

COME OUT, WHEREVER YOU ARE

Some unknown and unseen force had granted his ultimate wish. He was alone, sitting a bit uncomfortably with his solitude and silence, his thoughts and his books, wondering whether he had any right to make such a wish in the first place. Just two months earlier, the world had been a very different place. Vernon Parrish had been different. His friends, neighbors, and all of the townspeople had been of a quite different form and perspective as well. While his past was sometimes unbearable, life for Vernon Parrish had been normal, as far as he could recall, when compared with the most recent of his seventy-two years on this earth. Now he struggled to make sense of it all.



Verne, as people knew him, had traveled to the town of Livingston, Montana for an initial visit on a parched and dusty summer afternoon not quite six years ago. As he drove into town that first day, it was love at first sight, and he never left. He had just retired as the mayor of a large suburb just outside of Chicago, and he went to Montana for peace and solitude, and to get out of the public eye. He went for the mountains, the big sky and, of course, he went for the rivers.

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Verne's celebrity went with him, which he accepted since he realized he would never be able to fully escape the notoriety and attention from his past life. As mayor, he walked the streets of his town at any hour of the day or night, and people recognized him instantly. Cameras flashed often and his every action and word was captured for some later public distribution, consumption, and criticism. However, in Montana it was different. Though he became well known immediately and was respected for his broad smile and generous, outgoing personality, the townspeople of Livingston respected his privacy and cared only about the present. Many people in town, especially those who did not know him well, called him "Mayor," both out of respect and because it was an easy name to remember. Verne didn't mind. He quickly realized that the people of Montana were sincerely the nicest people of any place he had visited in his lifetime.

It was two months ago that Verne went into town, the town as he had come to know it, for the last time. Every other morning for almost six years, after walking along the river with his golden retriever, Buddy, he would put the dog in the cab of his truck and drive into town for breakfast, a visit, and to pick up any supplies he might need. On that one particular and final day, a cold and windy day in May, he pulled up in front of the diner and immediately suspected that something was amiss. Everything *looked* right to him—the façade of the diner, the cars parked in the street, and the few scattered pedestrians walking along the sidewalk—but something didn't *feel* right. He cracked a window, gave Buddy a Milk-Bone, and got

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out of his truck. He stood for a moment, looked, and listened as he chewed on a fingernail, but no revelation was forthcoming. He walked into the diner.

“Mornin’, Verne,” said Bob Harrison, the proprietor, who stood behind the counter and wiped the worn linoleum anxiously. He did not look at Verne.

“Bob,” Verne said. He walked along the full length of the counter and took his usual stool at the end near the paneled wall. He sat down on the diner stool, which was secured into the floor, and he spun around to observe the other patrons. It was then that he realized everyone had stopped talking, and he saw the many stolid and concerned faces pointed in his direction.

Bob walked up to Verne casually, set a cup down, and poured it full to the brim with steaming coffee. He turned to walk away.

Verne caught him. “Bob?”

Bob turned. “Yeah, Verne?”

“A menu, please?”

Bob walked down to the end of the counter, grabbed a menu from the top of the stack, and walked back over. He set the menu down in front of Verne.

“What gives?” Verne said. “Feels like a morgue in here. Someone die?”

Bob shook his head, and his face showed disappointment.

“What is it, for Pete’s sake?” Verne was growing more uncomfortable with each passing second.

“You see the paper this morning?” Bob asked.

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“Not yet.”

Bob reached below the counter and pulled out a newspaper. He held it with both hands, head down, and stared silently at the front page.

“You gonna let me see it?” Verne asked.

Bob continued his downward stare and shook his head once again.

“Bob, how long have we been friends now? How many mornings have I come in here to have breakfast and read your newspaper? Hand it over.”

Bob set the paper down on the counter, turned it around, and slid it over to Verne.

“Son of a bitch,” Verne said. There in front of him, in a four-by-six photograph, was Vernon Parrish as a much younger man. Beneath the picture, in bold black letters, was the headline, “Ex-Mayor with a Sordid Past.”

“Son of a bitch,” Verne repeated, as a dormant anger rose up within him. His chest bulged, and heat and blood rose to his head and flushed his face. He looked at Bob, who was staring at him.

“Never thought *you’d* have any enemies,” Bob said.

“I guess I do now.”

“Don’t want to believe it, Verne, but . . .”

“But what?” Verne said.

