

Under The Gun

Carlos Valldeperas

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by Carlos Valdeperas



Where do we go when we go under the gun? Will we cave under pressure? Will the strong remain strong when the comfortable world becomes uncomfortable? Can you answer these... while under the gun? Can you be sure how you will react when pushed to the limits?

For a group of people living in suburban USA, these questions –and many more- became part of their lives in a matter of seconds. *Under The Gun* explores the reactions of this group of ordinary, everyday people.

Some people learn and grow from adversity. Some cannot adjust or compensate for change, and crash in a heap of anxiety, confusion, anger, hate, and cynicism. How many will survive –both the physical threat and the emotional? How many will crumble?



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I

The town of Hill Crest would have faded into oblivion a long time ago if it weren't for Interstate 12. Some 20 years prior, Hill Crest was infused with life when Interstate 12 was laid out to run within the town's perimeter. Prior to that, the town was fading away as the farms around it, farms it once served as their shipping center, point of commerce, and communal recreational outlet began to consolidate or close down. At its height, Hill Crest was the living heart of some half dozen family owned farms, each producing its unique product to be shipped on to larger, thriving meccas. Hill Crest was their little town. Their place to interact with the folks of the surrounding farms and small communities.

Then came Interstate 12. This highway brought flocks of people, tourists, from the inland towns and big cities to the coastal town of Winter Cove. Interstate 12 was more or less an East-West thoroughfare. As it passed along the southern boundaries of Hill Crest, it ran parallel to Hill Crest's own main East-West avenue, Hill Crest Boulevard. The other two major roads bisecting Hill Crest were Harvest Lane and Farmers Road. These two were parallel roads, running North-South through the heart of the town. These three town roads formed a sort of Lorraine Cross. When the Interstate came, it offered two points of access for the town -Harvest Lane and Farmers Road. The significance of this, and it was a boom to town business, is that travelers along I-12 had two opportunities to exit the fast flowing Interstate. Miss one exit, the second one was not further along. And this worked whether people were heading out to the coastal town -seeking sun, fun, and relaxation- or on their way back home.

With the Interstate in place and carrying people back and forth, Hill Crest residents saw a bonanza of secondary tourist spending. Business was brisk. Mom and Pop shops, restaurants, and Bed & Breakfast places prospered. Yet city leaders saw more opportunities. From here grew Hill Crest Town Mall. From the seed of an idea, it was genius. By way of years of pruning out useless politicians, it was carried out effortlessly and with brilliance.

First, the city leaders recognized the importance of location. Location, location, location. Hill Crest Town Mall needed to be easily accessible from the newly built Interstate. With vision and a genuine sense of value, city leaders also sought a design that was more than plane walls or empty gimmicks. So, with these precepts in place, Hill Crest Town Mall came to be just off of Interstate 12; between Harvest Lane and Farmers Road. It was clearly visible from the Interstate -sitting high and proud on a natural crest running along the Interstate. And even from a distance it looked more than just another mall -more than walls, pointless themes, and gaudy stores. Any fast moving tourist would see the mall as something worth stopping at -if for nothing more than to get some food, gas, or a break from driving. It didn't hurt that a few choice hotels had sprung up around the mall AND that the town of Hill Crest held its own small town charm.

So traveling along the Interstate, maybe not looking to stop at yet another mall, once seen from the

highway, it became an effective lure. And by design, miss one exit, second guessing your curiosity, the next was a minute or two away. Thus people came. People stopped. People shopped. Once they arrived, the mall's design, store choices, and efficient management made it a destination for return travelers. I-12 became more than a means for getting to the sunny beaches of Winter Cove. It was sunny beaches PLUS small town charm and good shopping.

It didn't take long for some major retailers to see the value in this mall off the Interstate to the coast. This solidified the malls success. The lure of eager shoppers attracted many, varied retailers and business men, but thanks to the mall's stellar management, the quality of the mall's tenants was kept well in check. To strengthen the small town charm of Hill Crest, mall management actively sought out local business and quaint shops. This mix of small, local shops with some large yet quality major retailers served to fortify the malls existence and endear it to many a traveler.

Unfortunately, Hill Crest Town Mall's perfect location, in terms of a business sense, also was perfect for other, nefarious purposes. One early summer day, just another weekday, in the fresh hours of the morning, this mall's perfect location brought it malice, enmity, guns and violence.



Kyle Richardson was updating his FaceBook Page. “Another day in the dungeon!” That was the status for this day. More or less the same status he used when he was working at his dad's store. Kyle's posts made it sound as if he didn't like the job. He often wrote things that read as if his dad's store was a dive. Truth be told, Kyle enjoyed the work. Not only that, he thought that working with his dad was “cool”. He would never say so openly (certainly wouldn't POST about it), but he liked his dad very much. There was good reason, really. Trenton Richardson, Kyle's father, was a good, honest, hard working, kind man. The fact that the “dungeon” was probably the best place for a nerdy, 18 year old to work at, didn't hurt.

