Months ago, when we were in the midst of preparing for our journey, we buried small caches of similar food along our escape route, so what we carried with us now was more than enough to get us to our first cache. In addition, we each took twelve balls of pemmican wrapped in small squares of cloth and twenty-four hardtack biscuits each for times when there was nothing else.

We each packed a second pair of jeans, a pair of nylon pants to be worn over our jeans, two pairs of wool socks, two extra undergarments, a cotton T-shirt, a sweatshirt with a hood, a pair of wool glove liners, a pair of leather work gloves, a cotton long sleeve shirt, a wool

stocking cap, and a thick wool sweater. Coordinated like a sports team, we wore a pair of jeans, a long sleeve knit shirt, wool socks, hiking boots, and carried an insulated fleece lined nylon windbreaker jacket. We took our sunglasses and baseball caps. That was it. Our lives had amounted to these possessions and nothing more. Everything we thought we needed before was left behind. I had no idea what would happen to old pictures, Joan's beloved pottery, our stacks of books. I tried not to think about it too much.

Feeling drowsy, I covered up in my sleeping bag and sat against a large pine tree with the rifle by my side. I dosed off sometime around midnight and woke periodically during the night. It was eerily quiet; I never even heard any animal sounds. I didn't know if I should take that as a good sign or a bad omen. I opened my journal and began to record the course of events that brought us to this place and our journey to the safety of the mountains.

“And when ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers' places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows.” Holy Bible, St. Mark, chapter 13, verses 7 and 8.

As I think about the history of civilization, I know there have been many wars. They were all justified for nobly stated reasons: differences in religion, differences in culture, difference in social equalities, rights for natural resources, rights to be governed, so on and so forth. Although, the root of all, when deeply studied, always boiled down to greed. Leaders and politicians were masters at spinning their messages to justify the necessity of any violent courses of action, to insight their followers to rise against oppression or defend against it, that given a positive outcome, is economic gain.

This has been the case throughout history, so when a world, so dependent on oil, is faced with predictable scarcity and rising prices, the entire world's political sense is to create stabilization. How is this done? Simple economics—control the supply of oil, control the demand for oil, and you control the price of oil. So, how do you control the supply of oil? If you don't have it, you take it. WAR! And that is what we had.

The struggle to control the supply of oil began with the formation of OPEC, a group of nations in the Middle East, which formed an alliance to control oil production and regulate pricing. At one point, this group of nations held over eighty percent of the world oil reserves. Oil products became not only a source of energy and transportation, but also a source for plastics, and plastics were introduced into almost all manufacturing processes and products. Plastic was everywhere.

It was easy enough to reason that a small shift in oil would have a cascading effect on the world's economy. Higher costs to produce oil-based products resulted in higher costs of consumer goods. Higher costs of consumer goods meant people had to choose to go without or demand higher wages. Higher wages meant manufacturers either had to produce less or raise unit prices. If the manufacturers chose to make less products, they wouldn't need as many workers, which meant workers would lose their jobs and be unable to buy as many products. Ultimately, manufacturers' revenues from product sales fell, forcing them to reduce production, which in turn meant they didn't need as many workers.

Normally, such an economic downturn eventually recycled. Increased oil production caused oil prices to go down in response to decreased demand, which happened due to the shortfall of wages within the population.

In the decades before the Black War, which got its name because crude oil is black, this was the normal cycle of economics. The world became so dependent on oil that every aspect of life depended on it and everyone seemed to accept the cycle over time even though the anticipated outcry of higher prices and lower quality was heard every single time it happened.

However, the cycles became longer and longer to recover, and the nations without oil began to demand that prices be reduced by OPEC in order to stimulate economic growth. The demand was curtly dismissed and political and economic sanctions against the oil nations were imposed. The struggle of the “haves” against the “have-nots” had begun.

In the beginning, many larger nations without sufficient oil reserves were rich in other natural resources and produced the larger portion of food supplies for the world. In the early years of the sanctions, a modified barter system was used to provide lower priced food reserves to those oil nations that could not grow sufficient food in exchange for lower cost oil. This action infuriated other have-not nations and rumors of wars began.

The world quickly divided between food supply countries, oil production countries, technology countries making up first world economies, and second and third world countries. Second world countries bartered labor and unique natural resources to the first world countries. Third world countries were left to fend on their own, as had always been the case to some extent. However, starvation and disease were devastating without any resources, and so many people were fated to a natural form of genocide. Borders were closed, and no refugees were allowed into more prosperous lands. Migration was not an option. War within these nations began—cities against cities, chiefdoms against chiefdoms, villages against villages, neighbors against neighbors all struggling for food and water, all struggling to stay alive.

As millions died of starvation and famine, the second and first world countries barely noticed as they were focused on the simple need for control of oil and economic survival. Large portions of Africa, Australia, Asia, and South American became desolate and unoccupied except by the small population that essentially reverted to prehistoric cultures. Little did the remainder of the world know that their fate would soon follow the same or similar path.

In 2020, an unidentified virus outbreak in West Africa killed millions. The epidemic spread to a few European countries and there were a few isolated cases in the U.S., but it was contained before it spread to the rest of the world. Travel was restricted to and prohibited from the African nations where the outbreak began. Medical personnel from the west were withdrawn and quarantined before they were allowed to re-enter their native countries.

The U.S. played a major role in this control, and once it was clear that Africa was lost, our nation turned a blind eye to trying to stop it there. Overall, during a couple of years, the death toll in Africa reached about five million, spreading from Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea east to Mali, Nigeria, and Chad, north to Algeria and Libya, and south as far as Botswana.

In 2021, when the famine of needs spread among the third world nations, a real worldwide famine began. It started with a decrease of natural rainfall in areas that were near desert anyway, like the Serengeti Plain. At first, it wasn't even noticed—only a lighter monsoon season than the last. As years went on, the rain became less and less until the seasonal flooding ceased entirely and the arid landscape became permanent.

Tens of millions died of starvation in China and the arid parts of the world. In areas such as the plains states of the U.S., the absence of sufficient rain meant a return of the depression-era Dust Bowl. Crops withered and as irrigation resources dried up, so did the hope of feeding the nation and the hope of the continued barter for oil.

The same occurred in Asia, Europe, South America, and especially, Africa. The once fertile lands of the Mississippi, Rhine, Danube, Yangtze, Nile, and Amazon rivers became bleak and barren. Entire eco-systems were disrupted and lost forever.

With economic barter failing and a growing worldwide famine, it was inevitable that war would come. If there were only oil resources, we could keep the country moving. Our own oil reserves were long since depleted and everything had become completely under the control of the Emergency Management Agency, or the Agency, as everyone called it. What remained was only accessible by the rich, or those who stole it. The gasoline black market created a source for those of us who still possessed resources to obtain it. So, we bought what we could in small amounts to avoid suspicion and hid it to avoid confiscation.

Solar and wind energy was not enough—we needed oil. Everyone sensed it, everyone knew it, everyone wanted it. We would take it. It was our God-given right to survive and prosper, just like it was our God-given right to take land from the Native Americans during the 1800s. As history has shown, any excuse is a good excuse to justify war and soon enough, it came. In the year 2023, the Black War began.

For America, this meant no turning back, and no holding back. We were all in, and no one dissented. The impact of that decision was not what we envisioned or expected.

John Thompson, 1st summer of exile

Our first night of exile was uneventful and I was grateful.