

Excerpt from a College History Class in 2048:

“So, we can see how the corruption of the United States Congress, plus the general lack of concern of their peoples by governments worldwide, led to several global crises. We also noted how the short-term profit-taking and lack of funding for alternative fuel resources led to the depletion of oil reserves, again on the global level. Question, Tom?”

“Yeah - I thought the electric power plants were used even back in the early 90’s.”

“True, electric cars were used, attaining the speed, reliability, and performance of six-cylinder internal combustion engines. But oil companies sabotaged the attempts to support the recharging requirements. We can go about 200 miles plus without having to recharge, but if we had to go 800 miles until we hit the next auto stop, we’d be dead in the water. Even then that was a risky situation at best, and they could only go about 100 miles before needing a full recharge that would take about eight hours, so who would buy the electrics?”

“So, with the oil crunch the oil corporations finally switched over?”

“The ones that survived did. Judy?”

“But there was still oil. I mean, there still *is* oil - and Lubric was still part of the United States back then, right?”

“Right again, on both points. Louisiana, Arkansas, and northeast Texas were still in the United States at the time. As we know, however, it *was* the oil crunch, which led the United States to launch the attempt to nationalize the Texarkana oil wells, which led those states to secede and form Lubric, the first of the true nationally-independent megacorporations. The secession, of course, then led to the Southeastern Oil War. But tanks don’t run without fuel. “All the king’s horsemen,” so to speak, ran out of oats in the Ozarks, and they couldn’t keep the already fragile Humpty together anymore.

“What other event did the secession of Lubric ICC lead to? Jim?”

“The secession of Utah?”

“Good guess! How?”

“Well, according to the book, a lot of people in Utah saw the secession and the general deterioration of the United States’ moral quality as a sign that the great destruction they said would come was here, and that the time had come when they would have to “save” the Constitution, which they thought was divinely inspired, by stealing it from Washington D.C. When the attempts failed, they claimed they interpreted things wrong, made their own constitution, and seceded from the U.S. The U.S. was too weakened by the oil war to risk another defeat, so they let them go ...

Part 1

Parallel Progression

And there is the headlight, shining far down the track, glinting off the steel rails that, like all parallel lines, will meet in infinity, which is after all where this train is going.

- Bruce Catton

Waiting for the AM Train

Preacher Jack

The oppressive heavy heat of the July air somehow both stifled and aggravated the inner-city denizens, like putting an elastic muzzle on a rabid dog. Overbearing high temperatures and teeming humidity threw the city under a blanket of fetid moisture, transferring the urban ghetto into a concrete oven that somehow dripped.

Thirty-three-year-old Jack Mathews was wrapping up a phone conversation with Rita Williams, one of his favorite neighborhood personas in this urban ghetto turned tepid sweat-house. Phone to his ear, he stood in the doorway of his run-down tenement and looked out into the darkness. Several people sat out on porches, trying to catch the ghost of a breeze that might waft through the maze of brick, macadam, and debris. It was nearing midnight, but still they maintained their almost hopeless vigil. Downing their beers and homemade liquors they waited, wishing for that cool breeze, trying not to hear the sirens, fights, or any other evidence they were in a dying dead-end ghetto that it seemed even the air itself wanted to avoid. But still they held on, drinking on their doorsteps and street corners, yearning for some break from the stifling mugginess. Holding on, wishing, was the only thing they could do. Anyone who could afford an air conditioner could afford to live somewhere else.

A rat skittered across the darkened alley on the opposite side of the street from his apartment. His attention drawn, he observed three hoods trying to spot a mark for some quick credits. Most of the people out tonight preferred to be out at night, when the darkness might give them an extra edge by covering up their equally dark activities. The night made them feel more powerful because they thrived inside this tough and hostile world, yet somehow at the same time braver because they dared to come out at all. Jack was feeling neither particularly powerful nor especially brave. His only intention was to visit someone now in need of a friend.