“It *is* right there in the paper, plain as puddin’.”

Verne shoved the paper off the counter, spun off the stool, and stormed out of the diner. He saw many judgmental eyes tracking

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his departure, and he judged them silently in return. Once outside, he took a deep breath and looked through the windshield of his truck. Buddy was sitting up on the front seat, his tongue wagging in anticipation. The dog would have to wait. Verne crossed the street with a determined stride, headed down a half block, and turned the corner. Another half block down was the office of *The Livingston Herald*. He entered the building and stepped inside the first office he came upon. He found Karen Shultz and Ted McNamara, both standing behind a large wooden worktable, shuffling photographs and random sheets of a newspaper. Ted was the newspaper editor, and Karen was his copyeditor.

“What the hell is going on?” Verne said.

“Whatever do you mean?” Ted replied, a tad pompous.

“Don’t screw with me, Ted. You know exactly what I’m talking about. The morning paper—the front page.”

“Oh, that.”

Verne stepped forward aggressively, the rage building inside of him.

“Take it easy, Verne.” Ted turned to Karen. “Would you excuse us for a moment?” Karen left the room, and Ted continued. “Verne, we’re in the news business.” He picked up a copy of the morning edition and turned it to show Verne. “And this is news.”

“It’s bullshit, and you know it.” Verne clenched his jaw tight and balled up his fists. He relaxed his jaw only enough to get out, “It was over *thirty* years ago.”

“That’s true, but we have no statute of limitations here in the

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newspaper business. We now have access to most everything about everyone and about any little thing that might have happened during the course of a person's lifetime. Our lives are an open book for everyone to read, and everything about everyone has the potential to be news, if not now, then maybe sometime in the future."

"But it's not true!" Verne shouted.

"Says you. Verne, if you have information to the contrary, I'll be happy to look at it. If I'm wrong, I'll print a retraction."

"Guilty until proven innocent?" Verne said.

"It's just the nature of the news business these days. The people want the news, the information, and it's our job to give it to them."

"You son of a bitch." Verne squeezed his fists tightly and his knuckles cracked. He grunted and stepped up closer to the table. He could see the concern in Ted's eyes.

"Karen," Ted shouted. "Call the sheriff, please." To Verne he said, "Don't make this any worse for yourself."

Verne watched Ted's lips move but heard nothing. With two hands, he grabbed the underside of the table and in one swift and violent motion, he flipped the table over onto its side and toward Ted. If Ted had not reacted and stepped backward when he did, the edge of the table would likely have come down on his toes, pulverizing the bones into dust.

"You crazy old coot!" Ted shouted.

Verne flashed a sinister grin and stared at Ted with steely eyes. A flash of fear replaced the concern reflected in Ted's eyes. Verne wondered if Ted might have pissed himself. The thought made him feel

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better, and he turned and left.



Only thirty minutes had passed since the incident at the diner, but Verne already had a plan cemented in place and in full motion. Verne likely always had the plan but simply needed the circumstance to call it into action. He had driven across town and out south on Route 89 to his first and only planned destination before heading home. He pulled into the empty gravel parking lot of Pete's General Store and stirred up quite a dust cloud. His truck came to rest at the front entrance, lightly bumping the old horse tie-up that lined the faded and worn boardwalk in front of the store.

Verne walked into the store and let the rickety wooden screen door slam behind him. He glanced around for any sign of life but found none.

"Hey! Pete!" he shouted. There was no reply. He walked up to the counter, leaned across, and looked behind it, as though someone might be hiding there. The space behind the counter was empty. Verne listened but heard only the sound of the spinning fan blades above him and an unrecognizable country music song playing somewhere off in the distance.

"Pete! You here?" He listened again and immediately recognized the cowboy boot shuffling coming toward him from the back of the store. A moment later, he saw Pete come around a corner and lumber up the aisle toward him. "Could hear those boots from a mile away, Pete. You sure those are the right size for you?"

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Pete smiled. “Yep.”

Verne, with his hands in his pockets, looked at Pete, expecting more.

“Verne,” Pete said.

“Pete,” Verne replied. “You okay?”

“Oh fine, just fine, Verne. I was just in the back, lettin’ go of the morning biscuits and gravy, if ya know what I mean. Yeah, I shouldn’t eat ’em, but sometimes I just can’t say no. Went right through me like the Yellowstone River in June.”

“Thanks for sharing,” Verne said.

