

A Plague of Doubt, Or Social Distancing Fail

by David L. Haase

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John Forenow did what he did because he could.

For the third time this year, and it was only May, he planned to stuff himself into his isolation suit, seal himself into his car and drive off to the grocery store with the car's autopilot disengaged!

It was completely reckless behavior on so many levels.

But that's how humans behaved *if* they could—as if the new rules of daily life did not apply. In what some would consider his declining years, John felt the acute need of a survivor to experience life to the fullest and to push boundaries beyond the safe and secure. He lived while so many of those around him died.

Most of humanity, in fact, had died. What was the last figure he had heard, somewhere between 85 and 90 percent since 2014, just 10 years ago? Yes, the survivors like himself numbered in the hundreds of millions worldwide, and by worldwide he meant North America, pieces of South America, Australia, some of Europe and Russia. Elsewhere, survival had been sporadic at best.

He had watched on TV as eastern China disappeared as a population center, as did India and Indonesia as well as large parts of Brazil. Africa cleaned itself out, top to bottom. Saudi Arabia and Oman and the ever-garish Dubai turned back to dust, or, more literally sand.

Meanwhile, humans in self-sufficient, healthy, sparsely populated places like Norway and Finland thrived, which is to say they continued pretty much as before.

The dystopians and survivalists had gotten it all wrong, as John had figured all along. He had witnessed no nuclear holocaust, no new ice age or global warming weather catastrophe. His distant relatives and close friends passed on from a plodding plague of commonplace illness, not one disease. Rather, a witch's brew of acronyms and abbreviations—C. diff, staph, strep, TB, ESBLs, MRSA and VRSA, and a half-dozen other microorganisms, along with the ever-present influenza—the eye of newt in every vile concoction—and its new sisters, the coronaviruses.

People who would have survived any bacterial illness or disease through a dose, maybe two, of antibiotics had dropped over and failed to rise. Then their caregivers fell, and the families of their caregivers, and so on through the populations.

Earth had suffered a plague of humans.

John had fallen ill early with a staph infection. Indeed, statistically he probably numbered among the last human beings to respond to antibiotics.

Healthy as a horse and lucky as a dog with two dicks, he had rarely needed an antibiotic. But when he needed it, it had performed. For almost every other human on earth, the drugs stopped performing their routine miracles, and people paid the piper at last.

It was interesting, he thought as he donned his iso-suit, that humans should have been the death of humanity. Ironic, too. Yet almost predictable. When the antibiotics stopped working and the drug companies could no longer concoct new varieties that could take on and defeat bacterial infection, individual human beings became the greatest threat to mankind. John reconsidered. Not specific human beings like those 20th-century mass murderers, Hitler, Stalin and Mao, but every human being turned into a threat. Instead of the banality of evil, he thought, mankind faced the banality of existence.

It was as though mankind had become allergic to itself.

Yes, that was it, he thought as he adjusted his stylish bicycle-style helmet, lowered the visor and flipped on the air filter. Human beings had turned into histamines that irritated one another to death.

Here again, the doomsday fanatics were proven wrong. Life did not just stop after a week or two. Civilization did not break down into chaos and anarchy. People did not just hit the road, as Colman McCarthy had written so graphically. Life actually went on much as before, at least for the strong and lucky ones who survived.

People like me still live in houses, own cars, hold jobs and pay taxes, John thought.

Granted the survivors had to muddle through the transition, and despite being mercifully brief, John allowed that it had been rough, too full of anticipated death and turmoil. Everyone had endured a certain amount of chaos as the death chain started in Bangladesh and central Africa, spread to India, China, and Indonesia. No place was exempt because every place in the world was connected by airplanes.

Refugees from the first outbreak—or perhaps breakdown would be a more accurate term for what happened—carried it to the safe havens, although the scientists warned they were merely hastening the inevitable. When the annual winter flu virus broke out, antibiotics simply failed to contain the second-hand bacterial infections that afflicted the weak. By the time governments documented the terminal spread, it was too late for quarantines, not that that stopped the political demagogues from closing borders and ending air travel forever.

