

This is a short story from The Survivor series, volume 1, by Kurt Saxon.

Now Who's Stupid, Dad by Marc Ridenour

Ever since I'd first brought up the subject of survival, my father had scornfully rejected anything I had to say. He was one of those with the "it can't happen and it won't happen here" attitude. He reminded me of the brass in the US high command prior to Pearl Harbor, December 7th, 1941.

That evening, as I sat reading my latest issue of "The Survivor" in my room, my younger brother Jeff, who is a carbon copy of the old man, stuck his head through the door. "Whatcha doin'?" he demanded.

"Get out Himmmler." I barked.

He stuck out his tongue at me. "Don't have to."

Laying aside the paper, I got up and went for him. Turning, he fled for the stairs. Closing the door, I locked it and then sat back down and resumed reading.

Presently, I heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, and my father's voice demanded, "Are you reading that idiotic paper again? Cluttering up your mind with that survival rubbish?"

I didn't reply.

"Answer me!" he demanded.

"Open that door this instant!" came a second demand.

Again I paid no attention.

Muttering about "worthless whelps" and other things, he stomped away and went back downstairs. He, the runt, and my mother would all agree how impudent, disrespectful and no good I was and how I ought to be punished.

But, by maintaining as low a profile as possible, I could get by without too much trouble.

Sighing, I finished reading the copy of "The Survivor" and laid it aside with the others I kept. My parents couldn't invade my room because I kept it locked all the time. Besides "The Survivor" copies my father would love to burn, there were other books and equipment he'd enjoy disposing of.

But unless they wanted to break the door down or send for a locksmith, two expensive propositions, they couldn't get in. And my gear stayed secure.

When I first read "The Survivor" and other like papers and magazines, I was smart enough to realize they were telling the truth--my father's opinions notwithstanding.

So, since it wasn't possible to persuade him or anyone else--Mom or the brat, I decided to concentrate on saving my own hide when and if the crunch came.

Stowing the latest issue of "The Survivor", I was about to begin reading a sci-fi novel when the lights went out. I swore, then got up and broke out my calcium carbide lamp. This had happened before, my father cutting out power to my room at the breaker box to demonstrate his authority or show off his machismo or something--to strike back at me.

The carbide lamp hissed and burned, casting a soft white light that burned away the darkness, and let me read. A knock came at the door, and I called, "Who is it?".

"Can I borrow a flashlight?" asked Jeff.

"Bug the old man to put the circuit breakers back in." I replied. "Then you'll have plenty."

"The power's out all over town--even the streetlights!"

My first impulse was distrust. I trust my father and brother to knife me in the back whenever they can, so I looked out the window, and sure enough, the power was off!

Finding my AM-FM portable radio, I switched it on and listened. The local station was off the air as well! For the first time, unease began to gnaw at me. Digging out my CB walkietalkie, I switched it on and began to call, "This is KLZA 1508 to anyone with their ears on. Come in please, over."

I was transmitting on channel 11, the "monitoring" channel that almost everyone listens to. Within minutes, I had a reply.

"KLZA 1508 this is KNH 1234, alias Coconut Pete, I copy you."

"What's the problem? The lights are off everywhere."

"That's a big 10-4, by golly. The radio station's off the air, too. It must be serious."

"10-4" I agreed. "I'm gonna monitor 9 (the distress channel). KLZA 1508 clear and on the side."

Switching to Channel 9, I heard a jumble of transmissions. "This is Unit #8. I've just arrived at the light plant--man, it looks like somebody dropped a bomb--everything's down or really blown up! Better call out the Emergency Corps and the Sheriff's Posse."

"Any fire?"

"Negatory--there isn't enough left to burn!"

Keying my transmit switch I cut in. "Breaker 9."

"Go breaker."

"This is KLZA 1508. Is that the Southland light plant east of town?"

"10-4. Are you official?"

"Negatory. Is the plant totally destroyed?"

"Looks like it--and clear this channel, motormouth!"

"Ten-four, hotrock," I replied and clicked to channel 11 again. By now the wavelengths were getting crowded. The news the light plant had exploded and was totally destroyed was just starting to get around. Someone was yelling the Russians had bombed us, while someone else with a stronger transmitter was overriding him and claiming one of the huge boilers had blown. Each of those boilers was as big as a small building, and if one of them had blown, it would be as devastating as a bomb.

Besides M'town, the Southland plant supplied other areas with power. With the plant itself gone, it would be days, at least, before we'd have any power, let alone full service. And without electricity, a city is a dead hunk of iron, concrete, asphalt and plastic.

Flicking to channel 22, I began to transmit again. "KLZA 1508 to KRAO 2345. Do you copy?" The reply was almost instantaneous.

"10-4 KLZA 1508. We copy."

"Ol' buddy, the balloon just went up--Southland blew a boiler, and that pretty well leveled the whole joint. I'm beginning my Emergency Contingency Plan, and am activating Stage One. Do you copy?"

"Ten-four. Will meet you at the rendezvous site."

"Roger, KLZA 1508 clear and on the side."