Pete grinned and pulled his pants higher and over his distended gut. He adjusted the dirty ball cap on his head. “What can I do for ya today, Verne?”

“I need some supplies. I thought I would head out to the hunting cabin for a while. It sits out there in the middle of nowhere all by its lonesome for all but a week or two every year, and I thought I’d get some use out of it.”

“How long ya goin’ for?”

“A month or two . . . or three,” Verne said.

Pete looked at him quizzically.

Verne wondered if Pete had read the morning paper but assumed he had not. Pete didn’t seem to care much about what went on outside his store. His only connections to the outside world were the people who walked through the front door and the phone, which sat on his desk behind the counter and only handled incoming calls. It was early enough in the morning that the possibility of the news

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infiltrating Pete's world was slim.

"What the hell you gonna do out there for two months?" Pete said. "Ya know I ain't got no porno here to keep you busy for that long." Pete chuckled to himself in a way that made his belly jiggle.

"Pete, you know all those books I've been asking you to get for me?"

"Sure."

"Well, they seem to be stacking up and getting a bit out of control. I need to catch up. I thought I'd throw a few boxes into the truck and make a vacation out of it."

Pete looked at Verne as if he was from another planet. "*A readin'* vacation? Is that what ya said?"

"Of course, I'll bring my rifle and a fly rod to help fill the hours." That seemed to settle a little better with Pete.

"So, you're goin' out to the hunting cabin to hunt and to fish?"

"Of course," Verne said.

"Well, let's get ya set then," Pete said. "Grab that big cart, and I'll make the rounds with ya."

Verne grabbed the metal handle of the four-by-six, sided flatbed and wheeled it behind him, following Pete down the first aisle.

"Buddy goin' with ya?" Pete asked.

"Won't go anywhere without him. Make sure you give me the good stuff for him."

Pete loaded the bags of kibble into the cart, and Verne followed him around, aisle by aisle, throwing items into the cart without much thought of cost or preference. He simply needed everything,

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and everything is what he picked.

It took three full carts and three trips to the truck before Verne felt comfortable that he had all he needed. He let Buddy out of the cab and brought him inside the store to wait, about half an hour, while Pete put his mental calculator to the test and added up the bill.

Verne paid the bill with cash, which always made Pete happy. “Thanks, Pete. It’s been a pleasure as always.”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Pete said as he pocketed the money.

They shook hands and smiled at each other.

“Till next time,” Pete said.

“Until the next time,” Verne replied. It was their way of saying goodbye without having to say goodbye, a tradition Pete started the first time Verne met him. Verne turned and headed for the door, and Buddy followed.

“Verne?” Pete said.

Verne turned around. “Yeah, Pete?”

“You be all right out there, by yourself and all, no connection to the rest of the world?”

“I’ve got Buddy,” Verne said.

“Ain’t as young as ya used to be. What if ya need somethin’?”

“We’ll be fine, but thanks.” Verne pushed the screen door open and held it so Buddy could run through the doorway.

“Verne?”

Verne turned back again. “Yeah, Pete?”

“Could come by every couple weeks or so, if ya like.”

Verne knew Pete well and knew there was only one way this part-

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ing would ever actually happen. “Sure, Pete. That would be great. But only if you have the time, and if you can’t, I’ll understand.”

Pete smiled. “See ya in a couple.”

Verne nodded and walked out. As he pulled away, he glanced back and saw Pete in the doorway, his nose pressed against the screen of the door as he waved.



For Verne, the first week at the cabin was a time of transition, of settling in. He had been alone for some time now, since the passing of his wife, but being out at the hunting cabin was a different form of solitary confinement. On past visits, he had come out with his buddies from the local VFW, but this was the first time he had come alone. Aside from Buddy, all he had for companionship were the birds, the whitetail deer, and the dozens of other creatures that made this particular slice of heaven their home.

His cabin was simple and efficient. The logs that made up the four walls had been felled more than a hundred years ago, and it seemed that the mud that filled the gaps between the logs had come from an ancient riverbed. The tin roof was red with rust, and a slender river rock chimney protruded through it at one corner. A small, covered porch hung off the front of the cabin, the perfect place from which to gaze at the towering pines that rose up the slope of the bluff just across the dirt road. Inside, there was a single room that had a bed, two high-back chairs covered in cracked and worn leather, a small wooden table with three chairs, and a fireplace. He would cook

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by fire, get his water from the nearby creek, and take care of his daily business in the confines of the great outdoors.