In the developed nations, old folks' homes, asylums, prisons and hospitals, college dormitories, military barracks and apartment buildings—any place that encouraged or allowed crowds of people to live cheek by jowl—emptied first.

The early fearful survivors of the plague wiped out cats and dogs as species. People destroyed anything that was suspected of communicating disease. By the time researchers determined that humans, not animals, were the

culprits, we had killed most pets, John thought. Then too few humans existed to care for the remainder.

John shuddered as he recalled how rat populations exploded briefly, feeding on the multitudes of bodies that for a short time could not be disposed of quickly enough; then when the feast ended, the rats turned on themselves and solved that problem as well, with a little help from copious amounts of poison and a year-long open season on rat killing and burning.

Real life and death tragedies turned into TV reality series. “Antarctica Survivor” still drew huge audiences, including John, years after it had played out for real down to the last death. John wished his batteries were as die-hard as those that powered a live cam that still ran years later. That cam recorded the physical decay of the last survivor, the one who outlived all the others only to take her own life when she could no longer tolerate the loneliness.

That was the biggest downside for survivors – loneliness. Because the logical, simple solution to the plague of humanity was to eliminate human contact.

Thus, the isolation suits. The sealed cars. The shop-online-for-everything economy.

Survival rates for individuals living alone approached 100 percent, after allowing for natural attrition. For two people—a couple for instance, or a parent and child—survival dropped to 50 percent. When three cohabited, regardless of how careful they were, the rate barely exceeded one percent after a year. John

had never been great at math, but he certainly understood the mathematics of survival and extinction.

As deadly as humans were to one another, they were also inventive and, ultimately, survivors. They farmed out reproduction to laboratories, using random selection to avoid inbreeding. Rare, adventurous, or foolhardy couples continued the species the old-fashioned way, with the understanding that dad would leave when the new human arrived safely and free of disease.

Dad could still live close by, given the glut of empty housing. But close was not together. Despite the ubiquitous, always-on online social connections, some people locked themselves in their homes and just wasted away or ended it themselves.

John was the model survivor. He loved humanity, but disliked most people. When the Internet, that hoary old World Wide Web, first allowed people to communicate without actually being near people, he reveled in his new freedom, the freedom to ignore physical contact with his fellow man. When the government froze everyone in place, John was perfectly situated alone in his home in the outer Virginia suburbs.

His wife and a widow friend of theirs were ensconced in their weekend cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains west of the Shenandoah, locked in place when the government forbade unsterile travel and still riding their 50 percent odds of survival and warding off loneliness. John could, in fact, make the 90-mile trip to see her in person, but they both agreed it was not advisable, given the

odds, even with iso suits. Besides, the bloom had fallen off the rose of their marriage long ago.

Both of their children, Alex and Alicia, and their spouses had made incredibly lucky home purchases in the suburbs out West before the plague. John could not make the trip to visit them; they lived beyond the 200-mile safe-travel zone. But he kept up with regular Internet visits and drew comfort from their safety. Apparently they would be the last generation of Forenows; neither couple felt the human need to bear a child. John was all right with that. Besides, he had no choice.

Middle-class suburbia, like his Outer Springfield, was ideally suited for survival, once you shut down the Little League, youth soccer and hockey, the American Legion and church services. Cities, however, were ripe for destruction.

The poor died first—didn't they always?—contaminating one another like infected rats. The second die-off, and this was a surprise, took the super wealthy who discovered they could not do for themselves and relied on the infected to cook for, clean up after, and kill them.

Never a fan of cities, John thought it was only just that the arrogant city dwellers, laboratories of poverty and havens of wealth, emptied themselves literally. The high-density suburbs, ironically the solution to urban sprawl, shared the same fate as their urban cores, terminally connected to the cities by subways and express buses.

As the cities died, their true suburbs, with space between houses—and occupants—mostly survived, although with even greater gaps between occupants. John loved that.