Rita hung up the phone, and Jack smiled. The love and appreciation he felt for her softened his gaze, if just a little. Yes, of course he'd go to see her tonight. It was Friday night after all, the first night of the inner-city weekend. Though everyone still called her Mrs. Williams, her husband had died several years ago. She was alone, and being alone, a lot of little things tended to frighten her. Besides, she spent more than her share of time hearing him out. She was the backbone of his church before anyone else would listen to him at all. "She was pretty good at listening, herself," Jack thought with a warm smile.

Yes, Jack would visit her tonight, keeping her company as long as she wanted. He enjoyed the evenings they spent together, passing the time in conversation and friendship. He was alone, too. Had been on his own for more than he liked to remember. So, he agreed and got ready to go to her apartment

building for the night's visit. He found he regarded her like she was his own grandmother, which she really could have been. Rita Williams was eighty-six years old.

He stepped out of his apartment building and into the dark urban street. Heat, humidity, and sense of threat combined to mute both thought and voice, creating a palpable aggravation that few could do more than scowl at. The collective animal that the urban zone often became shrank back on its haunches and tensed. Jack sensed that animal was fully alert, hunting, ready to spring in fury at the first victim it could ensnare. Violence would meet many tonight before dawn would pry open the vestige of the darkness that freed muggers and street gangs to feed on the city's remains. Countless criminals and hoods waited, hiding just behind the cracks, in the shadows, salivating over the rotting leftovers of civilization the ghetto could still scrape out. They were like half-crazed, malevolent beasts feeding on the dark, the fear, and now the pervasive heat.

The irony was not lost on Jack. The beast they wished to become a part of to feed upon others would eagerly turn on these would-be predators, consuming them as well. In the concrete and plasteel jungle full of carnivores, often enough the predators became the prey. After all, Jack thought, the cracks of the streets didn't care whose blood they gulped, as long as they were full. The morning would reveal most of the victims to the survivors. Others would never be found. Many would only be missed by a few, yet each night also brought good lives to a bitter end; the passing night was indiscriminate in its feeding.

More would be driven to hopelessness and despair by the very dawn that was supposed to bring comfort and hope. Jack grimaced and continued, distancing himself from his own thoughts. He shrugged his shoulders against the darkness, the heat, and the fear. He shrugged against the city itself, trying to forget where he was for the moment and focus on whom he was going to see. He hoped she would be okay when he got there.

He walked on through the litter-covered neighborhood where few outsiders would venture even in daylight. Two men silently approached him from behind and began to walk alongside and slightly behind him, one on each side. Jack tensed, waiting for their next move.

"Yo, Preach, what you doin' out on a night like this? Your little halo startin' ta slippin' or somethin'?" It was Fearless, a member of the Razors. The gang held this section of the city, and over time Jack had rubbed shoulders with almost all of them one way or another.

"No, I'm still on track," Jack replied, letting himself relax. "Mrs. Williams asked if I could stop by, so here I am. How about you? You ready for *your* halo yet?"

"Not yet, Preach," Beast replied. "Scissors got word that you were out and about tonight and he wanted us to keep escort for you. So here we are, ridin' your shotgun. You know how Scissors is."

Jack knew how the street gang's leader was. He'd met all five-foot eleven-inches, 215 pounds of muscle of him a couple days after the minister first moved into the city. Scissors asked the new preacher

what he was doing there in his territory, and Jack answered that he was planning on planting a church on the hoodlum's turf. Scissors was furious. Then Jack told him that he needed Jesus, whereupon the young warlord proceeded to hammer on Jack's jaw and take what credits he had. Jack had been praying for Scissors ever since, and except for Mrs. Williams, everyone kept their distance from "that crackpot preacher."

Two years and countless Razor beatings later, Jack sheltered a little kid called "Not-Nuff" from a couple of street hoods and later led the kid to the Lord, saving him from the gang violence that claimed so many young lives of the neighborhood. Not-Nuff turned out to be Scissor's younger brother, and Jack had made a friend of the gang leader for life.

Now the Razors didn't hassle Jack at all, and even listened to him from time to time. Word was out, too, that anyone messing with Jack or his church would be "found." Jack didn't like their threatening, but he had to admit his church was safer due to the strange guardian angels the Lord sent his way. Even the rest of the neighborhood noticed the change in the Razors, and with that came a flicker of hope to the otherwise dead-end slum. Yes, Jack's church was growing, his emergency calls lessening now, because of his labor of patience and nearly unimaginable love for the people of that run-down dying remains of what was once an inner city. Over time, "that crackpot preacher" eventually got shortened to the favorite Razor buzz name for him: "Preach.

