

ALONE

“What would you do if you woke up one day to find that all the other people were gone ... ?”

FICTION by Jenny Nazak

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Dedication

*Every book is, in an intimate sense, a circular letter to the friends of him who writes it. They alone take his meaning; they find private messages, assurances of love, and expressions of gratitude, dropped for them in every corner. The public is but a generous patron who defrays the postage. Yet though the letter is directed to all, we have an old and kindly custom of addressing it on the outside to one. Of what shall a man be proud, if he is not proud of his friends? And so, my dear Sidney Colvin, it is with pride that I sign myself affectionately yours,
R. L. S.*

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote the above as a preface to his book *Travels with a Donkey*. And I'm going to borrow this quote and use it to pay

tribute to some old and faraway
friends who are particularly dear to
me, time and miles notwithstanding:

“And so, my dear JMP, AM, KMG,
CS, RD, JC, RO, it is with pride that I
sign myself affectionately yours,
JLN.”

I love you guys!!!

1.

“Although the problems of the world are increasingly complex, the solutions remain embarrassingly simple.” — Bill Mollison, father of the permaculture design movement

“So this is the tale of our castaways, they’re here for a long long time. They’ll have to make the best of things, it’s an uphill climb.” — Sherwood Schwartz, “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Isle”

Dear Filmmaker

O great cosmic storyteller, film director in the sky, whatever you are: If you were going to make a film where the protagonist is the last

person standing on earth, why on earth did you pick *me* as the person?

Not that I mind the fact that I didn't get sucked up, or vaporized, or whatever happened to all the other people (and also, apparently, their dogs — though not the cats). Make no mistake: I'm glad to still be alive. But the question is, Why me? A middle-aged underachiever; a failed environmentalist; a neighborhood pariah. One of those weird cranky ladies whose house and "overgrown" yard you walk by quickly in order to avoid getting drawn into conversation (rants about native plants vs. nonnative species; the evils of excessive palm-tree pruning) or worse (exhortations to attend Neighborhood Watch or City Commission meetings). Maybe you're making me the star of your film to see how long I can stand

my own company, with all the other humans gone. Hmm, now that's a thought. Especially given all the stupid and heinous things I did the week before the entire rest of the human race disappeared.

“The Child is father of the Man”

You can tell a lot about a person by looking back at their elementary-school report cards. Actually, I'm not sure if that's true or not. What I am sure of, is that you can tell a lot about *me* by looking back at *my* elementary-school report cards. Take this one, for instance. Second grade, 1969.

Matthew Oliver Wendell Elementary School, Santa Vista, California. Ms. Huston presiding. (She wore her long straight blonde hair in pigtails and had purple corduroy bellbottoms. She looked really worldly and sophisticated to me at the time.) “Jean

continues to read eagerly, and far above grade level. I only wish her appetite for printed matter were matched by her industry with the pen. She shirks written assignments and can't seem to get any words on paper.”

Also this: “Jean has trouble being with other students. (Except when yelling at them for not doing things her way.)” Together with this: “Jean has trouble being by herself. (Except when reading.)”

And: “Jean always needs to be the center of attention. (Except when reading.)” And yet, “Jean resists help and attention when it is offered.”

Yep. Sad to say, that's pretty much me in a nutshell. It was me at age 7, and it's me at age 57.

Pretty much all of my teachers wrote the same kinds of things, every year. If any of them had felt at liberty to be fully honest, they'd probably have written something more like, "As far as I can tell, Jean is a spoiled, overstuffed little bookworm with no social skills, and seemingly no inclination to develop them. She inhales books almost as voraciously as she sucks up the cookies and other snacks that are supposed to be for snacktime for the whole class. She seems utterly uninterested in giving back to the class or otherwise participating in the world. I doubt she will ever amount to anything, and I'm not sure how she'll support herself when she grows up. I expect that on her tombstone, the epitaph will say, 'Leave me alone, I'm reading.'"