Today as he sealed himself into his SUV, refilling the vehicle with filtered air, he reflected, traffic jams just no longer existed. Of course, the new auto-piloted vehicles—for the most part, one person loungers on wheels—drove themselves. Traffic accidents no longer occurred.

Oh, there was the occasional suicide, some fool flying his car off the road and into a tree or river or deep ravine. Even if the person survived the impact, the new laws allowed anyone—anyone—to waste the idiot.

Everyone packed guns. Often enough, John heard on the news of some desperate soul seeking human contact gunned down by the intended victim. The new authorities—Monitors, they were called—redefined assault as approaching within 10 feet of another person, iso-suited or not; they made it punishable by death. Immediately. No police intervention was required.

John and the other long-term survivors found they could still do anything they had ever done before the bio-safety laws took effect, just not with other people or at least not unprotected. If he wanted to ski, he could do that. (He didn't want to do that.) If he wanted to visit a museum or monster truck show—no to both—he could do that. Computers built on sudoku exclusionary logic kept iso-suited individuals moving safely in large crowds.

Cooperation took on a new meaning. It no longer assumed a coming together for a common purpose; now it involved unceasing communication and a little bit of planning.

People given to organized mingling—think of the suburbs here—kept up the organization but moved the mingling online. They set up neighborhood bulletin boards and scheduled outings. Not joint outings, of course. No, not at all. Individual outings.

For instance, John was allowed out from 8 a.m. to noon Mondays and Thursdays. (Schedules changed monthly so John got a morning, afternoon and evening outing every season.) During his outing period, he needed no special protection, no iso suit. Work gloves, of course, when he planned to mow the lawn, work in the garden or change the oil in car, but so long as everyone else kept their distance, he did not need any special survival gear. (His gun stayed with him always.)

Survival was mostly a solitary activity. You just scheduled your solitary activities—if you still felt the need—and because there were fewer people and less demand, you could usually get a slot during your allotted outing time.

John's cul-de-sac was a perfect example, he thought as he backed his car out of the garage. His neighborhood was actually crowded. Three of the 11 houses on the street were inhabited; none was contiguous, however. The population of his dead-end street included a Japanese couple, a single woman lawyer who worked for the Patent Office, and him. They scheduled communal

outdoor activities, mowing lawns in the summer and shoveling snow in the winter. It was mostly just like the old days, only at a safe distance.

That Japanese couple, they knew how to live together without contaminating one another. In fact, ever-paranoid Japan showed the way out of the human plague. They put everyone in masks and plastic gloves; that practice evolved into the creation of iso suits. The younger generation had already eschewed sex, the greatest danger of contamination, by the middle of the 2010s.

They designed the first comfortable isolation suits, the isos that everyone wore now. They were like loose-fitting wet suits. Americans, of course, had made them fashionable, adding colors, designs and pockets. Americans had transformed the bicycle helmet into an iso as well, cutting off the tail and adding a raft of computerized communications and avoidance technology. There was absolutely no reason to be taken by surprise in your iso suit. And if you were, you always had your gun.

For a very short while, the survivors had experimented using tasers to keep others at a safe distance, but that meant someone, or several someones, had to come out, check out the tasered person and either return them to home or use extremely valuable space in a rare medical facility. What was the point? If they would not cooperate, why should the rest of humanity put up with them? Handguns firing lethal shotgun-type shells turned anyone into an accurate shooter.

That was the government line, and John agreed. Actually, everyone agreed. It was necessary for survival.

The weak and the sentimental—John thought they were one and the same—came together every so often in touchy-feely conspiracies, preaching the gospel of actual physical togetherness. John thought it was shameful the way some middle-aged messiah would lure gullible young people into these short-lived cults.

He openly praised the government for not interfering with these quasi-religious gatherings. In America, the government still adhered to the original Bill of Rights, mostly. In a way, the touchy-feelies reinforced the wisdom and authority of the government; they were the exception that proved the value of the rule.

