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# THE GREENSBORO REVIEW



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## A MINOR DISRUPTION IN MERIDIAN-KESSLER

Jared Green

The morning, sunny and 9/11 cloudless, begins in earnest with the announcement that Our Family will be going for a walk. That is exactly how Joyce says it: "Our Family is going for a walk," but gravely, in her talk radio voice, the way a president might announce that a war had commenced. She anticipates pushback from the children, and from me as well, since we are all tuckered out from so much digging, but instead there is silence. We all have our eyebeams trained on funny/sexy/fearsome things on our end-to-end encrypted phones. We have been digging for days to complete the new convolute; this is our downtime before the concrete will need to be poured, the ventilation system installed, the electrical wiring laid down. Soon enough the fitness room and interior bunker complex will get underway. Joyce, undaunted, plows ahead. This is why I call her Joyce the Undaunted, which I've never actually told her but surely will when the Hard Times come and we, alone among our unprepared neighbors, have survived to repopulate our subdivision of the Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson metropolitan area.

"Our Family is going to get dressed," she says, "duct tape the bottoms of our feet, and put on our hiking shoes. Then we will go hiking in The Wilderness in the fresh spring air."

What Joyce means by The Wilderness is in fact the very small remaining patch of spindly sycamore trees between the mall and The Interstate 70 off-ramp. The Socials tell us that soon The Wilderness will be cleared for the building of a little more mall and a little more Interstate 70, hence the note of urgency. It's no coincidence that it was a distant relative of Joyce's who designed the Sad Mac icon that you'd see in the '80s when your computer crashed and wiped out all your personal information. This cousin also composed the Chimes of Death sound you'd hear when Sad Mac appeared in its ominous black void. I attest that this has to do with why Joyce is no stranger to expecting the worst. Nothing is really a coincidence. It all lines up if you have rigorous logic and the proper angle of view.

“There is no time like the present,” she insists.

“You don’t have to tell *me* that,” I say, because *There Is No Time Like the Present* is the name of our late-night talk radio show and also because Joyce’s talent for persuasion is why I hired her as my co-host, just before I asked her to co-host Our Family.

About The Wilderness: Joyce got the idea from an Ad Council spot purchased on *There Is No Time Like the Present*. It was for going out to the forest, produced with the U.S. Forest Service, who very likely did not have our specific wilderness in mind. I doubt they would even call it The Wilderness, really. Still, it qualifies because it’s possible for people to get lost in it, as happened to a little boy The Socials called Sweet Baby James and whose story our eyebeams had recently followed for three exhilarating days.

Our Family had intended to join the townspeople in the search for Sweet Baby James, but before we could finish all the things that were in the way, the things we’d been putting off long enough as it was, he’d already been found, praise be. Frightened, sure, and temporarily lacking the ability to process spoken language, but he was alive, praise be, having survived on the remnants of Happy Meals and Big Gulps thrown into The Wilderness from both the mall and Interstate 70.

On The Socials he was shown showered and smiling, sandy hair parted on one side, eating a free Happy Meal that had been donated to honor his rescue. Our Family was so relieved for Sweet Baby James, so glad we had decided to help.

The next time a child is lost in The Wilderness, as happens about once or twice a year, we’ll be prepared. Maybe we’ll even interview said child on *There Is No Time Like the Present*, make it a regular segment.

“Remember Sweet Baby James?” I say, even though I can already feel the emotional significance dissolving from our exhausted amygdalas. “We could learn a thing or two from his survival skills. Quick now: what will we do if later today *we* are the ones lost in The Wilderness?”

“Open our Get Home Bags!” says Bethany.

“Assess if this is a SHTF situation!” says Shiloh.

“Build a reflector oven!” says Canaan.

“Tap the sycamores for hydration with our spiles!” says Judah.

“Hunt for Happy Meals!” says Masada.

“Why are we doing this?” asks Salem, the oldest and most sullen. Always sullen.

“Because we are making you resilient,” I say, down on one knee. We are eyebeam to eyebeam, imploring one another.

“What if you’re not making us resilient, just scarring us for life?” she says.

“What if these are the same thing?” And this, I feel certain, she understands.

How great our children are, I think. And such good diggers. How hard not to feel Real America rage tears when looking at their trusting faces, their beaming orthodontia, their at-the-ready GHBs, knowing how terrible it will be in a Shit Hits The Fan situation. Unforgivable are the burdens we forebears have placed on them, having consumed their Happy Meals and given them only endless streaming content in return.