As with most Friday mornings, Mr. Richardson had opened the store, got things ready for business, and then left Kyle to run things while he went to the bank. This was the routine every Friday morning. Kyle had done it -shouldered the responsibility- for close to a year. He relished the responsibility and trust put on him. He need only hear from his friends, some working fast-food or cashiering at one of the mall's other small retailers, to feel grateful for his dad and the “dungeon.”

The reference to “dungeon” alluded to darkness, dampness, filth, torture, and other unsavory things. It did not denote the qualities of Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium. This “emporium” was Kyle's bread and butter (and his dad's dreams come true through blood and sweat). To call it a movie store would be short sighted. It wasn't a music store either. It embodied the idea of an “Entertainment Emporium” with gusto. It had been built up over years, through research, trial-and-error, sheer brilliance and simple determination. Kyle helped. Yet he was barely starting to realize how innovative and unique the place truly was. If he took the time he would realize that the days of movie stores and music stores -at least brick and mortar ones- had come and passed.

Kyle just knew that their collection of music was limited but unequalled. The store's collection of movies was rare. Rare and with a flare for the obscure, exotic, and uniquely erotic. It was the erotic that brought some of the most interesting customers -and the best tales for Kyle to share on his Page. On this day, however, the tale was far more horrific, personal, and impressive. It would begin like many of his others, with observations of the varied people in the store. Kyle was good at “figuring out” people by what caught their attention within the store. It took him little time to pigeon-hole shoppers into categories. This particular Friday, he had all but one person figured out.

The challenge for Kyle was with old man Sorrensen. Mr. Sorrensen was a regular customer. Kyle had been ringing out his rentals and various purchases for well over three years. The rentals were usually of the same basic genre -Westerns or what his dad had categorized as “classics.” The few purchases made over time were of basic audio-video supplies -like a VCR/DVD combo, a universal remote, a CD binder, and batteries. LOTS of batteries! Today though, Mr. Sorrensen seemed to be lost. Lost or unsure. Kyle had noticed the man walk around past his usual areas several times now, and still nothing. What was piquing Kyle's interest was that as Mr. Sorrensen walked back and forth between the Westerns section and the Classics, he kept passing, and more importantly, slowing down as he passed the “special” section.

This “special” section was one of the things that made Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium unique. Unique and successful. It contained a very large, yet very selective collection of erotic videos and “materials.” This was NOT just an “adult only” section or simply shelves full of porn. Even the most staunchest critic could not deny that the collection had some class. This was something that Mr. Richardson had worked on for many years and whose final realization he was rather proud of. Even the non-video “materials” reflected some restraint, thought, and honest purpose. Kyle was particularly pleased with the inclusion of this section in “his” store. It definitely didn't hurt his reputation amongst his friends.

On this ordinary Friday though, the section was causing him some consternation. “What is he doing?” Kyle wondered as Mr. Sorrensen made a third pass by the Special Selection area. It was not part of the old man's routine. Kyle even considered approaching the man to see if everything was alright. The area and its contents were also unnerving Mr. Sorrensen. “My Betty would be beside her self!” This “Betty” was the old man's deceased wife. A wife of 33 years, and now gone for just over 16. He missed her. He also missed their very “active” marriage. And it was this void that was driving Mr. Sorrensen to entertain the idea of renting something “different.”

Kyle had pretty much figured out what the other customers were eventually going to get. Mr. Thomas was also a regular customer. As was his custom, he brought his two kids (Mrs. Thomas was no longer a part of their lives. Rumor had it she had run, unable to cope with being a mother of twins.) These twins were the only kids Mr. Thomas had. He never remarried. Nor was he ever seen with any woman -or any adult, for that matter. His life seem to consist of work and the twins. On this day, the twins were looking through all the popular music CD's the store carried.

“I want this one!” Emma was exclaiming. She wanted a Justin Beiber CD while Evan preferred the One Republic CD.

“We have that one already, you goof.” He said, looking at her as if she were years younger -rather than the 10 minutes OLDER she really was. “We downloaded it the other night.”

“Oh.” She knew now that Evan was right.

As Kyle knew, the two kids would fight over a particular CD until finally realizing that their taste in music was, unlike them, identical. And as was his custom, Mr. Thomas would add an action movie rental to the CD purchase.