And in their own way, they were entertaining. Always on the lookout for sports replacements, the gaming industry ran lotteries and allowed people to bet on how long the conspirators would last and on the order of their deaths. You could make a lot of money on your bets, although suicides tended to keep things unpredictable and therefore interesting.

Gary, an online friend of John's, made a living writing algorithms to estimate how long a touchy-feely cult would last, considering its location, size, and physical practices. For instance, some lived together but essentially wore iso suits 24/7; they tended to develop skin diseases. Others, however, went whole-hog naked, using no isolation measures at all. They thrived and grew for a week

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to ten days, then the dying started and recruiting stopped. Within a month, the cult was dead, literally, but by then another would have sprung up somewhere else, claiming some type of religious exception or pioneering spirit.

In John's mind, it was all very silly because it was so predictable. Nonetheless, he used Gary's algorithms occasionally to pick up some extra cash.

Gary, meanwhile, won the lotteries regularly enough that organizers considered banning him until they realized people were willing to bet on his performance, too. Gary didn't care about the money, but he loved the attention and acclaim. His email in-box would be filled for weeks after an accurate prediction. Unfortunately, he could never leave his home because of the groupies who surrounded it.

If Gary was right more often than not, the conspiracy theorists and doomsday preppers turned out to be wrong, wrong, wrong. Government had not turned out to be the bad guy; it had been the savior. Not the military. No, the Army, Navy, and so on, succumbed early on, all of those people crammed together in unsanitary conditions. In the States, it was the CDC, the Public Health Service, FEMA, and the other agencies that actually planned and delivered health and recovery services that thrived and developed into the core of the new government.

Far from fading away, in fact, government became more essential, more dominant, more domineering. Ditto with big business, now run by the technologists and planners rather than the financial types. As the cities emptied

out, the mega corporations saw their markets dispersing so they did what any monopolist would do and started telling people where to live and how to live if they wanted to survive.

John's father, an old-fashioned carpenter, had a favorite saying: Good enough for government work. That could have become the motto of the government health-industrial complex that ran life: Just enough. Big enough to have a "critical mass" to make it profitable for farmers to sell and ship produce and meat, but not so populated as to force people to accidentally face one another—to touch, feel, smell—and contaminate.

Food, manufacturing, and shipping companies, in coordination with the health services, decided where people would live. Their principles were simple and unarguable: Survivable communities—sure-coms in the new lingo—had to be compact enough for government to keep up the infrastructure like water and sewage, fuel, power, and roads. And they needed a source of food within a few hundred miles, to keep shipping costs down. The private sector relocated the jobs to the sure-coms.

On the map of the United States, you would find sure-coms wherever two interstate highways met anywhere between I-80 in the north and I-40 in the south. Going west to east, places like Sacramento, Salt Lake City, Denver, Omaha, Kansas City, Des Moines, Springfield, Indianapolis, and Columbus became hubs of humanity.

Places with weather extremes—Arizona, New England, and anything north of, say, I-90—drained population like a sieve. Some survivalists planned to homestead those areas, but the climate seriously diminished the standard of living. Isolated areas like Alaska and Hawaii reverted to wilderness pretty quickly. Futurists doubted that humanity would survive a second generation there.

As John drove along the parkway toward the nearest enterprise zone—an EZ combination manufactory and mall—he marveled at how things were turning out. Mother Earth was fixing her worst problems. Overpopulation became a non-issue in less than six months. The hordes of old and unproductive people died, heading off the unpalatable but predictable need a broad-based program of euthanasia. Global warming, with 85 percent of the human race gone, was showing signs of reversing.

Some social problems were resolving themselves, too, although in a way that even a heartless cynic like John considered occasionally barbaric. The poor, the welfare-dependent, the aged and infirm—all gone. Unemployment quickly became a thing of the past. EZs offered more work than there were workers to do it. Even some of the materialism was fading as production focused on necessities.