After Verne picked up his supplies from Pete's, he had gone home to pick up three boxes of additional necessities. Two of the boxes contained books. The third box was filled with bourbon. Now in the cabin, the books were out of their boxes and dispersed all around. Verne wanted them laid out so that no matter what direction he might glance, he would see a book there to catch his attention. The box of bourbon was in the corner, two bottles lighter than when it first arrived. His cabin was perfect.

It wasn't long before Verne settled into a routine. He was up at dawn every morning with the first sound of the birds. He and Buddy would walk for a good hour through the surrounding forest, each of them looking around for something, anything of interest, and always listening. Sometimes they would head for the nearby creek, other times for the valley where they could always find some white-tails grazing in the dew-laden grasses. At the creek, Verne would fish while Buddy chased hidden critters up and down the banks. If Verne didn't have his fly rod, he had his shotgun in tow, always ready to pick off a game bird from the sky. Back at the cabin, Verne would have his coffee and read for a few hours before breaking for lunch, which usually consisted of something simple and easy to prepare, like a can of soup and a glass of water. After lunch, he napped for an hour and then he was back to his books for the remainder of the afternoon. He started to think about having a drink at four but always held off until six, as he found he could not remember what he read

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while the bourbon was flowing through his veins. At six, he would pour a tumbler full and get dinner started. At eight, with the dinner dishes washed and put away, he would sit at the table and write in his journal for as long as the words flowed from his brain to his pen to the paper. For his journal writing, the bourbon was a grand facilitator, opening up the neural paths and manipulating connections both typical and unique. At nine, he was out on the porch sitting in an antique rocking chair with Buddy lying at his feet. He would wear his wool jacket to fend off the cool air that came with the dusk, and he would settle into a quiet evening with a second tumbler of bourbon and a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes. He would sip, smoke, and listen to the endless sounds of nature until his eyelids became heavy and finally closed of their own free will. At the first sound of a rumbling snore, Buddy would get up and nudge Verne awake, and they would go into the cabin for a good night's rest.



Verne was living a life of wished-for solitude; a dream realized. For so many years throughout his career, Verne often thought about the possibility of getting away from it all, from the many distractions that diverted him from what he most cared about. His wife had always put his dreams and his wishes into perspective, providing a view of reality encumbered by the arguable variables of work and family and all the rest. She assured him that there would always be something important that would keep him tied to his well-known and well-lived life: another election, local investments, friends and

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family, and future grandchildren.

He thought about his wife often, and late one evening in the middle of the eighth week, he received an unexpected visit from her, in a dream. Before going to sleep, Verne had hit the bottle a little more heavily than usual, for no particular reason other than that the bourbon was going down good and his mind was racing. The more he thought about things, the more he drank, and the more he drank, the more his mind reached for explanations, for answers. As usual, he ended up falling asleep on the front porch, but Buddy was unsuccessful at rousing him from his alcohol-induced slumber. He awoke with a chill at the earliest moments of dawn, stumbled inside, and crawled under the covers as Buddy settled in on a braided rug at the foot of the bed. After just an hour more of sleep, the dream came to him, causing him to bolt upright. His heart raced as sweat glistened on his forehead. He got out of bed, started a fire, and hung the coffee pot over it. His heart calmed with the percolating beat. He poured a couple fingers of bourbon and sat before the fire, aching for a feeling of warmth that was long in coming.

The next day, his typical daily schedule was disrupted, for he could not shake the dream. He didn't leave the cabin, he didn't read, and a mid-day nap was not an option. The dream haunted him. He ate little throughout the day and was not surprised that his first evening sip had an immediate, almost hallucinatory effect. He spent the evening on the porch, drinking and smoking and not thinking about the dream but instead considering what might have prompted it in the first place. Verne had led a long and interesting life, one that

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other people would consider successful. However, a significant number of Verne's choices in life came with baggage—not just consequences, but heavy baggage and lots of it. Verne thought about some of those choices as he rocked in his chair, and he wondered if it had all been worth it. All the ties to his past life were no longer in place. His career was over and he had ended his life as a public servant on a positive note, but there were skeletons in his career closet. Most of his old buddies were either dead or in Florida, waiting to die. The neighborhood had turned over twice since he and his wife first moved in and the current inhabitants were barely acquaintances. He had liquidated his local investments years back, and the correlating memories were already vague and distant. His wife was dead, and late one evening a long, long time ago, a driver likely distracted by something electronic and surely less important than life itself had taken his only child from this world, a lifetime too soon.