“Why do they still BUY full CD's... or still rent store movies?!” This was a thought Kyle had on more than one occasion. This was, after all, the digital age. Though the store still thrived, Kyle (and Mr. Richardson) knew that people were turning more and more to the internet for most -if not all- their entertainment needs and wants. Kyle didn't understand Mr. Thomas' need to get the twins out of the house. He didn't get the need to expose them to the world beyond the computer. Kyle was only several years older than the twins (who had celebrated their 13th birthday three months earlier) but his “dependence” on the internet was not so prominent. Or so he felt.

“There they go again,” Mr. Thomas mused as he watched the twins arguing over what to get. “But better they argue and fight than ignore each other. And at least they aren't vegetating in front of their computers.”

If Kyle could read Mr. Thomas' mind he would realize the man would rather not waste his money at “these arcane brick and mortar stores” -as he often contemplated to himself. Well, whatever did drive Mr. Thomas to Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium, Kyle was grateful. It was, after all, his bread and butter. On this day, Kyle was well pleased that people still frequented these “brick and mortar” places. And today, the store was doing rather well. Aside from Mr. Sorrensen and the Thomas family, there were a fair number of shoppers. Not just browsers but actual shoppers. Or so Kyle hoped.

In the Drama and Romance area were three store regulars. Kyle knew them from school -when he was an in-coming freshman, two of these were getting ready to graduate. Tedrick always seem to travel with more than one girl. It was so during his High School years, and it was true today. He, a girl named Brenda (from

Winter Cove), and Tedrick's regular side-kick, Mel, were looking through some “chick-flick” videos.

“Oooh, this one looks good.” Mel said, batting her eyes up at Tedrick. “They fall in love after she saves him from death.”

“That looks good to me.” Tedrick replied rather dryly. “If you think it's good...”

Brenda stood by shaking her head, amused at the banter between her two friends.

Tedrick and Mel did this every Friday. So Kyle knew they would find something to rent. It was also likely that the High School sweet-hearts, Daniel and Cat would also find something. Today these two would surely walk out with either a comedy or a porn video -Kyle hoped for both. (Though he held a little reservation over the porn, given that he had held a distant infatuation for Cat -Cathy- since they were both in Middle School together. He found himself cringing at the thought that Cat and Daniel were intimate despite the fact that they had been together for several years now, and Kyle knew it quite well.)

Over by the hardware, looking through some MP3 players, was a man Kyle knew from the food court. Harold, as his name tag read, worked the counter at the mall's Wendy's. For the past week he'd been coming in, looking at the selection of MP3 players and asking questions about some of these.

“How many songs will this one hold?” was the first question. “Will it work with my iTunes?” and “What file format will be best on it?” Were other standard questions.

If Harold bought anything this day, Kyle would be very surprised. “but wouldn't it be nice” Kyle thought. Some of these players had a 160% mark-up.

Off to a corner of the store was Patsy. She was familiar to Kyle only through other people. Only from reputation. Patsy always seemed like a recluse. It proved so all the times she came into the store. If she bought something, she did so quickly and with limited conversation. As Kyle reflected on this, she came up and presented her purchase -a 32 GB flash drive. With a quick swipe of her check card, she was gone. The total sum of words shared between them was two. “See ya!”



This is when Kyle saw something. What it was wasn't clear to him right away. It was a sort of frenetic activity; an unusual frittering and fuss of people outside the store. There was a soft sound that didn't register in Kyle's mind until Harold opened the door -on his way out the store. There was screaming. As the doors closed, Kyle finally came to understand. Something was going on outside. The sound that came registered in Kyle's mind as a soft sound was now, without a doubt, screaming. The screeching of people afraid. What they were afraid of, Kyle did not know, could not know. But he knew enough to feel a surge of fear and tension filled his body. He went rigid.

Inside Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium, everything and everyone stopped. All their attention turned to the space beyond the store's windows. "What is going on?" was the unspoken thought dominating all their minds. Like falling dominoes, as one person realized that there was trouble outside, it brought the next to the same realization. Little by little the patrons turned to look out into the mall's halls. At first sight it may have looked like a regular mall crowd. As Kyle soon saw, those people's purpose seemed hurried. And as each minute passed, that movement became more rushed. More agitated. Within five minutes of that initial dark silence and bone rattling scream, people outside Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium were actually running. This put many of the Emporium's shoppers into a panic. A calm panic, compared to what was escalating outside, but building quickly.

Kyle always had a way about dealing with stressful situations. It was one of the things his dad was proud about him for. It was a quality he most coveted in his son -when it came to managing the store, that is. And manage the store he did. Before panic took over INSIDE the store, Kyle took action. Seeing Harold run out, trying join the random, almost crazed melee outside, Kyle foresaw that that same easy exit posed an easy entrance to whatever threat laid beyond. So Kyle rushed to lock and secure the store's doors.