The teachers' dire prediction of my career prospects didn't turn out to be true, at least not entirely. I ended up having a useful skill: Turns out I'm really good at tidying up spaces. Indoors, not outdoors. We need to keep our destructive mitts off the great outdoors, already. (And by "really good at tidying up spaces," I mean I'm so obsessed with cleaning and decluttering rooms, cars, and refrigerators that it would be more accurate to say I'm really bad at *not* tidying up spaces.)

All through my childhood, I used my cleaning bug to buy goodwill with my parents so they'd leave me to my own devices, while they and my twin brothers were out being active in the world doing all their loud busy active world stuff. I got left in peace, with plenty of time for reading and

daydreaming and snacking. And at the end of the day, they always got to come back to a nice clean car or house. Everybody happy!

As an adult, I parlayed my tidying-up fixation into a livelihood. While some people have looked askance at this use of my college degree (some of the college rating guides even refer to my Alma Mater as a “near-Ivy,”) I contend that an English major with Sociology minor can do lots worse, and at least cleaning houses and condos pays the bills without being illegal, seedy, or dangerous.

Tom, a guy I met back in Austin who'd been an English major, knew about dangerous work. Taking a job with a house-painting subcontractor, he was told on the first day of the job, “If you fall off that ladder, you're

fired before you hit the ground!” The boss was true to his word. Tom fell off that ladder the first day. He’s in a wheelchair now and still paying his medical bills, probably will be for life. Now, Tom ended up lucky he lost that job and that boss, as he went on to become a wildly popular graphic novelist who has three million followers and loves getting up for work every day. Kind of a rough route to self-actualization, though. And he does still have that medical bill — though the sales of his latest book might help make a dent in it.

And for a cautionary tale of an English major falling into seedy work, look no further than my college classmate Charlene. She was brilliant. And unlike me, she didn’t just read the books; she actually did the work. But when graduation rolled around,

Charlene's lovely face and body proved to be her undoing; the siren song of the stripper's pole lured her off the genteel but economically unstable path of academia. The money was the good part of being a stripper; she pulled in thousands a week, and, unlike many of her co-workers, she didn't even eat into her profits by doing drugs. The bad part about the job was what it did to her *mind*. Now, lest you think I'm judging someone for making a living by taking her clothes off in public, I'm not. Truth be told, if I'd been born with looks, I might have tried it myself. The human body is nothing to be ashamed of, and who could resist that kind of steady money, for work that offers the promise of leaving your mind free to roam? Except, it *didn't* leave her mind free to roam. This wasn't one of those hip, creative burlesque shows where

the ladies are fully in charge and don't need to take any crap off the customers. The misogynistic culture of the Girls On Tap Gentlemen's Club left Charlene's mind very distorted, and she drifted further and further from her intentions of writing.

All of which is to say that, compared with other jobs an English major might take, being a housecleaner is an altogether OK line of work. And since I keep my overhead low, I only have to work two or three days a week to get by. Cleaning is pretty much the ideal occupation for a person who wants minimal intrusions and exclusive control of her own brain space. I tried waiting tables when I first got out of college, but that was pretty much the opposite: Daydreaming is death in a food-service setting, as the many restaurant

patrons and kitchen staff unfortunate enough to have me as a waitress can attest.

You might ask what a 57-year-old is doing still in possession of her second-grade report card. It was in a fat file folder with all my other report cards; among the stuff that I got from my parents' house four years ago, after the accident. "The accident" being the car accident that killed my entire family: my parents, both of my brothers, my sister-in-law, and both of my nephews. (As if I needed another reason to hate cars. I already hated cars before they killed my entire family; I really hate them now. HATE THEM!) Anyway. My mother and father never threw anything away, and, despite my mania for tidy spaces, I've never had the heart to throw

away any of the stuff I inherited from their house.

My Dilemmas

- I'm a peace activist, yet I can't even walk out my door without getting into an argument.
- I don't want to be alone, but I can't seem to get along with other people.
- I'm an eco activist, fighting to save the human race from its bullet-like path to self-extinction, but lately I'm starting to think the human race *deserves* to be extinct.
- I'm an activist, but only in my own head. Actually I'm extremely lazy. You wouldn't use "active" in the same sentence with my name.