Laying aside my walkietalkie, I dragged out the huge backpack and frame I'd had built for me by a tentmaker and welder. The frame measured 2 1/2 feet wide by 4 feet long. The great pack could take a lot, and it was possible to strap a dufflebag or two, along with a sleeping bag, tarp and groundcloth onto the frame itself. I'd designed it with that in mind. After clearing it from the closet, I began to pack, working as fast as I could, without making any mistakes. By the time I was finished, I had everything I'd need--from basic survival gear to books, magazines and newspapers and tools that would come in handy for long-term survival.

The fully loaded pack weighed almost half as much as I did,

but I got it on at last. Then, picking up my shotgun and donning my hardhat with the calcium carbide lamp on it, I walked out my room's door after unlocking it, relocked it behind me, and headed for the stairs.

They had candles lit when I stepped into the living room, and Dad started when he saw me. "What are you doing with all of that stuff?" he demanded.

"Leaving." I told him.

"Where?" he demanded.

"You wouldn't care," I told him.

"Are you going on that survival kick again? Do you think the Crunch, as you call it, has arrived?"

"It'll do until one comes along." I told him.

"You stay right here--this won't last long--they'll have repairs completed by morning."

"No they won't--the whole plant is gone."

"Where'd you hear that? Over that stupid CB radio you play with?" he sneered.

Ignoring him, I turned and opened the front door and walked out. "Why was I given such a stupid son?" was the last thing I heard him say.

Walking down the totally darkened street, my carbide lamp lighting the way, I heard the sound of glass shattering and suddenly running men appeared in my light's beam. "Hey! There's one--get him!"

My shotgun leaped to my shoulder, finger squeezing the trigger. BOOM! the flash and roar were tremendous, and the charging figures vanished as if by magic--except for the one who lay sprawled on the street ten feet from me.

Walking hard, I reached the rendezvous point, grateful I'd spent \$2 for that MASS info packet, that had put me in touch with an M'town sportsman's club that was also a survivalist association.

Presently, a station wagon towing a trailer came slowly idling up to the spot, and I walked up to it, halting when a flashlight squirted light into my face.

"Hi--ready to go?" asked a cheerful female voice.

"Ready," I murmured, shrugging off my pack and loading it in first, and then climbing into the crowded rear seat, holding my gun carefully.

The station wagon took off, cruising slowly. The woman at the wheel, and her three kids were quiet and alert, looking around.

"Where's Jack?" I asked.

"He's still at home--securing it."

"Good. My family'll still be there." I grimaced. "My father called me stupid whenever I tried to warn him."

"Your family isn't coming?" she asked, and I nodded.

"The brat, my folks--they wouldn't believe me. 'It can't happen here.' I'm the 'stupid son'."

"Stupid like a fox." she replied crisply.

Grinning, I relaxed. It was curious, but I found myself not caring too much what happened to them. I guess they'd killed any love I'd had for them over the years with their picking, belittling and nagging and bitching.

We left the city limits behind us, and drove down the asphalt. Reaching a gravel turnoff, we pursued that until it came to an intersection. Hanging a left, we drove along that road until we came to a small farmhouse and outbuildings. Several cars were parked there, and lights were on inside.

"Our wind generator gives us enough power for some light after dark," said Wanda, as she stopped the car. Helping her with their

gear, we were soon inside with everything--kids, gear and us. Everyone else who belonged to the survival association was already there, save for Jack, but soon, he too arrived, and then the chairman began to call the roll.

Everyone was present, and after that was taken care of, the chairman asked for a report from each of us. When he got to me, I told of my conversations on, and monitoring of, the CB channels, and my encounter with the looter gang.

"The situation seems clear--if grim," the chairman stated boldly. "With power gone, the rest of the public utilities will go too--and in a few days, the city will be a pigpen. From what we know also, law and order are breaking down inside the city--the looter gang that one of us ran into was probably just one of many. So, we had best prepare for a long, long stay--perhaps as long as two months. In view of the fact that lawlessness is starting to appear, we shall mount guard in case nightriders come our way. Tomorrow, we'll decide what shall be done in the way of long-term preparations, but for now, we shall mount guard and turn in. I have a duty roster drawn up. As I call out your names, stand up and get ready.

I didn't draw guard duty that night. But the following morning I did wind up on wood-gathering detail. Armed with my machete, folding saw and hatchet. I ventured into the woodlands around the small farmsite, and with three other fellows proceeded to cut and gather up dead wood.

Upon returning with our sizable load, we then split up the bigger pieces, and then kept breaking up the smaller ones until all we had left were sticks about as big and long as corncobs and fingers. Small sticks burn better than big ones.

The Franklin stoves we had wouldn't be necessary yet--except for food preparation. The large garden out back would provide enough food to see us through the winter, if it came to that. All in all, we numbered some forty people--men, women and kids. It was a bit crowded, but we were glad for the company. We had well water, and for sanitation, a crude septic tank affair--that was hooked up to a methane gas generator. The methane gas was in turn piped to either storage tanks, or burned by the small light plant we had set up along with our wind charger.