As he rushed to the doors several things occurred in a flash. To Kyle, it was like a dream sequence -slow, fuzzy, and surrealistic. Several shots rang out just outside the store. These were loud, piercing sounds that reverberated in Kyle's head long after they were fired. The ringing of them scrambled his thoughts temporarily leaving him dazed and confused. This confusion was further exasperated by Harold's body returning to the door way. It was just that, a body. Not a person. To Kyle it registered as almost fake -A phantasm. Like a movie prop. The reality of the moment was far more gripping than anything he had ever seen on TV or movies. Harold's head was not right. "It's not there!" Kyle's brain saw the discrepancy but couldn't directly make sense of it. The blood, warm and sticky, covering Kyle's face drove the reality of the situation home.

Kyle stood rooted to the spot AND the moment. This was so much more than his young mind could process in such a short time. "The man is dead." Kyle processed in his head. He'd been killed right in front of him. His head had exploded. Gunfire had turned the fused skull bones into flying fragments. That was how it looked like to Kyle -an exploding head, as things started to assemble themselves in his mind. Kyle took note of his environment. The dead -decapitated- body of the Wendy's guy. His blood and brains splattered everywhere. Kyle wiped his face...Harold's blood and brains dripped from him. It was sticky. Warm. Wrong.

It was Kyle's movement within the store that brought the rest of the patrons out of their trance of confusion and befuddlement. They hadn't been close enough to the door to see Harold's gruesome demise. As Kyle turned away from the doors he found the patrons migrating towards the center of the store; coming closer to their fellow shoppers. Their individual interests and purpose changed to a unified cause -their safety. Kyle approached them with clear intent -to keep them from harm. To this aim he ushered them towards the back of the

store. "Move to the back. Quickly." They moved without hesitation. They moved as one. The awe and disgust in their eyes went unnoticed by Kyle. Kyle was covered in blood. Crimson red. Real. Worst, intermingled with the blood was brain matter -clumps of sticky white-gray brain matter. And bone! Yes, there were bone fragments clinging to Kyle's hair and neck. The patrons were transfixed by what they saw. Still, they obeyed him, like mindless lemmings following the tide's movement. So Kyle turned his attention to the store.

Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium had security shutters for its floor to ceiling windows. These, Kyle surmised, would provide some protection against whatever or whoever was beyond. He had them down and secure within moments. As they came down, Kyle could hear more shouts. Closer. More frightened. There were other noises as well. Shouts of commands. Piercing booms of gun fire.

"Crap! They're shooting again." Kyle thought out loud.

"Crap, crap, crap!!!" He muttered.

Kyle hit the light switch as he passed the entry way to the store's back section. "Give them a harder target." That was his idea, even if he didn't know who THEY were. "Who ever they are.... WHATEVER they are, they are shooting." He rushed on towards the back door. This led to a series of long hallways that eventually reached the outside. It was the employee access and supply conduit. It was also what Kyle had hoped would be their way out to safety.

"Damn, damn, damn!!!" Kyle cursed as he reached the heavy metal, security barred door. It was still very much secured. "Where are they?" He wondered. Where could all the customers have gone? As he walked slowly back towards the front of the store he became aware of two things simultaneously. One, there were heavily armed men out in the mall. And they were shooting their weapons -not simply hand guns, but automatic, assault type weapons. He could see the blast of fire coming from their nozzles.

The other thing he realized was that the customers had found the store office/ storage room and had hidden themselves in it. Kyle only had a split second to ponder this when one of the store's glass double doors shattered into millions of tiny diced pieces. Harold's lifeless body still propped up against it, blocking the way, preventing the shutters from securing the store's entry. As he dove through the office doorway his mind managed to consider the destroyed glass door... "It shouldn't have shattered like that!.... Tempered glass isn't supposed to shatter like that." Only once he was inside the office, locking and barricading the door did his mind focus on the more important thing: "That was a shot. They SHOT at the store.... They shot at ME!"

Kyle crumbled to the floor. Without thinking about it he'd pushed himself against the wall just left of the door. He pushed himself into a corner of the office. And there a great weight fell upon him.

"I could be dead." This thought raced through his head. Over and over. "I could be lying out there, my life leaking out of me." His heart was pounding against his chest. His head felt as if his lungs weren't getting enough life sustaining air. His head was spinning.

"I have to stay calm." He told himself as he took in two deep, slow breaths. He was in charge of the store. That made him in charge of the people in it. The people that he just realized were crowded into the office; scattered about, hidden as best they could.

Mr. Thomas and the twins, Emma and Evan, were tucked behind boxes of newly arrived inventory that had been carelessly staked right of the door. Mr. Thomas had each child under his arms, pulled in tight.

"Shhhh!!!" He was softly hissing at the children. It was as to much calm them as it was to calm himself.

"What's happening, daddy?" Emma inquired.

"I don't know, Em. But it will be okay. We're safe."