“Our Family will first fuel up,” Joyce says, undaunted as we prepare to go into The Wilderness. She means vacuum-sealed nuts and grains, freeze-dried fruits, dehydrated dairy, and reconstitutable proteins. We will gather these elements from the food vault in Convolute 6. As we fuel, we will discuss off-grid uses for plastic grocery bags, then practice our accuracy with live fire on the shooting range, then update our inventory to reflect the meals that we have reconstituted, the amount of water and ammunition used, all of which we will need to replace. We will then assemble what is needed for Our Family’s trip to The Wilderness (e.g. hardtack, pemmican, parched corn, and trench cake). Because going to The Wilderness is, let’s be honest, a Minor Disruption, maybe not the kind that brings on the Hard Times, but Disruptions are what preparation is all about. We have always known that the question that matters is what form the Major Disruption will take. This is why before we go to The Wilderness, we will need to practice our Get Home Scenarios, just in case a Shit Hits The Fan event occurs while we are out. Then we will

practice our Bug In/Bug Out scenarios for such natural disasters as tornadoes, for which we are surely overdue.

Just beyond our picture window, our neighbor, Stig, rides back and forth, back and forth on his Troy-Bilt mower. Just like there is no possibility of a Disruption (e.g. currency collapse, dirty bomb, Deep State coup, tornado), and the only thing one has to do is make the perfectly straight lawn lines that I'll admit I admire. His wife, Joyce (Other Joyce, who is not undaunted, but who I'll admit I also admire), suns herself catlike on her chaise lounge and reads an interior design magazine that will ready her for nothing.

Almost no one is named Joyce anymore but somehow these two wound up next door to one another here in Meridian-Kessler, which feels like it should mean something and maybe does. She has a seat on the Meridian Street Preservation Commission and hosts the mayor once a season. She preserves a way of life that belongs to another century's mansions. She believes The Government can keep things as they were, as they should be, but we know better. This is, at any rate, none of Stig's concern. He and Other Joyce are, generally speaking, inadequately concerned. Their only child, Grace, has her precious eyebeams captured willy-nilly by Socials monitored by both The Surveillance State and The ChiComms, who know that teenagers are the unlocked backdoors to all our lives and bank accounts. Grace says aloud the answers to a game in which she guesses the locations of internet photographs; she sings along with the songs she is forever dancing to in militarily precise fifteen-second increments. She paints her toenails the same maraschino shade as her bikini. She occasionally asks for a horse.

I pity them, not knowing what's coming, unprepared for any and all Shit Hitting The Fan scenarios. Theirs will be the panicked, lotion-soft fists banging on our door; theirs the regretful voices calling out through the Hard Times, only to fall on the deafened ears of Our Family.

We would like to help them, we would, but we will already be underground, and they should have been preparing all this time. They will have only themselves to blame. I long ago gave up trying to convince the distracted citizens of our section of 51st Street, from Broadway to College Ave. There is only so much

you can do for others. That is what my father said, and his father before him, the one who built the first bomb shelter, which still stands today. I suppose you could say that “there is only so much you can do for others” is our family motto.

*You have been forewarned*, I mouth to Stig’s shining, hair-free head as it goes by our window. Does he shave or is it alopecia? You can’t ask. The head glides, gleaming. The Troy-Bilt executes a perfect turn; the head goes back in the other direction. What it must be like to carry that ponderous, satisfied Nordic skull around from place to place. To drive it from one location to another on a mower, or in his sleek, smug EV. What sort of things must this Viking head have room for, preparing as it does for nothing? But no, not nothing: in fact, Stig occupies himself a great deal thinking about the colonization of Mars. Terraforming, radiation shielding, interplanetary telecommunications, water extraction, mining, seed germination, childbirth in diminished gravity. He is on the waitlist for an Earth-facing unit in Gale Crater, where he, Other Joyce, and Only Child Grace will be one of ten families in a reality show that I will refuse to watch or promote or even acknowledge on *There Is No Time Like the Present*. Even though I’m not so sure that there really is any such waitlist, Stig has shown me the brochure from his side of the phalanx of conic dwarf firs that separates What Is Theirs from What Is Ours.

Stig goes to semiannual conferences about Mars with like-minded futurist physicians. It’s been said that he’s built a cryobank in his sub-basement, fed by mail-order military surplus nitrogen tanks that will forever freeze his non-irradiated heirloom seeds, his wife’s eggs, his own sperm, and, it’s also been said, himself, should death come knocking before the Mars rockets are ready.

Stig thinks only about where we might be headed, not what might be headed our way. But dreaming of being the first proctologist on Mars is not at all the same thing as being prepared to be the last dentist in the Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson metropolitan area.