More about all that:

- I'm a peace activist (hardcore! my top three heroes are Peace Pilgrim, Gandhi, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.), yet I seem to hate a lot of people. Sometimes I'm afraid I pretty much hate everyone, even my friends. Actually it's even more complicated than that. I hate everyone, yet I pretty much crave everyone's approval and can't bear the thought of someone not liking me. Which, right now, given everything I've said and done, is probably pretty much everyone. And furthermore, thanks to the miracle of telecommunications and social media, not only can I not even walk out my door without getting into an argument, I can even get into an argument *without* walking out my door.

- I do feel lonely without all the other people around. And yet, I so do not

miss 1) the sound of leaf-blowers and other E.L.A.'s (Evil Lawn Appliances). I also do not miss 2) overly bright streetlights that keep the street ablaze like high noon 24-7, keeping the birds and me awake all night. Sadly, even just these two things I don't miss are almost enough to make up for the one big thing I *do* miss, which is the lack of human company. Oh, and another thing I don't miss one bit: Facebook anxiety. The incessant feeling of less-than; the grinding pressure for "Likes." Facebook anxiety might be #1 on the list, actually. Oh my goddess, what a weight off my shoulders to not have to even think about social media.

- I'm not *lazy*, exactly. I'm just extremely averse to unnecessary activity. Which, in our leaf-blower and pressure-washer-dominated

society, seems to be most of the activity I see around me.

Unintended Consequences

The disappearance of all the other people besides me seems to have produced a completely crazy side effect: Suddenly, I can write. I'm not talking about being able to keep a journal, write letters to the editor and my elected officials, that sort of thing — that was never an issue. What I'm saying when I say my writer's block is suddenly gone, is that suddenly I can finally do what I've been wanting to do all my life: write stories. Or a story, anyway. So along with writing down the details of my life to you here in this notebook, I'm also composing a really wild fiction story. We'll see which one turns out crazier in the end!

Writer's block is an occupational hazard of the most dreaded kind. Pretty much everyone who thinks of him or herself as a writer gets it at one time or another. But some of us have more extreme cases than others. Let's see, how long has it been for me? Since I learned to read and write at age 4, and the writer's block pretty much set in immediately after that and never let up, and I'm 57 now, we're talking about a 53-year writer's block. A five-decade-long writer's block, suddenly lifted.

It's a bit ironic that the circumstances that lifted my writer's block were also the ones that brought about the disappearance of everyone who could possibly be a reader. Sort of a "Gift of the Magi" scenario. But I'm used to inhabiting an ironic universe. And it is an enormous relief to be free of

writer's block for the first time ever in my life. The downside to this is, now I have to reveal all my deep dark secrets. And there are some whoppers, trust me. True confessions of a self-described "Sustainability Educator" gone way way wrong. You have been warned. But, if you are willing to follow along and wade through all the forced metaphors and ridiculous digressions (hey, just because my writing isn't *blocked* anymore doesn't necessarily mean it's *good* — 53 years out of practice is 53 years out of practice!), I might just have a worthwhile story to tell! Filled with twists and turns; reprobation and redemption. Spanning the globe from Tokyo to south Austin; from Breaux Bridge to Fortuna Beach. For as long as you can bear to stay with me, Gentle Reader, I thank you for your presence and will endeavor to make it

worth your time. After all, time is something we can never get back; I know that now more than ever.

A Really Bad Movie Plot

One morning a little while back (it's been about three weeks, if I've been ticking off the marks accurately), I woke up to find that all the other people were gone. And, weirdly, it seems, the dogs as well. And the electric power is out. Other than that, everything else seems to be more or less normal and intact, from what I can see. There's no drama whatsoever. There's plenty of food (including my guilty favorites, Cheese Nips and Little Debbie snack cakes), plenty of fresh drinkable water, and not a flesh-eating zombie in sight.