"Those are M16 shots going against... probably standard issue 9mm's in the hands of scared local police." Evan said with the calm demeanor of a professional answering an easy question asked by an ignorant nothing.

Mr. Thomas looked down at his son and sighed. He thought to himself, "I have to get him outdoors, playing soccer or tennis. Something. Anything as long as he is away from that damned computer."

"From the sound of things, who ever has the M16 is winning. They're wasting a lot of ammunition, but they're winning." Evan ended his statement in a whisper as his own assessment drove the realization that things were looking bad for them. The bad guys surely were the one with the assault rifles.

Tedrick had staked out the far, right corner of the office. He was trying to reassure Mel and Brenda. "We're OK in here. The store guy closed the store's shutters." The women were intently listening to him. "That was that one rattle we heard." Brenda nodded in acknowledgment. She'd wondered about that one noise. But there were other noises. Noises she distinctly knew as gun shots.

"But like the kid said, those were machine gun shots... and lots of them." Brenda said, failing to keep the fear out of her tone. She had also heard Evan's assessment that the guys with the machine guns were winning. That put even more fear in her.

Mel's shaking expressed what her thoughts were. She just pulled in tighter to Tedrick. Looking up at him, as in the hopes that he would assure her somehow that nothing would happen to her.

"It'll take an army of them to get in here." Tedrick whispered.

The conversation between Daniel and Cat did not carry beyond their space. Soon as they entered the office they had huddled by the office desk. The desk had a wide overhang and it was under this that the couple had hidden themselves. That overhang must have given them a sense of safety. They had sat facing each other, legs entwined; hands clasped together and gathered up chest high, leaning close, forehead against forehead. From the moment they settled in the office, taking this distinct position, they engaged in some very soft but intensive whispering.

Their whispering consisted of supplication. Soft but earnest prayer. Prayer for protection. A prayer for help. A prayer for strength.

Mr. Sorrensen, sitting in the office's lone chair, sat silently behind the desk. Elbows propped on the desk. Hands cupped, holding up his head. Eyes closed. His mind full of thoughts, memories, and dreams.

Kyle's mind was less full of coherent thought. It also had much fewer memories. At the moment, whatever dreams of life he may have had were being subdued by fear and a sensation of imminent doom. He too had heard Evan's assessment of the situation. He too knew about assault weapons and their distinct sound. And he had been closer to these sounds. He had been there when the glass door shattered. He was well aware of the danger they were facing. He'd seen the black fatigued dressed people running by the store. He'd seen the weapons. And worst of all, he knew that as effective as the window shutters were, as proud of himself he was for having the initiative to secure them, he was overwhelmed with the dread over the fact that he'd not been able to shutter the doors as well.

"That is our weakest point." Kyle told himself. "Those half-closed shutters won't keep them out if they want to get in." Another part of his mind reminded him that if the bad guys didn't know anyone was in the store, why would they find a need to break in. "Why would they come?" He asked himself. These thoughts were pierced by renewed sounds of conflict outside. And the sounds were nearer. They were even more fierce sounding. Worst yet, the sounds of guns and men screaming seemed to come from the store access hall as well.



Off in their huddle, Daniel and Cat could be heard whispering. Kyle could just make out some words here and there. He heard Daniel's deep voice say "...art in heaven..." Then Cat's higher pitched voice came through with "lead us not into temptation..." After that Kyle clearly heard the couple say in unison, "...Mary, full of grace..." "The fruit of thy womb..."

"They are praying!" Kyle exclaimed in a rather louder voice than he intended. And indeed, Kyle should have recognized their reciting the Lord's Prayer.

Kyle's unintended announcement did not go unnoticed. Tedrick took notice. So did Mr. Thomas. Daniel and Cat continued on, whispering and reciting prayers. There were tears running down Cat's youthful, rosy cheeks. Daniel gently caught them with his thumbs, lovingly wiping them away. And they prayed on. Softly. Fervently. But with resolve and steadfastness. The silence of the room was being pierced by the soft sounds of their prayers; their supplication for God to provide them with strength, mercy, and life. Their prayers were prayers for life.

Tedrick had rarely thought about life's finite reality. To him, life was now. It never had occurred to him that all life would come to an end. It never really came to mind. Not until today. Not until he found himself hiding in a "closet" with only a door keeping death at bay. Needless to say, Tedrick was now thinking of "the end." It filled him with some feelings he had never felt before. A dread. A fear. He was, for once in his life, seeing the darkness that hovered over all life. This forced him to reflect on his life and his beliefs. He had been brought up with a deep faith. A faith that strengthened his mother and father in such a way that they prospered and overcame obstacles that doomed many others around them.

Tedrick had once felt that capability in himself. He had once held that governing strength within him. This day, he could see the merits of such fervor. Recalling the days when he shared that fervor with his family, Tedrick resolved to share it now with Mel and Brenda.