A smaller population did not eliminate evil, or even simple bad behavior, but the necessary isolation of human beings from one another reduced the opportunities for crime or organized violence. It was just impossible to keep a criminal organization or army together and healthy.

Citizen-survivors provided most of the law enforcement, and justice tended to be terribly swift. Messing with the infrastructure, roads, power lines, refineries, water purification produced immediate retribution. Death was not instant upon arrest, but the jailers were volunteers and didn't change the sheets very often.

A lot of laws no longer mattered. John's car, like every car today, had the mandatory automatic pilot, which obeyed all traffic rules. No one needed to drive any more, but a few brave ones like John still enjoyed it. He knew how to disengage the autopilot and loved to push his giant SUV to 80 and 90 mph down the parkway where the speed limit, a relic of the old times, was a mere 50 mph.

The monitors would catch him, of course, and email him a citation, usually before he returned from wherever he had gone. He would ignore the summons, and the court would ignore his ignoring the law. A note would appear in the neighborhood news logs; that was all. No one was jailed for a traffic violation. If he caused an accident resulting in death or injury, the rescuing citizen would shoot him and mark his corpse for highway pickup.

It was just one more reason to remain safely in the cocoon of home and never leave. Swift justice created part of the thrill of getting out for John. So much could happen and have such serious consequences. The very notion produced goose bumps of anticipation for John.

Sex had gotten simpler as well, not that John thought much of that anymore. Each survivor was expected to take care of those needs himself or

herself, and the online porn channels catered to every taste, as they always had. Now, however, just the thought of two people coming into contact like that heightened the level of titillation. It went beyond explicit, beyond daring; it was absolutely reckless.

John had heard of underground facilities, places you could go and rent a sterile booth and peer through a glass window at a man and a woman, unprotected, standing talking, even touching. There were rumors that at some of these places the actors even kissed. John thought that was an obscene risk to take. How did the owners replenish the supply of actors and actresses?

If John and his wife had still lived together, he could see becoming one of the adventurous ones, slowly peeling off his wife's clothing, touching her private spots, putting his lips on hers, tasting her mouth. Ah, it was almost too much to bear, he thought, as he slowed his car to 40 so he could make the turn into the enterprise zone.

As EZs went, this was a small one, no more than 30 stores and small manufactories in two one-story buildings in the shape of an L. It had been built on the site of an old mall, so hundreds of parking spaces sat empty, slowly returning to nature. Three spaces per building was the usual allotment; this parking lot had room for 20 or even 30 per outlet.

Preoccupied by thoughts of his unclothed wife, John missed seeing the three teen-agers standing together where the two buildings met. Rebellious against their parents (or more likely a surviving parent) and society, they defied

convention by congregating, although they were all snugly sealed up in their look-alike iso suits.

Impressionable teens made up the bulk of followers of the touchy-feely conspiracies. They came from the generation that had experienced human contact at an impressionable age and were having trouble adapting without it. Some 97 percent of isolation law violations involved teens. They craved “naked” contact like a drug, the narcotic of the warm touch, the tender hug, the soft kiss, the gentle pat on human skin.

They just didn’t understand, this thin slice of a generation, that they might die out. The experts on the public policy programs that John tuned into all agreed, as a group they might not survive even though they had all the privileged advantages that isolation could bring. They had not matured to the point where they understood the need for the isolation laws; they still felt too many attachments, too many emotions. In short, they could be a threat.

Some had resorted to violence, violating the 10-foot assault barrier. Futurists warned that that kind of senseless behavior threatened the entire existence of humanity. In the public policy chat rooms, John argued that it was a minor threat, at best. Even in the old days, some teens did stupid things, but most did not. Humanity would be fine; individuals just had to be vigilant and ruthless in enforcing the assault zone. It was that simple.

John pulled into a front row slot just outside the Safe Giant supermarket chain store, the kind of parking place formerly reserved for the handicapped. Of

course, the store was expecting him. Locked doors discouraged unscheduled drop-ins. This Safe Giant was rated safe for up to six shoppers at a time. With that many, however, the store imposed paths up and down the aisles, starting in produce and ending at the far corner of the building in the pharmacy.