He wondered about how he had gotten to this place, to this time. Was it simply fate, or life itself, that had steered him to his current destination? Was he the navigator? Did he have a hand in how his life turned out, or was he simply a puppet dangling from strings manipulated by a much higher power? Did the choices he made, right or wrong, have an negative impact on the people he loved? Did the endless and relentless media inquiries and the resulting public communications tarnish what would have otherwise been a burnished life? The questions came quickly and steadily, but the answers evaded him. He racked his brain into the early hours of the morning until, distraught and frustrated, he went inside to go

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to sleep. He was fortunate that his wife returned to him once again while he slept, and he awoke late in the morning to a freshly risen sun, a steady heat, and the realization that everything was going to be all right. His wife had told him so.



It was on a beautiful and crisp morning at the end of his tenth week at the cabin that Verne felt that something was wrong. Just like that last day in town, some age-worn instinct had put him on alert. Pete had not shown up for his last visit and at first, Verne did not think anything of it. He assumed something had come up or simply that Pete had lost interest. That was two weeks ago. Now, Verne was not so sure. As he sat out on the front porch and listened to the birds and the wind, he sensed something was different. He wondered if maybe all the solitude was getting to him. Maybe the books and the visions were trying to tell him something. Maybe the bourbon was. He couldn't put his finger on what exactly was troubling him, but there was an uncomfortable knot in his stomach that he couldn't shake. Verne, as a politician, had a history of following his gut, and his gut was telling him something was wrong, terribly wrong. His gut was telling him to go back into town.

Within an hour, Verne had the truck packed, the cabin locked up, and Buddy was in the front seat waiting for him. He looked around one last time, said goodbye to the cabin, hopped into the truck with Buddy, and drove away. It seemed to Verne that he could not drive fast enough to settle his anxiety, but he eased up on the

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accelerator when Buddy started to whimper.

He felt the need to get into town quickly, but Pete's store was coming up on the left. He turned in and pulled up to the building with locked brakes, the tires skidding across the pebbled drive. He hurried inside and stood at the front counter, just as he had done ten weeks earlier.

"Hey, Pete!" he shouted. "Pete!"

He heard nothing except the same spinning fan blades and the radio in the distance. Only the song had changed. He looked around, and the store looked as it always did. He eyed the desk and saw that it was a mess as usual, but something was different. He thought about what he was seeing and realized that the desktop had a new inhabitant—new to the desk, but old to the world. Sitting at the far corner of the desk was an old computer, covered in dust. In fact, Verne quickly realized that most of the desk and the things on top of it were covered in dust, which he thought was odd. He looked down at the countertop in front of him and saw a fine coating of dust there as well. Verne considered the countertop curiously, as he used his index finger to write in the dust, "Verne was here."

He hurried back to the truck, quickly got back onto Route 89, and headed north into town. The two-lane highway was deserted, which was always possible depending on the time of day, but at nine o'clock on a Friday morning, it seemed to Verne that there should be someone out and about on his way to work or school or fishing.

There was no one.

As he entered the town limits, the wind howled through the

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many drafty, broken seals of his truck and moved with such a force as to nudge his truck across the center yellow line. He grabbed the wheel with both hands and slowed the truck as he looked with amazement at the snow-like particles floating through the air. Verne had seen his share of unusual weather in his six years in Montana, and had even experienced a snowstorm, hail, heavy rain, and seventy-degree sunshine in the same day, but he had never seen snow in July. He squinted through the windshield and examined the floating flakes, noticed their gray tint, and quickly realized that what was falling from the sky was not snow at all. He turned on the windshield wipers to swipe away the accumulating dust.

He continued down Main Street, driving well below the speed limit and not worrying if there might be someone behind him. He was taking it all in, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Cars lined the streets as usual, but most had their doors open. All the storefronts were dark, and it was eerily silent. He rolled down his window just a crack and listened. All he could hear was the wind and the sound of his heart beating in his ears.