"Can we pray together?" Kendrick surprised both women with his question. "I use to do it with my mom and granny. It helped them fight their fears and pains. And it made me feel strong." It made him feel purposeful, Tedrick reflected. He felt deep within himself that it could now aide him in this situation.

"Please, just try." He asked of his friends. They were looking at him with awe and a lot of bewilderment. It was a side of him they had never seen.

Brenda simply nodded. Mel drew in close to him and whispered, "I'm afraid."

Kyle watched the changes in the people crowded inside his father's store office. Little by little the fright induced silence of the room filled with the soft sounds of prayer. Tedrick was leading the women in reciting words from the book that had governed his youth. He had shown them what had long ago been his normal position for worship and invocation. Thus they joined with the petition and prayer like Daniel and Cathy.

Daniel was praying to the Saints. He was asking for their intervention. Asking for their assistance to bolster his supplications to God for mercy. "By your will, God." He implored. "I pray you to keep us safe.... but

only if it is your desire... your plan for us.”

Tedrick was echoing words he knew by heart as a child... “I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn. From the mischief of created things... From the mischief of Darkness as it overspreads...” His words came in a soft whisper, like a morning mist engulfing a green meadow. A peaceful serenity surrounding and embracing all will to submit to it. “By the Glorious Morning Light,” Tedrick continued. “And by the Night when it is still,... Your Guardian-Lord has not forsaken you, nor is He displeased.”

There were other words Tedrick remembered from those days when his Faith was aflame. “...they love the life of this world better than the Hereafter... and Allah will not guide those who reject Faith.” These he would not say out loud. Their sting would be strong when his Faith had faltered so. He knew he had grown to relish in the bounties of the world he lived in, while neglecting -and essentially rejecting- the wonder of these gifts and of life it self. He went on recalling long forgotten teachings... “One Day every soul will come up struggling for itself.” Deep inside he knew these struggles. More so on this day. “...and every soul will be recompensed (fully) for all its actions, and none will be unjustly dealt with.” In these memories, Tedrick was finding some peace. In sharing the words he was reassuring his own soul -and fortifying his own Faith.

None of these personal revelations went unnoticed by Mr. Thomas. He too had drifted away from the faith he had grown up knowing. The bitterness of life had tainted much of what he so easily accepted and loved as a child. The departure of his wife -his one earthly joy- served as the final force severing him from that blind faith and causing the schism that now governed his world. Still, parts of the faith remained. Hearing the words of Faith around him, these parts came drifting to the surface. He started recalling parts of prayers that were once so common place in his life. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” That was something he'd learned. He'd learned prayer too...” “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...” Some of the words he could not recall. Some of the spirit he could not enliven. Some of that old feeling of peace and assurance he could barely remember. Still, some of it was coming back to him.

Out loud Mr. Thomas said, “for thine is the Kingdom, power, and Glory, forever and ever.” Emma looked up at her dad in wonder. She had been feeling the peace coming from the whispered prayers issuing from some of the others in the room. By her side though, she felt only a rigid fortress of indifference and repressed pain. She knew enough of life -and knew her father well enough- to recognize an attitude of subjugation and buried misery. To hear words of peace, words of hope coming from her dad was surprising.

“Could we say that prayer?” Emma whispered her words to her dad.

“What prayer?” Responded her dad.

“It was about 'green pastures' or something.” Emma replied with a little more life to her tone.

“It wasn't a prayer.” Evan spoke. He'd been sitting in sullen silence since hearing the gunshots. His input surprised his sister and father. They looked at him in mild puzzlement.

“You're talking about a verse out of the Bible.” Evan answered their unasked question. “Grams use to read it with us.”

Emma remembered this. It was long after their mother had left. Their grandmother had stepped in. For nearly six years she was the closest thing to a mother they had. Their dad tried, but some things he could just not provide. One of these was a sense of faith. Now the memories of those days came rushing back.

“Bible?” Emma was searching her memories.

“From Psalms. Twenty-something.” Evan offered.

“Psalm twenty-three!” Emma exclaimed in excitement.

'Psalm twenty-three', Mr. Thomas reflected. He used to know it well. He and his wife (he still thought of himself as married to her) would recite it -and Psalm 25- whenever they found a stumbling block in their young lives. It seemed like so long ago. A past life. Now dead. But was it...