Climbing out of his SUV, John checked his helmet visor for the presence of other shoppers and was delighted to find none. An employee, most likely the trouble shooter for the entire EZ, was leaving the store via a side exit that would take her or him—the vibrant colors of the iso-suit suggested a her—into the next outlet.

All alone inside, he unlocked his helmet and lifted his visor, simply because he could. It was not as risky as he would have liked; his visor screen informed him that the air had been filtered and completely recirculated since the last customer left. But this was the daring part of every outing that he relished. Let others cower; he would poke his finger in the eye of fate.

Besides, it was almost perfectly safe. He was, after all, alone.

John could smell the fresh clean scent of fish somewhere nearby. What a joy. He would buy fresh fish, salmon or trout, and grill outdoors on the barbecue tonight. The Japanese couple in his neighborhood who had the evening outing had not scheduled anything; he would borrow 15 minutes of their time and enjoy a spring barbecue. Ah, this was living.

John reveled in the freedom of wandering the grocery store aisles. He saw so many choices that he kept forgetting about. Once you got into the habit of

simply repeating your food delivery order week after month after year, you forgot delicacies like Oreo cookies and imported beer. Bass Ale, he thought. I'll get a six-pack of Bass; that would dictate the trout over salmon for dinner.

He pushed his metal shopping cart up and down the aisles, back-tracking from time to time just because he could, picking up chocolate cream-filled cupcakes in the bakery section and cardboard-rigid three-for-\$5 'deluxe' frozen pizzas. Neither was good for him, but at his age, he had stopped worrying about that.

You only live once, he said to himself as he imagined a lunch of nuked cardboard pizza with rehydrated vegetables and specks of sausage; add cupcakes and a beer for dessert for a totally adventurous meal.

As he strolled through the frozen foods section, he thought of the idiots who had had themselves cryogenically frozen. The future would not be about extreme changes in technology; it would be evolutionary, just as in the past. Evolutionary, not revolutionary, change.

An alert beeped in John's helmet. Another shopper had entered the store; no, two. Probably an older couple like himself who did not have to be at work. His helmet dinged a third time. After the calm, he thought, the deluge. It had been fun while it lasted. He should prep his helmet for a reseal.

Five aisles away, the solo shopper was moving with determination in his direction; the couple had headed straight to the back of the store where the milk and baked goods filled the shelves.

John didn't really need anything more so he decided to put a little more distance between himself and the other shopper. It was instinctive now, like breathing. He skipped the frozen desserts and ice cream aisles—the stores still managed to provide enough options to require full aisles—and headed toward the pharmacy deeper into the store.

He checked his visor and amplified the volume on his helmet to the level where he could hear the wheels squeaking on the other shoppers' carts. They maintained their distance from one another, one at the front of the store, the other at the back now moving along the meat section, but in their haste to make their predetermined purchases, they were ignoring the rules of courtesy by closing in on him.

They had arrived so suddenly, and truth be told, he had been enjoying himself so much that he still had not sealed his helmet. With the other shoppers now well within 50 feet of him, although still separated by aisles of freezers, he had to keep moving to maintain a respectable distance.

As he fumbled with his helmet settings, John noticed that the couple in the meat section and the solo in frozen foods—he identified them by their locations—had slowed although they seemed to be inching closer.

Perhaps he was just getting worked up over nothing. He had not been out often enough to feel comfortable in a crowd. Probably the other shoppers hadn't either and were just realizing they were headed toward a social collision.

Just his luck. Three geezers all headed toward the pharmacy where it looked like he was penned in. Well, he had to stop now, right in the middle of an aisle of pain killers. He had to seal his helmet. The solo and duo were about to pass his aisle any second now.

Of all the times for his hands to get clammy inside his gloves. This is crazy. I can't even send them an avoidance warning signal, he thought, not until the helmet is sealed. They think I'm buttoned up just like them. Crud!