Verne pulled up in front of the diner and parked. He looked through his dusty windshield at the lifeless façade and stepped out of the truck. He hurried inside, but once there realized there was no need to hurry. The diner was dark and empty, with every surface covered in dust. He walked behind the counter and looked around. Aside from the dust, everything seemed in order. He stepped up to the cash register and pressed a button. The drawer slid out, revealing a full till loaded with cash and coins. He closed the drawer and

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slid his hand along the underside of the counter, found what he was looking for, and gently pulled it from its holster. Anyone who knew Bob Harrison, the proprietor, knew about the palm-sized .22 caliber revolver he kept behind the counter. Bob would often say, more loudly than necessary, “In case anyone gets out of line or criticizes the cook.” Then he would show the backside of his hand, wait a second, and turn his hand around to show the revolver resting in his palm. He would raise his eyebrows and flash a smirk, which always roused a round of applause from someone. Verne thought about Bob’s regular event, and it made him smile. He pocketed the gun and grabbed the box of ammunition on the shelf below. He left the diner in an unusual manner—he did not say goodbye.

He drove around the quiet and dusty streets of town for a few minutes and realized there was no point in driving or searching any further. His town was a ghost town if there ever was one. He headed back out onto Main Street, got back onto Route 89, and drove out of town with a heavy foot.



Verne was forty or so miles outside of town when he spotted a dark, moving dot far in the distance. His mind raced through the possibilities, but before he could deduce the correct result, he was able to make out a vehicle racing toward him. His heart quickened, and he tightened his grip on the wheel. It seemed like an eternity to him, but just ten seconds later, a black pickup truck passed him on the left. He glued his eyes to the rearview mirror to get a sight on it as it

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continued down the road. At a distance of about a hundred yards, Verne saw the truck's red brake lights glow and watched the truck pull off to the side of the road. Verne slowed his truck while keeping an eye on the road in front of him as he veered off to the shoulder. He gazed into the rearview mirror for a long time, staring at the pickup behind him in the distance. Both trucks remained motionless, engines idling.

Verne took his eyes off the mirror for just a moment to look forward, and that is when he heard the sound of screeching tires. His head snapped around, and he turned to watch through the back window as the black pickup truck approached. At a hundred feet, the truck pulled over again, stopped, and waited. Verne looked through the back window and into the bed of his truck and saw his shotgun lying there in its case, close but impossible to reach. He groped at his front pocket, and his heart calmed some as he felt Bob's revolver. He looked up from the bed to the pickup truck behind him and watched as the driver's-side door opened. A young, dark-haired woman stepped out of the truck and stood next to it, slowly raising her hands to show empty palms. Verne turned around, stared at the steering wheel, and thought about his next move. There wasn't much to think about, so he opened the door and stepped out. He turned back to Buddy. "You stay right there, boy."

"I'm not armed," the young woman yelled. Before Verne could say anything, she added, "Let me see your hands!"

Verne slowly raised both hands. "Take it easy, young lady. I mean you no harm."

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They stared at each other for a long minute. Then the young woman started to walk toward him. Verne lifted the collar of his coat to deflect the breeze and put his hands into his front pockets. His right hand slid easily over the revolver, and he took comfort in feeling the cold steel of the barrel. He walked slowly toward her.

“You come from town?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Verne said. “There’s no town left.”

“Figured as much,” she said. “But I was holding out hope.”

“There’s no hope there either.”

They were fifty feet from each other and the gap was closing.

“Where’d you come from, before that?” she asked.

“I’ve been out at my hunting cabin for the last ten weeks, away from everything. It seems like I missed out on something.”

“You could say that,” the young woman said.

At twenty feet, Verne watched as the young woman reached behind and pulled an automatic handgun from her belt. He watched her fearless eyes and her smooth confidence as she swung the gun around and raised it level to his chest. His grip tightened on the revolver in his pocket, but he did not flinch and continued to walk toward her.

“That’s far enough,” she said.

“There’s no need for that,” Verne said, motioning with his head toward her gun.

“A girl can’t be too careful these days, *especially* these days.”

“I’m just an old man, trying to figure out what the hell is going on.”

“Hell indeed,” she said.

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Verne did not follow what she meant. He stopped and stared at her.

She slowly lowered her gun and stuck it in the front of her jeans. “You’re not that old,” she said as she cracked the slightest of smiles.

Verne’s grip on the revolver in his pocket loosened. He pulled out both hands to show that they were empty and said, “I’m harmless. I just want to find out what’s going on.”

The young woman walked closer. She stopped two feet from him, pulled a pack of cigarettes from the inside pocket of her leather jacket and in doing so, revealed a young and fit upper body concealed by only a thin, white t-shirt. Verne noticed, and the young woman noticed him noticing. She pulled a cigarette from the pack and lit it. “Smoke?” she asked.

