

2061

By J A Williams

The tide was low. The lowest it had been for as long as I could remember. I saw the railroad tracks with my ancient binoculars from my perch on the balcony of our house on top of the hill.

It brought back memories of childhood tales as the family huddled around in warm winter evenings. There were stories of snow, something I had never seen, and of course, the sandy beach, a pier, and restaurants snuggled along Marine Drive, a road I only knew from stories, for they were all now buried beneath the warm waters of the Pacific.

Dolores came out, fanning the baby. She was dusky skinned, a refugee from Latin America, when it became too hot to live there.

Mankind cannot survive in 55º temperatures. Most refugees had died en-route, the trek too harsh. I fell for her at first sight and took her for my partner.

She came over, leaned down and brushed my cheek with her lips. I smiled up and touched Chloe's cheek, for so we had named our daughter.

Soledad.

"Look," I said, handing her the binoculars, pointing to the shore.

She passed me our baby, took the binoculars, and stared in wonder at the sight.

"¡Dios mío!" She reverted to her native tongue in her wonder at the visage. We had never seen the tracks, only heard about them. Until today.

I bobbed Chole on my lap, she cooed and I kissed her forehead. She was a treasure, there were not many children born these days, some believed that it had something to do with a hole in the ozone layer. Science was limited now, though my grandparents told me of a time when there were universities and medical institutions filled with scientists and knowledge abounded.

Now we barely had a country, and anything left of civilization was in Montreal. I built our house myself, with logs I felled by hand. Mankind was dying off, we had killed ourselves and destroyed our world. What fools men are.

According to my grandparents, it was all for greed, for money.

"Were low on sugar and salt," Dolores reminded me.

I nodded and stood. She took Chole from me and I went back inside for the baby backpack she'd

made. I took Chole and handed her the carrier, which she strapped on to hold our six-month-old in front. When she was ready, I went inside for my Winchester, pulled it off the rack, checked that there was a shell chambered, and clicked on the safety. We would walk the six miles to the store together. It wasn't safe to leave a woman alone these days, in particular, one who was fertile.

I picked up the empty knapsack we would use to carry our purchases and slung it over my shoulder. Dolores went ahead of me. She was looking forward to the trip I knew. We would pass three other homesteads on our trek and she hoped there would be an opportunity to socialize and catch up on the news.

Frank Winslow had a prehistoric, ham radio and was our main source of international news.

Such as it was.

Twenty-five minutes later, we came upon the homestead of the Edmonds. Four people lived here. There was Mr. and Mrs. Edmonds, their only son Steve and his partner Bev. Steve and Beverly had been together for over six years with no sign of children.

The girls hugged in delight and Bev pulled Chole out of the carrier cooing and cuddling her. I felt for them, I knew they wanted children. Steve and I shook hands, then embraced, pounding each other on the back.

"Just stoppin' by for a visit?" Steve asked.

"No," I shook my head. "Heading up to the store for some sugar, and salt. We'll see if they have any flour, an' maybe a half pound of coffee."

"Getting harder to get staples every day," Mr. Edmonds interjected. Steve and I nodded.

Mrs. Edmonds brewed tea in a decrepit aluminum pot. She always made good tea. I could taste the mint, but did not know what other ingredients she gathered and dried for it. We didn't stay long, we still had an hour walk before us, and then the return trip.

I didn't want to be out after dark with Dolores and Soledad, rifle or no. Dolores and I had both seen a Wilder, as had several of our neighbors, so we were certain, one was in our area.

Wilders were human but insane. They lived off roots, berries and had been known to eat raw rats and squirrels. And, they steal. I cannot blame them, for they wish what we all do... to survive. However, they have no sense of right or wrong. We don't know for sure, but we have heard rumors of a male Wilder raping a woman, then slicing open her belly and eating her liver.

I would take no chances. If I saw one, I would kill it first, then question it afterwards.

There was no one at the next two homesteads, but there were signs of life. Dolores and I nodded to one another and continued on our way.

The store loomed ahead. It was a small fortress, easy to defend, which was necessary hereabouts. In particular, if you had food and guns.

“Hey Frank,” I called.

Betsy, his wife peered over the high log wall with a rifle aimed in our general direction. She saw us, then took a long, careful look around before nodding to us.