If this were a movie plot, I would walk right out of the theater. You

would too. I mean, right? We pay good money to view a motion picture, and that doesn't even include the \$7 for a small popcorn (with that nasty fake oil stuff instead of real butter — or even worse, that orange-yellow-colored dry powder flavoring stuff, the very existence of which is just one more piece of evidence proving that the human race deserves to be extinct). We expect to see tension, conflict, emotional highs and lows. We do not expect to see a completely average-looking, staggeringly unambitious middle-aged woman surrounded by more food than she can eat, and no challenges to her survival. In the ever-popular “apocalyptic survivalist” film genre, this reality would not cut it at all. Let's look at the scenario here. Think about what most audiences look for in a TEOTWAWKI* flick.

*TEOTWAWKI: Sorry, I don't know if I need to spell out this abbreviation or not, I might be a little out of touch with the pulse of mainstream reality here, since I have spent the past 15 years of my life hanging out in a subculture of people known as "permaculturists" (or "permies" for short.) People who grow their own fruits and veggies; know how to make pickles; who build Rocket Stoves; who stockpile two years' worth of canned food in their kitchen cabinets; maybe hoard stacks of solar panels and mason jars in their garages; and definitely think that a bucket of sawdust for the compost toilet is pretty much the ultimate housewarming gift. What I'm saying is that I realize that I'm somewhat out of touch with what is considered to be common mainstream knowledge. In

case it's not common knowledge, TEOTWAWKI stands for "The End Of The World As We Know It."

Or if you're familiar with the term "Zombie Apocalypse" — same general vibe. Flesh-eating undead monsters, unleashed by humankind's greed, misuse of technology, yadda yadda, fan out over the land, gobbling up the unsuspecting. You could think of flesh-eating zombies as the Godzilla of the new millennium. (Though, come to think of it, we did recently have a Hollywood remake of Godzilla, didn't we. But in my opinion, the original was a lot better. Caveat: I haven't seen either the new Godzilla movie or any of the old ones. But I always think the original of anything is a lot better. That's my stubborn tendency and I'm sticking to it. And besides, having spent a

significant chunk of my life in Tokyo, I confess to feeling a bit proprietary toward Japan, and I'm a firm believer in Hollywood leaving Japanese films the heck *alone*.)

Anyway. Back to what I was saying, about the unworkability of my current situation as a movie plot. Fans of the TEOTWAWKI/Zombie Apocalypse genre feel entitled, and quite reasonably so, to expect certain standard elements. At an absolute minimum, there needs to be a full cast of stunningly good-looking, highly buff actors and actresses. Bonus if they are clad in scanty fur costumes. (Or if it were set here in Florida, I guess it'd have to be grass skirts or palm-frond loincloths or something.) And a bombed-out industrial urban wasteland is pretty much the backdrop of choice. Either that, or some kind of

rural commune setting, where the menfolk in the absence of electric razors have all grown beards down to their navels, giving them a hokey stereotype-Amish look. Which doesn't stop them from presiding over a harem of drop-dead gorgeous women (dressed in scanty fur costumes, grass skirts, or sacklike Puritan-inspired frocks) who outnumber the men by about seven to one, and who are somehow willing to do all of the cooking, cleaning, and most of the shovel work as well. (If this fantasy scenario doesn't sound like anyone's idea of heaven to you, you obviously haven't been hanging out on enough male-dominated prepper listserves.)

(At this last sentence, my inner voice of conscience is screaming, "FOUL! You wrote this to get a cheap laugh; it

isn't true. You have never ever met anyone like this, on a listserve or anywhere else. You need to have integrity in your writing at least, if nowhere else in your life!”)

As I'm reflecting on the non-film-worthy nature of my current situation, I'm slicing carrots and getting ready to add them to a pot of bean soup, which I will then pop into the solar oven for my lunch. (The *solar* oven! It's so satisfying to be able to harness the sun's free energy, even if the electric power were not, as I mentioned, out.) The bean soup, made from scratch yesterday, will reheat for about 45 minutes, during which time the newly added carrots will cook enough to be cooked but still a bit al dente, just the way I like them.