“Psalm twenty-three. Yes. I think I remember it.” Mr. Thomas said to his children. “It goes something like, 'The LORD is my shepherd...’” By the second verse, Emma and Evan joined in... “He makes me lie down in green pastures...” In strong unison they went on... “he leads me besides quiet waters, he restores my soul.” By the time they were to verse 4 they were reciting in earnest. Their voices were now sure and determined. “I will

fear no evil,..." They said it defiantly. In a renewed confidence and peace they finished, "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Kyle had been watching the Thomas' family transformation. He was awed by theirs and the other's shift in stance. That fear that he could almost smell was giving way to a sweet scent of resolve and assurance. He was mesmerized by the "transmutation" -as he was thinking of it. His focus had been so intent on these three groups -Daniel and Cathy, Tedrick and the two women, and the Thomas family- that he didn't notice the change in old man Sorrensen.

Mr. Sorrensen, Kyle now noticed had left the chair. The old man was now sitting on the floor like he was doing Yoga. He was cross-legged. Arms on his thighs. His back straight ('Like dad always tells me to sit!' Kyle thought to himself.) The man sat with eyes closed -not sleeping but in what looked like a state of peaceful rest. As Kyle looked closer, he noticed Mr. Sorrensen's lips were moving. He was mouthing something. He couldn't tell what the old man was saying, but given what was going on with the other people in the office, Kyle could guess the man was praying.

"My suffering is my strength." Mr. Sorrensen muttered. "Through my actions, thoughts, and proper contemplations I will near Nirvana.... Until I depart from this body and return to try again." Mr. Sorrensen accepted the limitation of this human world and the turmoil and battles that were part of living. Through the years, in his faith, he was finding a serenity and wisdom to overcome everything the world he lived in challenged him with. He was finding great solace now, during this frightful predicament, thanks to this doctrine.



Just to test all their resolve, a renewed cacophony of screaming, concussive sounds, and piercing gun fire filled their place of refuge. Adding to the noises, now there was a subtle odor of burnt something... “Gun powder?” Kyle wondered. Just then the lights flickered. It startled some of them out of their psychological and spiritual “trance” -as Kyle was thinking of it. Then the lights went out all together. The sudden darkness only served to drive them further into their faith. After a few minutes of darkness an emergency light hung high on the wall lit, casting a mild glow to the room. It was almost ethereal and surreal. Soon, the noises died down again. The smoke smell dissipated. And the supplicating whispering returned.

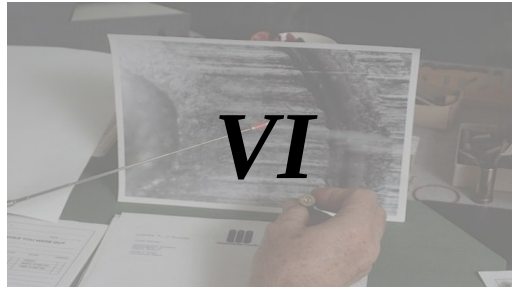
Kyle was sure they would be okay. After all, he had done everything possible to protect the customers and the store. He also figured that they were out of sight and so not in the line of fire. 'Why would they come to us?' He continued to ask himself. 'They won't.' He was sure. Still, he was nervous. He had considered -for some moments- the possibility of life taking a very different, a very dark turn. That was something he sensed from the others before this fellowship of Faith. Fear. Uncertainty.

Faith, even one that was long ago forgotten or buried in Earthly toils, was being revisited and explored here. If nothing else, Kyle could see that it had a more profound affect on the emotional state of these people than anything else seemed to have done. A close camaraderie hadn't done it. The soothing words of a parent hadn't done it. Love hadn't done it. The safety of their hiding place hadn't done it. Even the knowledge of the physical barriers between them and whatever -WHOMEVER- was beyond, could not ease their minds and souls.

This blind belief in something greater had overpoweringly subdued their fears and doubts. Kyle had mused over the benefits of faith during his young life. He recognized the power of this faith. The power of believing in something greater. Something beyond this little sphere life (and death). He recognized the ability to lead, direct, and control people through religion. It was this particular aspect that caused the deep conflict he felt about his faith. That was the thing; Kyle saw faith and religion as two different things. At times, they seemed to be direct opposites to him. At his young age, he was already jaded by the way religion was used to manipulate people, their thoughts, and their worlds. Now though, seeing how FAITH could overcome fears and doubts, how it could overcome adversity, he also recognized the positive power faith had. Faith, not religion. Faith in something greater. Faith that there was something bigger.

There was something bigger going on in the office. Through this new-found fellowship, these people were overcoming the fear of the world outside. And each was finding it within their own available level of belief. No one was being preached to or threatened with ever lasting damnation. No talk of fire and brimstone. The whispers filling the room did not include any “thou shalt not!” This was the positive side of religion. The true Faith of the soul. It was a compelling thing. It drew Kyle into accepting the possibility of something more. Something beyond his mere existence.