“Come to the man door. When we open it be quick about getting in.”

“You may be sure,” I grinned up at her.

She glared at me.

We jogged over to the door. Dolores got ready to run inside, I unslung my rifle, clicked off the safety, put it to my shoulder, and fanned it away from the building, searching for movement. I would pull the trigger first, and deal with the results later.

The heavy door swung open, Dolores ran inside with Soledad, and I backed in, rifle at the ready until Frank slammed the door shut and dropped the hefty beam across it. I snapped the safety back on, and pointed the gun at the ceiling, a friendly gesture. Frank nodded and smiled.

“Good to see you. We’ve just got a fresh shipment in. I think you’re going to have a happy partner,” he grinned at Dolores, then winked at me.

It was expensive, but in addition to the sugar, salt, flour, and coffee, we managed to purchase a bolt of heavy denim, which must have been a found item, as I did not think it was still being produced. He also had shells for my Winchester. We bought three boxes as they were getting harder to come by every year. I no longer used my rifle to hunt, its sole use was to protect my family.

In spite of the shaky welcome, Betsy stuffed us with fresh biscuits and marmalade from the orange trees, which flourished in their large, stronghold. I purchased a length of hemp rope, so Dolores could make the denim into a pack for our hike home. She slung it over one shoulder, packed with the lighter purchases, and Soledad in her carrier. I took the flour, salt, sugar, and spare cartridges in the backpack.

We headed home.

With Dolores and our daughter in front, where I could watch, we headed south at a fast walk along the rugged path. My girl was tough and I was proud of her. She was a fine mother and a hard working partner. No man could ask for more.

We waved to the Edmonds as we hurried by their homestead, in a rush to get home before dark. Dolores glanced back at me, a grin of contentment on her face. I was willing to die for these girls... but that would be a last option, my face held a grim look of determination I knew.

The trees were tall in this region, the path we followed a narrow canyon cut through heavy underbrush. My eyes shot around searching for danger. Darkness loomed in the depth of the northern tropical, forest. My heart pounded, my finger found the safety, ready to click it off in an instant.

Without a sound, a body crashed down on me. It clawed at my face and tried to snatch the Winchester from me. My surprise was absolute and it fought with supernatural energy.

“Run!” I screamed to Dolores. I fought my rifle from desperate hands, and slammed the butt into the ribs of the body on top of me. There were crunching sounds. I thrust it away with adrenaline infused effort.

It moved.

I shoved my Winchester into its mouth and pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

Blood splattered me. I turned to see Dolores clawing at another Wilder.

“HELP!” She shrieked.

The Wilder grabbed for Chole, trying to snatch her from the carrier. I aimed my Winchester, but with the violent struggle, could not be sure I would not shoot my wife or daughter.

“BASTARD,” I bellowed, as I ran with desperation.

In that instant, the Wilder managed to snatch Chole from her carrier. The look of triumph on its face shot fear into me as it took her and bit down on her neck.

I launched myself at it. I smashed into them. My fist found a chin, I prayed it was that of the Wilder. We three rolled several feet. Chole was on top. I pushed her off, found the neck of the Wilder, and squeezed. It was then I realized that it was a female. She looked up at me, her eyes begged, begged for life. I smashed my hand against her esophagus and crushed her throat. She tried to gasp, but her throat was destroyed and crumpled. She died beneath me gasping for breath.

I jumped up and ran for my girls. Chole screamed, her neck bled, it looked bad, and Dolores lay quiet on the dirt path. I snatched my daughter with one arm and tapped Dolores’s face.

She didn’t respond.

NO!

I realized that she was covered in blood... I slapped her face.

She didn't move

She's dead, I thought.

She stirred.

"CHOLE!" She screamed.

"She's here... we're both here."

"I'm so sorry my love," I told her. "We've got to go. Please come."

My brave, strong, Dolores struggled to her feet. I slung my rifle over one shoulder, held Chole in one arm, and pulled my Dolores to me with the other. We limped along. It was well after dark before we arrived at our cabin. I slammed the beam behind the door and tended my girls.

I began to hunt for Wilders and killed fourteen of them over the next ten years, but it was never enough. Mankind would die out and give way to cockroaches and slimy things. I was happy I would not to live to see it, but worried for Soledad and our other three children.

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