“Why not,” Verne replied.

She handed him a cigarette and stepped forward to light it. It was the first time a woman had ever offered to light a cigarette for him. He smiled. As she held the flame, Verne leaned in and drew deep on the cigarette. He exhaled slowly and smacked his lips for the flavor.

“You’re very kind,” Verne said.

“Been away ten weeks, huh? Why should I believe you?”

Verne shrugged. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

The young woman took a drag and pondered the question. “You first.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Verne said. “I packed up my truck and my dog ten weeks ago and headed out to my hunting cabin for a little rest and relaxation. This morning, I woke up and felt the

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urge to drive into town. Found a lot of nothing . . . except for all the dust.”

The young woman stared at him. Verne remained quiet.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Verne said. “Now it’s your turn.”

She took another long drag, then dropped the cigarette and stubbed it out on the pavement with her boot. “Went on a camping trip with my boyfriend a week ago. We were in the park, having a good old time, and then he started to get restless. Yeah, once the beer ran out, he got fidgety. So, last night he left me at the campsite and headed for town, the bastard. Said he’d be back in an hour or so, but I knew better. It’d be an easy two hours, assuming he didn’t stop for a few cold ones, which I knew he would. At eleven o’clock last night, he still wasn’t back, so I went to sleep. I woke up this morning, and I knew something was wrong. I could *feel* it. The world didn’t sound right, and the clouds that floated by in the sky were unlike any clouds I’d ever seen before.”

She reached for another cigarette and lit it.

“Those weren’t clouds,” Verne said.

“I know.”

“What the hell happened?” Verne tried again.

She tensed a bit but took a couple drags and calmed herself. “I usually take a shortwave radio with me whenever I’m traveling. It’s something I picked up from my granddad. I always felt better knowing that I could hear somebody, anybody, no matter where I was. So this morning, I got a report out of New York, some guy saying

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something went wrong, terribly wrong, with the country's communication systems. It's hard to believe." She paused. "Impossible to believe."

Verne rubbed his chin, feeling the two-day-old whiskers. "Young lady, what in God's name are you talking about?"

The young woman started to cry. "They're all gone."

"What?"

"Everybody . . . gone."

"Come on. I've had a rough couple of days. Come clean."

The young woman stopped crying in mid snuffle. "Listen, I'm no rocket scientist, but I'm no idiot either. I was listening to the Emergency Broadcast System. You know of it?"

"Sure."

"They said to stay away from any and all communications equipment. Reports I've been hearing from those that are left, *out there*, is that anyone within close proximity to any communications device at eleven-thirty last night was exposed to a level of radiation unheard of in modern times." She started to cry again. "My poor Billy. Gone."

Verne did not know what to say, or what to do. He wondered why anyone would be using a shortwave radio given what had supposedly happened, but he lost the thought quickly. He stood and continued to draw from his cigarette, even though the ember was burning the filter. He watched the young woman closely.

After a minute, she stopped crying and collected herself; her time of mourning appeared to stop as quickly as it had started. "Radiation—communications equipment—you think it's possible?"

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“Young lady, I was a politician. Anything’s possible.”

She processed the response and accepted the possibility. “So, it’s just you and me,” she said.

“And the shortwave people,” Verne added.

She nodded. “Well, it’s been fun, but I must be moving along.”

“Me too,” Verne said, and wondered to where he might be moving along.

“Where’d you say your hunting cabin was?” she asked.

“I didn’t say.”

“Right,” she said. She turned and walked back toward her truck.

“You got a name?” Verne yelled.

She turned around. “Marion. You?”

“Verne.”

She smiled. “Verne, it’s been a pleasure. I’ll be up in the park for a few days until things settle down, so I can get my act together.” She turned and walked back to her truck. She pulled onto the road and drove toward him, then slowed and stopped alongside where he was standing. Through the passenger window she said, “Until next time.”

Verne smiled and nodded. “Until next time.”

The young woman sped away and disappeared into the distance.

Verne pulled the pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one. “Hey, Buddy. Come here.” Buddy lunged from the driver’s seat of the truck and sprinted toward him. Verne leaned down and rubbed the dog on the top of his head. “Good boy.” They walked back toward the truck, slowly, giving him time to finish his

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cigarette.