With Fearless on his left and Beast on his right, the rest of the walk was uneventful. Jack stopped at Mrs. Williams's building and started going up the steps. He stopped halfway.

"You two want to come along?" he asked.

Both gang members smiled but declined. "Not tonight, Preach," Fearless responded with some amusement. "We'll wait out here."

"Okay, your choice. But don't wait too long, guys, okay? Every day we get closer to not having another chance." Jack then finished climbing the steps and went inside as both men nodded.

"So whatcha thinkin'?" Fearless asked after Preach left them, noting a concerned expression on Beast's face. "You worried about Trickz cuttin' out on ya?" he asked, grinning.

"Nah, she'd never leave," the ganger replied. "We're gold, man. She's gold."

"Dude, I know. Like seriously, you two are lookin' good. So, what's eatin' you?"

"Somethin' Preach told me once. I know he means best, but y'know, he's ... *different*. That bro' got game goin' we just don't. Drives Trickz nuts."

"Anyway, we're talkin' one day, and Preach tells me that him an' me ain't so different, but he's got connection to God somehow. Says I could, too."

Fearless laughed out loud. "Beast! You *really* think this God stuff is for real? Let me ask you somethin'. Look around you. If there is a God, he has *surely* frakked us over this time. Do you see

anything in this dump of a hole that gives any slightest clue that there's a God? Bro, think 'bout it an' answer me." Fearless jeered. "C'mon, just *one* thing. I'm serious."

"I see Trickz," Beast admitted, almost shyly.

"Ha! Oh man, you are so lost! Because of some wh—" Fearless stopped, catching the glower crossing his friend's face. There were reasons the guy was called Beast, and Fearless was exactly one half of one syllable away from being reminded just what exactly those reasons were.

"Sorry, Beast. Trickz was a good call. Ya got me," Fearless quickly offered. He glanced away, into the night sky, the pattern of the urban skyline tattered as a pair of old sneakers. "I sure as Hell don't see no god, not here."

"Preach does," Beast threw out, then thought for a second. "Hey, Fearless?"

"Yeah, Bro?" Fearless asked, obviously uncomfortable with how the conversation turned.

"Think about it for a second. If we really could see God ... I mean, with the way we live and all the drek that we're into ..."

"Yeah? What's up, Bro?" Fearless asked again, wondering where his friend was going with all this.

"Do you really think we would *want* to?"

The unanswered question hung in the air, like the smell of sweat and garbage decaying on a hot July night.

... ..

Inside, Mrs. Williams greeted Jack.

"I'm sorry I called so late. I just felt this gnawing feeling that something was going wrong, and I felt so lonely that I wanted you to pray for me, but you certainly didn't need to come out on a night like this!"

"That's okay, Mrs. Williams," Jack assured her. "After all, the Bible does say 'For we know that all things work together for good to them that love God...', and maybe God is working right now," he said, motioning towards Fearless and Beast.

"Yes," Mrs. Williams agreed, "that very well could be."

"Now," Jack stated, "let's pray."

Camp-out Inbound

“God, get us *out* of here!”

Another blast sounded, this one close by, augmented by the staccato chopping sound of M-16A2’s firing on full automatic.

“How could I have been so *stupid*?!” screamed Corey, grabbing his shotgun and pumping several rounds into the area where he thought the firing was coming from.

“Sue! Get to the car! Hurry!”

Sue was sobbing openly now. “It’s them again, isn’t it?” she cried.

“Yeah, but we don’t have time for that now. Move!”

She may have tried to add something more, but the cracks of bullets hitting nearby trees drowned out whatever it was she had been trying to say. Corey tried to return fire, but he was hopelessly outgunned. The motorcycle gang was far better armed, and they had caught him sleeping. “How could I have been so stupid?” he thought again. Their only hope was to get to the car.

Suddenly, the firing stopped; an eerie, dreamlike quality settled over the roadside woods where they camped. A public-address system screeched, then Corey heard the <PUFF PUFF> of someone blowing into a microphone – and Corey knew who that someone was.