It occurs to me that because I am Stig’s present-time dentist and because he is my present-time proctologist—to say nothing of

the fact that Other Joyce is Joyce the Undaunted's OB-GYN—we two families have looked deeply into one another as few have. I have seen Stig's adenoids and his geographic tongue, and he has seen and snipped my polyps. And still, we know so little about each other. I often consider this, gazing down into the glistening mouthpink of my patients while Joyce hands me my instruments, fills tiny cups with water, pulls dental floss tight as a garrotte between her elegant fingers. How much can any of us know about one another? How many patients, mouths agape, eyes on their own reflections in my safety glasses, imagine that beneath their dentist's home snakes a labyrinth of convolutes and chambers and emergency supplies that will ensure his survival and not theirs? And what about them: what are they preparing for? What sort of endings do they anticipate in ecstasy or terror? Sometimes it seems like we are all preparing for our separate apocalypses. Or are they even preparing for anything at all? Consider: Stig and Other Joyce can barely be bothered to lie to me about their flossing habits. How will they possibly make it when Shit Hits The Fan? They don't understand that *There Is No Time Like the Present*. Maybe given *another* time, an alternate history, another world in which Shit and Fan are not perpetually hurtling toward long-foretold impact, we might have been friends, the best of friends. We might have gone to The Wilderness together.

But now we cannot possibly go to The Wilderness at all. There is a storm coming. This is not a metaphor; it is a fresh Disruption. The Socials announce that the storm might cause a tornado. We are tracking the weather system with radiant resolve, even though it is hard to believe in the tornado when the sky is swimming pool blue. But then, the more we dig, the harder it becomes to believe in anything but the digging. Just this morning, Joyce asked me "Are we hiding from the future or searching for it?" And when I answered "Does it matter?" I just meant that in every blue sky there nests an unborn tornado for which we have to prepare.

We affirm now, hands joined prayerlike, that *There Is No Time Like the Present*, and that being prepared begins with naming our

fears, e.g.:

- That in case of a tornado, the aged ash tree in our yard will fall on our roof, just above where the children sleep, stacked supermarket-neat in their bunk beds.
- That, speaking of which, we need to rotate our food stock because the original supplies are all expiring or have already expired.
- That, furthermore, we have far too many canned legumes and not enough powdered electrolytes. Plus, none of us can digest legumes.
- That we do not have enough iodine in the medkit, or hydroxychloroquine or ivermectin in the medkit, and it is, in point of fact, impossible to have enough medicines of any kind in a medkit for all of the things that might befall us when Shit Hits The Fan, so we need more medkits.
- That we no longer have enough unexpired dehydrated meals. This is because Joyce went away last weekend for the Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson metropolitan area dental hygienist's conference and left me with our children and my insufficient cooking skills. She had not adequately prepared us for this. I rehydrated meals for all seven of us, three squares a day, which came to sixty-three meals total by the morning that Joyce returned.

"Why didn't you get some pizzas?" she said, surveying the depleted stock. "Why not Chinese? Burritos? I left you menus."

"We have to be self-sufficient in an emergency."

"Is being without your wife for a weekend an emergency?"

"Everything is an emergency."

And she nodded, knowing that this will take everything we've got. Also, that there is no way to have enough of anything.

Stig's head does another motorized orbit just beyond our picture window. The Indiana sky is somehow bluer than before. It is bluer than anything has ever been. We will all say how chlorinated blue this sky was, how calm the earth seemed, before the tornado hit. Joyce inhales slowly, counts to ten, exhales. She has endured so much. But then, she always knew that the corridors beneath our home would be the real stuff of our conjoined lives. Knew



from the get-go that so thoroughly threaded into the paternal fibers was the drive to make bunkers, dig convolutes, inventory provisions, that it had become genetic. During our first date, we went to the shelter my father and his father built together to outlast the Soviets' warheads. There, by kerosene light, I read her pages from the diaries of my ancestors, pioneers of preparation, who came by flatboat with the first settlers down the Ohio River in 1814 to build George Rapp's Harmonist utopia along the Wabash. We acted out the parts, pronounced their fevered prophecies, saw their visions of a perfected life underground, sheltered from the vagaries of existence. I gifted her their survival manuals, their recipes for preserved fruits and hardtack and pemmican, their heavy burdens. She knew that it was atop this collapsed paradise that my father's father had founded his fallout shelter company to construct impregnable futures for all the imperiled homeowners of Meridian-Kessler. Our Family has explored those that remain standing, seen what they've been turned into by those who lost the will to prepare: wine cellars, dens of teen decadence, man caves, places to store Christmas decorations. We alone preserve the dream, the True American Dream. It is from the patriotic concrete of Our Family's own shelter that we broadcast our show, sponsored by Harmonist Freeze Dried Biscuits 'n' Gravy. We will not be silenced, nor will we rest while there is so much work to be done. So many rehearsals for The End Of The World.

"Our Family cannot go to The Wilderness," says Joyce's radio voice into the beautiful, blameless, disappointed eyebeams of the children. I tell them about the tornado. They understand. We have never been to The Wilderness.

"There is too much to do. We are not prepared."

"When will we be prepared?" asks Masada, the youngest and most disappointed. "When is preparing over?"

"When The End comes," I say. "Then we will no longer be preparing; we will be surviving what we prepared for."

"But what if The End never comes?"

To which I smile, as if to say: But it will, my child. It will. Because it has to. We all know Our Family can't hold on like this much longer.