My “kitchen” at the moment is my roofed patio. It has a big table, wrought-iron and topped with glass. The table and most of the other furniture came with the house, which I bought four years ago. It’s a good thing the table and other stuff came with the house because I am way too lazy to do any kind of interior decorating.

I like to do meal prep out here on the patio rather than indoors when weather permits, which it usually does. I pick up a jalapeño pepper from a small pile on the table, quarter it, and pop it into the pot as well. And then I carry the pot of soup over to where the solar oven has been preheating, in my sunny driveway.

A solar oven is basically a black box covered with glass, surrounded by

tilted reflector panels that bounce the sun's rays into the box. It's about the size of a large microwave oven. When I'm trying to explain a solar oven to people who have never seen one, I say "It's like a crock pot that uses no electricity." The oven temp is up to about 350, as I'd expect on a clear bright blazing day like today. This is the kind of day that gives my adopted home state its nickname. Florida. The Sunshine State. Although, the way things have been going the past few years, I wouldn't be surprised if we were to get renamed the Hurricane State. Or, the Ineptly-Managed-Stormwater State.

Anyway, where were we? Oh yes, TEOTWAWKI movie plots. Yes, you would expect a star-studded cast of retina-searing shiny Hollywood A-listers. The most current crop of

whom I cannot list, since I've been, shall we say, a bit unplugged from mainstream American culture for some years now.

But wait, you might be saying. (Who is "You," anyway, considering that there are no other people left? That sometimes comes up as a question from the voice in my head, who tends to be a lot more logical than I am.) I guess I'm figuring that either 1) the rest of the people will be coming back someday; or 2) it's all going into the Akashic Record, which one day we'll all be able to access from the great cosmic beyond. So I feel safe writing "you," with a reasonable degree of confidence that someday, some "you" will be able to access these words, even if it's only from the great cosmic beyond. Yes, I have a metaphysical

side. It's very helpful at times like this.

By the way, I used to have a sign by my front door that said, "Smile! You're on the Akashic Record!" I deployed my best hand-lettering skills and painted it to look like one of those "Smile! You're On Camera!" signs, but with a meditating cartoon goddess and an Om symbol instead of a camera. Since those "Smile! You're On Camera!" signs have become such a fixture of the landscape, and my homemade hippie parody of our paranoid consumer culture was so visually close to the original, I expected it to fly under the radar except among those who would get the joke. But no! A few months back, my cute clever little sign was discovered by Code Enforcement (or, more likely, by a neighbor who then

ratted me out to Code Enforcement) and I was ordered to take it down.

The way things have become, you would think our neighborhood was one of the HOA developments out by the interstate (the ones where neighbors turn you in to the Lawn Gestapo when you've got dollarweed growing in your precious St. Augustine, or you've gone too many days without pressure-washing your driveway), instead of what it actually is, which is a seaside neighborhood of quaint bungalows and Victorian houses in the historic urban core of a city known as Fortuna Beach, located on the Atlantic Coast of Florida. (Our neighboring smaller cities, tony Ormolu Sands to the north and buttoned-down Port Peerless to the south, both have a superiority complex because their buildings are

better-kept and their atmosphere less seedy than here. But there's a reason why I didn't pick either of those places to live. Ormolu Sands has even more zealous Lawn Gestapo than we do. And if you're into street drugs (which I'm not, but if you are), you won't find any up there; Fortuna Beach has that market cornered. As for Port Peerless, it's fine if your main passion in life is tall bright streetlights, and if you aspire to inhabit a place where the cops routinely pull people over for being on foot after midnight.)