“Look what they gained by giving in to that blind faith.” Kyle thought to himself. He asked himself the question, “What CAN you possibly lose by believing in a loving, compassionate God?” With death having come looking for him, he wondered about the merits of Faith. Either there is nothing beyond death -an empty nothingness- or there was a sort of continued existence. Given that, what could one lose by believing in a greater power -believing in God or A God? He pondered this question. He considered this in his mind and in his heart.



Like the small flame re-lit within Kyle Richardson, illuminating something inside him, the lights inside the little office of Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium came back on, enlightening the people within. There was a peace though within. There was a glow in the people's faces that did not need artificial light to shine. It was such a stark difference from the faces that Kyle first saw hiding inside the place. Hiding from the threat of the world beyond. And hiding from themselves.

Moments after the lights came back on there came the calls of an “all clear!” It took a few moments for them to comprehend what “all clear” meant. “What?” Was one question on their minds. “Who?” Was the other question. Kyle was quicker than the others. He'd been isolated from the fellowship that had subdued the others. He had stood on the outside of the fellowship that had over taken the others. So he was quicker to grasp the meaning of this.

“There've been no shooting for a while.” He thought to himself. Indeed, everything had been quite for sometime. “Actually, it's been so quiet.” This “all clear” made sense to him. It registered in his mind before it did so for the others. As such, Kyle had cleared the doorway and was walking out of the office before any of the others pulled themselves away from the peace of their communes.

Kyle reached the front doors of Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium just as a heavily armed and armored officer was about to check the security of the store.

“Identify yourself!” The officer commanded.

“Kyle... Kyle Richardson.” Kyle stuttered. “Kyle Richardson. This is my store.” He spoke again with more affirmation.

“Open the door.” The officer instructed Kyle, pulling away the limp, headless body of Harold -the Wendy's cashier.

“How many people are inside? Anybody hurt inside? Who was that?” The officer rattled off the questions, pointing at the Wendy's uniform without a head. Kyle worked on unlocking the store's doors.

Just then the first of the store patrons filtered out of the back office. Tedrick lead the way, followed by his girl Mel and her friend Brenda. Others followed suite. As Kyle addressed the officer's inquiries, the office emptied. They gathered around the front doors, the diced glass crunching under their feet. Brain matter sticking to the bottom of their shoes. The mess brought them closer to the realization of how close they were to danger.

“Is everybody alright?” Sergeant Morris asked the crowd gather by. The officer saw the inquisitive and bewildered look on the people's faces. “Everything is over. The perpetrators have been neutralized. You are all safe now.” He added as he saw that all were indeed well... but confused.

After some further questions -from both sides -a sense of normalcy returned to the store. Lights were turned back on. Kyle swept up the shattered glass. He cleaned up blood, bone and brain. People

went on with their lives. Tedrick and the women left without renting anything. Daniel and Cat exited empty handed, but with plans in their hearts. Mr. Thomas did pick out a movie -"Courageous"- and indulged the twins to a CD -dcTalk. (Kyle grinned to himself when he noticed the selections Mr. Thomas had chosen. He rung the items out quietly, without commenting on what they had just experienced –or on the selected items.)

One by one the customers left Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium. Some would be back. Others found different means of passing their time. Mr. Sorrensen never returned. He never questions seeking pleasure through videos. He also found a peace that he hadn't felt since his wife was by his side. That love they shared, he realized, was still within him. It just needed to be re-purposed. Love also changed for Daniel and Cathy. It took a much deeper meaning to them. Less physical. Much more emotional and spiritual -and lasting.

There were changes in the love that permeated Mr. Thomas' home as well. Time spent with the twins felt less forced. Their connection ran much deeper than any of them had realized (or would have admitted to... before.) Likewise, the twin's relationship with their dad was far more relaxed. Relaxed without a loss of respect. Actually, Mr. Thomas noticed how the kids showed a greater adoration and esteem for him. Love. A deep and sincere love. And this love often extended beyond their home. It took far more to incite and irk any of them. They radiated a special peace and serenity –they were quicker to respond than react. And their responses were more often than not of love than hate or anger.

Dunn Reedin Entertainment Emporium was back to business in no time. The attack on the mall flooded the news for days. "Mall Besieged by Terror... Seven Lives Ended," was the media's sensational headline. In the end it turned out to be home grown terrorists looking for attention. Attention they could not find through love, respect, or integrity. They thought respect and change could be found through violence and hate. That force was greater than knowledge and understanding. But they failed to see beyond themselves, and failed to achieve anything but destruction and disruption.

Kyle Richardson went back to his job. But his view of the world was a little different. His drive had gone through a slight shift. He was more open to things. "What if...?" Became more prevalent in his thoughts. There was a greater possibility, as he learned. There was a greater purpose. "How much more awesome life would be if there was a REASON for our lives?!" That thought gave him power. Strength. He recalled something he had once read: "We need only open our minds to hear our own wisdom."