A week went by, and we marked our first week with a celebration--we sang songs--played games and had a shooting contest with non-firearm weapons. I did so-so with my slingshot, but one guy with a longbow made everyone look sick--except for another guy with a crossbow, who made the longbowman look sick.

We monitored CB channels and listened to the local radio station, which was back on the air. For the first time we found out what had actually happened. A boiler had exploded at the Southland plant--due to a structural flaw that had passed unnoticed by all until heavy pressure had been built up in it. The plant had indeed been almost gutted by the blast, and the loss of life had been heavy. It was not yet known just when electrical power would be restored--although vital public utilities should be restored in another week or so--scant consolation for the thousands who hadn't prepared at all for the debacle.

And so we stayed out at the retreat, working, playing, taking turns tutoring the kiddies, and all in all, we had a decent time of it.

The second week went, and then the third. By then I was adjusting to the routine, and for the first time in my life, I was a contributing member of a community. I was respected, and people listened to me, and didn't call me a dummy either.

On the third day of the fourth week we were there, a Tuesday, one of the kids was fooling around with one of the radios, and suddenly the local station, which had been broadcasting a pretty weak signal via standby generators, came through like a 21-gun salute.

I was helping with the washing that day, and I'd struck up a friendly relationship with one of the girls--a pretty dark-haired brown-eyed senorita named Consuelo. We'd just hung up the laundry when Jack came dusting around to tell us the news. Electrical power had been restored. The city had full power again, all public utilities were operating at capacity.

We held a meeting late that afternoon, and the consensus was that with things getting back to normal in the city, we could all head on back tomorrow.

That evening, sitting around the small Franklin stove, Consuelo beside me, everyone else singing, laughing, talking, having a good time, I was sad. Tomorrow I'd have to go back to my family and revert to being "the stupid son". Back to the nagging, bitching, belittling. Out here I'd been somebody with respect. I'd been a good man to handle many chores--cutting wood, washing clothes by hand, hoeing in the garden, doing other chores that need to be done--I'd won myself respect and was esteemed by my fellow survivalists as a man they could trust. But tomorrow--it would end. I'd go home--and catch hell for having ducked out. But after all, they hadn't believed me--just like most people hadn't listened to Noah. Only when it was too late did they try to get aboard the Ark-- but by then, God had shut the door. And no-one else could get aboard. It was much the same way with the survival community.

"What's wrong?" asked Consuelo softly.

I told her--all of it. And ended with, "I don't want to go back--but what else is there?"

She smiled. "Maybe they'll change their tune when they see you. Stand up for yourself."

"I plan to , honey." I told her.

The next morning, Wednesday, we all piled into our vehicles and rode back to town.

Jack and Wanda were kind enough to drop me off at my place--which was outwardly okay. The front door was wide open, and I entered with my gun at ready--and found no-one else at home. Nothing looked disturbed, so I began to explore--and found a note on the kitchen table.

It said, "We have gone south to stay with some friends of your father's. We'll be back after things get back to normal. Love, Mom."

Laying the note down, I turned on the living room light and sat down in my father's recliner chair. Footsteps sounded on the porch, and two Army or National Guard MP's stalked inside, both in fatigue battledress, .45's drawn and ready.

"Hey--what is this?" I demanded, rising.

"Who're you?" snapped the senior MP, a tall, husky man with grim planes on his face.

"I live here. What's the deal?"

"Let's see your ID," demanded the second MP. Carefully, I dug out my wallet and tossed it to him. He caught it, flipped it open and scanned my papers--driver's license, social security card, draft card and gun club membership card and my sportsman's club card.

Tossing it back to me, he lowered his gun. "Sorry--we've had reports looters were still in this area."

"Are they?" I asked, with a start.

"We aren't sure--but they were real bad on the south side of

town up until just awhile ago--after power was restored."

"Yeah--the gangs were really having a time of it--ambushing the refugees trying to leave the city by the south roads."

I gulped. "My folks said they were cutting out by the south roads. This note's dated a week ago."

"Then they're dead--those gangs killed everyone they got their hands on, buddy. What's their names?" asked the MP. I gave them, feeling a funny empty space appear in my gut all of a sudden.

The MP looked at his partner and nodded, "We'll check it out--the bodies have been mostly identified by now. Some got through, but not many. I hate to be gloomy, but--but it looks like your folks are dead."

They turned and marched out, as I went to the phone. Lifting it, I heard a dial tone. I called City Hall and they referred me to Civil Defense. I called them, and asked if they knew whether my folks were dead or alive.

A CD clerk checked and then got back to me. "Your little brother's at the pediatrics ward at MACH East hospital. I'm sorry, but your parents are dead--killed by looters when they tried to crash a roadblock."

"Thank you," I murmured, and slowly hung up. Gazing at the picture of my parents on the buffet in back of me, I murmured softly, "Dad, you said I was stupid, lazy, ignorant, dumb--ever since I was a kid, you said it. Well, who's the dummy now, Dad? Who's the dummy now?"