OK, some of the residents here in Fortuna Beach see our housing stock as "shabby" rather than quaint, and the neighborhoods as "blighted" rather than historic and urban. But those are the same people who show up at Neighborhood Watch meetings

complaining that there's a chip of peeling paint on the road stripe, or a weed growing up out of the sidewalk crack, like it's the worst problem in our city. This in a city where something like half of the kids come from such low-income households that they count on school cafeteria lunches as a significant source of calories and nutrition. (In the proud nation whose federal government declared that packets of ketchup could be considered as a "vegetable" for school-lunch purposes.)

But anyway, on back to you. You, whoever "you" is or are, might be saying (in regard to my claim that my current situation fails as a movie plot), "But wait! What about the type of apocalyptic movie where just one person washes up as a castaway, like on a desert island or something?"

Good point! “Solo Castaway” is a valid subgenre of apocalyptic film, where one person is left alone to battle the elements, and great excitement and drama ensue, with commensurately high box-office revenues. The person is preferably 1) young (bonus if it’s a bold and innocent child or teenager out there battling the elements); and 2) has an engaging presence on camera. Neither of which even my most devoted friends and avid fans would use to describe *me*.

When I say “my most devoted friends and avid fans,” I don’t mean to imply that there are all that many of them. Friend-wise, I have three what I would consider “besties,” all of them living out west: one in Texas; one in New Mexico; one in Colorado. And as

far as fans, I had about seven of them following my blog and six following my YouTube channel, last time I checked.

It Could Be Worse

You might think I'd be super upset at the loss of everyone else on the planet, but I keep an even keel by making "It Could Be Worse" lists.

It could be worse: Instead of just me alone, it could be just me and the Department of Code Enforcement. Which would suck, because a lot of the permaculture-based technology that makes it easy for me to do without electricity and running water and all, is against city codes.

It could be worse: Instead of just me alone because all the other people got

vaporized by some mysterious cosmic force, it could be just me alone because one of my screw-ups killed all the other people and now I have to live with that knowledge for the rest of my life. Like, what if that “perpetual motion machine” guy who approached me for help publicizing his work, and I gave him pointers on how to organize a test demo event, was actually a terrorist using the test demo as a ruse to assemble a bunch of good and important people all in one place, then blow them up or something.

It could be worse: I could have to grow all my own food, instead of there being a massive surplus of food already on hand: canned food that basically will last forever; and fresh food that needs to get eaten before it goes bad. (Actually there’s no way I

can eat all the food before it rots. I will need to compost a lot of it, and there's a considerable amount of work involved in that. But I have plenty of time!)

My therapist likes me to write Gratitude Lists. And I can see she has a point. Writing this right now, I actually feel something close to happy! Maybe the happiest I've been in a while. Of course, a lot of my good mood surely has to do with my lingering elation at being free of the yoke of social media. More about that later. I never fully realized how stressed-out I'd gotten. But anyway, right now I'm suddenly ambushed by a burst of happiness. To celebrate, I break into a hearty chorus of Barry Manilow's "Daybreak" as I gather a handful of twigs for the Rocket Stove.

My neighbor Lizzy, if she were here, would say right now, in response to my choice of musical self-entertainment, “You’re showing your age!” (She’s 10 years younger, 5 inches taller and a good 30 pounds lighter than me, and looks fabulous, but she worries a lot more about age than I do, and has the Pilates membership, the diet-meal subscription, and the hair-salon budget to prove it.)

To her comment, I would respond: “A. Yeah, right! As if every single paragraph of this story starting with the reference to Gilligan’s Island didn’t already totally show my age! And 4) I know I’m dating myself, but I can’t help it — I’m such a fun date!”

Which would precipitate a whole lecture from her about the impropriety

of a list in which “A.” is followed by “4).” But I’d be too busy pretending to puff on a cigar like Groucho Marx to care.

That’s all for now. I realize you probably have a few questions. Like for starters, how do I know that *all* the people other than me are gone? And what the heck is a Rocket Stove, and what’s “permaculture”? And how *ever* does one live without air conditioning in Florida? Answers to all of the above and more are forthcoming. I’ll catch up with you again soon!