“How could I have been so stupid?” Corey almost audibly cursed to himself again.

“Hellooo, out there!” an amplified voice amusedly called. “It’s us again. And how are *you* tonight? I know you’re still alive, ‘cause you fired back, but we’ll soon fix that ...”

The voice went on, but Corey was trying hard to pay more attention to hear the sounds of any bikers trying to creep up on him through the brush under the cover of the bullhorn. It wouldn’t do to get himself killed so pointlessly right now. Susan needed him, and he was sure that thought alone would see him through Hell and back again.

“... You lis’nin’, son? Iron Mike himself comes all the way to the old border, and you’re not even goin’ to answer to what I have to say?”

“Okay, look. I’m sorry about your Old Man and all, okay? We’re all sorry, ain’t we, Jackals?”

Various cheers and whistles assured Corey that not a single one of them was. “Well, maybe not *all* of us, but what do you *want*? Your father was a pain in the neck, you know that? We could have just rode into town peaceably and helped ourselves to what we needed in that cesspool of a town of yours, but *your* old man had to play “Cops and Robbers” and get the locals all stirred up. So, we lynched him, is all. After all, since he was so hot to play the Cops, *somebody* had to be the Robbers!”

Corey translated to himself what Iron Mike was telling him. The Steel Jackals would have rolled into and looted the town, kidnapped the women and literally tortured them to death without any resistance. His father, Thomas Martin, wouldn't let that happen.

Since the government had failed back in '28, Thomas Martin had headed the local militia, and his bike-breaking tactics were very effective. Thomas taught his son Corey everything he knew, until one night the gang managed to catch the town off guard. Waynesville, Pennsylvania died that night, and Thomas Martin was forced to face the wrath of Iron Mike and the Steel Jackals. Their house was burned down and his whole family was literally butchered that night. Only Corey had managed to escape, surviving by hiding in a junk lot until they had left. They stayed for a week, killing and maiming for sport, then left for some other nearby town.

Corey returned to his former house, and retched when he saw the remains. The bike gang took a special interest in the leader of the town's militia force. Corey spent the remainder of that week burying the remains of his family. At the end of that week, he checked his dad's car.

The car had been his father's pride and joy, but it was reduced to a wreck from the gang's violence and the burning of the house. Corey spent the next month working on the car, each day filled with memories of him and his dad working on it together. Grimly the weeks passed, and after Corey had at last closed the hood, he drove off out of Waynesville to make his father proud.

"Sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to be so stu-"

Just then Corey heard the padding sound of a footstep in the leaves just ahead to the right. He threw a rock into the area screaming, "Sue! Frag out!"

A large figure dove to clear the blast of the "grenade," but instead he met the blast of Corey's shotgun. The biker rose high into the air after the first shock of the pellets hit him. Corey fired a second time at the now aerial target, and the biker never moved again. Corey rolled right to avoid a burst of automatic gunfire.

"*ALL RIGHT, THAT'S IT!!*" The voice on the P/A was now hysterically screaming. "You think you've had your fun and games? *No more* of my men will die by a member of your family!! You're *dead*, man, and after we get done with you, your little girlfriend Susie's gonna be mine, and there won't be any more little heroes runnin' around to screw things up! You got that? I just thought I'd leave you a little somethin' ta think about while you're bleeding to death!"

Corey froze at the mention of Susan. What was taking her so long? *Did she make it to the car?*

"CARVE 'IM UP!!" roared Iron Mike over his P/A, and a murderous volley of machine-gun fire opened, threatening to shatter his eardrums as the guns blasted away. Corey cringed and lay flat behind a tree, but then he noticed most of the noise was coming from a pair of .30 caliber machine-guns behind him. The dull whump of a recoilless rifle sounded, the shell blasting the area where the P.A. system had

been sounding from. He then heard a door open behind him and a female voice yelling, "Hurry up, Corey, and get in!" His 6'2" muscular frame lumbered into the passenger seat and the door closed just as about a hundred rifle and shotgun shells started rattling against the armored body and windshield of the vehicle.

Sue had made it to the car.