Just a few feet from the truck, Verne stopped, and Buddy stopped alongside him. Verne looked up into the sky and watched the dust clouds float by. For some reason, he thought about Ted back at the office of the town newspaper, on the phone and getting the latest scoop. Verne envisioned Ted's unlikely demise, and that made him smile.

NOTES ON COME OUT, WHEREVER YOU ARE

These days, our world is enmeshed in technological connectivity—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Internet services and social network capabilities available to the individual are endless, and as a result, many people spend the majority of their days searching and texting and updating their networks of people on every minute detail of their existence. Time that used to be spent reading and thinking or just doing nothing is now filled with a seemingly endless stream of digital communications. What is everyone communicating about? In addition, anything (and everything!) a person may say or do can be captured instantly by one of the millions of smartphone devices lurking around every corner. The thought is unnerving. Personal privacy is an afterthought and is most certainly in jeopardy. Not only that, but we're at risk of losing our individual identities in a sea of social media consumption.

Don't get me wrong; I like technology as much as the next person. I realize that our current technologies and communication capabilities are endless and can prove to be tremendously beneficial, but where does it all end? Is it possible to be too consumed and too connected? I think so.

I think we need to be forced away from our devices every once

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in a while to relish the simple pleasures in life: reading a book, taking a walk, or just looking around and taking in all that is happening around us. For without the break, we might get so distracted that we'll miss out on what is really important.

What if a person decided to walk away from the technological tether and live his life in solitude, and what if while he was away, the social network imploded and took its membership with it? That, very simply, was the seed of the idea, and it was all I needed to get on with writing *Come Out, Wherever You Are*.

In the story, the protagonist, Verne, had forced himself to break away. During his career as a politician, he was always in the spotlight and always in the news. Privacy was not a possibility and he understood that the absence of it came with the job. So, as he came to the end of his career, he made a wish and then when he retired, he made the wish a reality. What he didn't expect was for the circumstances that nudged him into exile to end up being the same circumstances that made his exile permanent. Sometimes, we have to be careful what we wish for.

When I sat down to write the story, I had the beginning and the ending in mind. In most cases, it is a necessity for me. I need to visualize the opening scene and have some idea of how the story will end. I need the final bit of action or the final sentence. With those basic story components solidified, only then am I able to effectively set out on the journey to reach that ending.

Coming up with a main character—someone struggling with technology—was easy. Politicians, more than anyone, need technol-

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ogy to further their cause. At the same time, technology can ruin a career, a person. If you're a politician, the technology and the person behind it is always there—always in your face—to help or hurt you. It's a true Catch-22 situation.

So, I had the main character, and I knew exactly where to put him. I fell in love with Montana on my first visit there over ten years ago, and I have been pursuing my own temporary but regular exile in that state ever since. The sky is big, the rivers are endless, and I think the people there are likely the nicest people in the world. Add to that—regarding the people, there are only about one million in the entire state. There is one square mile of land for every six people. It's open and easy to get lost there, and I like the possibilities. Montana was where Verne needed to go.

I knew Verne would start and end his story in Montana, and after the fateful technology-induced demise of the human race, I expected him to simply head off into the sunset to finish out his remaining years in solitude, as he had wished. What I didn't expect was the response I received from initial readers and editors with whom I shared the story. Most everyone wanted to know what happened next. Two people very specifically noted that the story read like the first chapter of a novel, as if it was just getting started, and I found that interesting. When I finished writing the story there was no more; I had no more. Verne got what he ultimately wanted, and that was that. But since that time, I have given the comments I received a little more thought and find that I'm often wondering—maybe even worrying—about Verne and what his future holds. Who

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knows, maybe I will run into him again somewhere down the road.

This past summer, I had the fortunate opportunity to join our Boy Scout troop on a 100-mile backpacking adventure in northern New Mexico. On the day we arrived at base camp, I collected everyone's smartphones and locked them away, as no electronics were allowed for the ten days on the trail. There was a little complaining, but most everyone conceded willingly. At the time, I could only imagine what was going to happen to these nine very connected people in our crew, myself included. Would everyone freak out from technology withdrawal? Surprisingly, the devices were a distant memory just an hour later. It happened that fast. And without the devices, the most amazing thing happened: everyone looked around and took in the sights and talked to one another.

I hope we figure out how to create an appropriate balance between life and technology. I hold out great hope, but until we do, let us all be careful of what we wish for. And, by the way, watch out for that device next to you.