John's fingers fumbled with the one clasp that activated the sealer, the filtration blower, the alert signal, everything. He was going to look like a fool, a dangerous old fool who was not sealed up in a public place. This was going to warrant more than a traffic summons from the monitors.

Over his shoulder, John saw the solo shopper turn the corner, deliberately entering his aisle, violating all social protocols. More than one person would be in trouble here, although his own violation was the more grievous. Why wouldn't that clasp fasten?

This was not an old person. The iso-suit was alive with zig zags of neon colors. A teen-ager. What was it doing out at this hour?

John stopped playing with the clasp and looked the opposite way down the aisle planning his escape. There stood the duo with an empty shopping cart. Wearing teen-aged colors.

What was this? Some kind of new high school joke? A prank? Harassment of the elderly?

He looked back over his shoulder at the solo. It was a girl. She had not just opened her visor, she had removed her helmet and she was walking right toward him. Oh, my God, a touchy-feely, he thought.

John reached for the strap on his shoulder holster, hoping to free his pistol in time. A noise in front of him distracted him for an instant. The other two. A boy and another girl, also without helmets.

Suicide terrorists. He had heard whispers of such things. Kids who got their kicks, their final kicks, by exposing themselves to strangers. They invariably died from the mutual contamination, but so did their victims.

My God!

And he had made it so simple. His helmet was unsealed. They would not even need to tear at his gloves or iso-suit. They could just breathe on him.

John's instincts took over. He shoved his loaded shopping cart at the boy-girl duo and spun around with his fist raised to meet the solo.

"Sir, don't be afraid. This is natural, this is how we are meant to be with each other," she said just before his right fist smashed into her face. A jagged tooth punctured his glove. Contamination of the worst kind. The mouth, full of foul germs.

A heavy weight landed on his back, forcing him to his knees. One of the duo had made it past his shopping cart. It was the girl, and she was pushing his helmet off from behind.

Why would someone do this?

"Old man, how do you like this world you made for us?" the girl on his back said.

"I didn't make this world," he called out, his words muffled by the helmet peeling off his head. "I'm a victim, too."

He tried to fight back, but it was impossible to move on his knees. His helmet was almost all the way off. He couldn't see the girl he had struck, but he could hear her and feel her. A decade ago, it would have been an old man's delight.

"Don't hurt him," the girl in front of him said. "We're not here to hurt him."

"He tried to run us down with his cart," the girl hanging on John's back said.

"But I was the one he hit," the first female voice said. It sounded softer than usual without the technical intervention of their helmets. "I will deal with him."

Then his helmet popped off, and he could see the girl. A pretty one, with short blond hair and a ring through one nostril. The left side of her mouth leaked blood where the skin had broken when John hit her.

"Leave me alone. You'll never get away with this," John said, kneeling up straight as the girl on his back let go of him.

"We're not here to hurt you," the bloodied girl said.

"Of course you are," John said. "You violated the 10-foot zone. That's assault."

She suddenly looked frustrated and did not respond.

John used the pause to finally release his gun and aim it at her.

“Now, all of you. Get away or I’ll shoot,” John said. He backed against a shelf so he could see all three of the children.

My God, he thought. They are just children. He waved the gun back and forth, from the couple to the single girl.

“Move together,” he said.

The boy-girl couple joined their friend.

“Now what?” said the boy.

John didn’t know what. He should have shot them already. That’s what the training videos taught. Shoot first. Always shoot first. Any time anyone violated the privacy zone unasked, you drew your weapon and fired. People did it every day. This should be easy. But these were just young teens, kids. Was he supposed to just kill a kid because he could?

“Sir,” the bloodied girl said, “you have to flip the safety off. Otherwise it won’t fire.”

John stared at the gun in his hand, not believing this was happening.

“You know the monitors will find you. If you resist them, they will shoot you on the spot. And if you don’t resist, they’ll put you in some kind of jail until they do shoot you as a lesson.”

John’s hand trembled.

“We know,” the lead girl said. “You have to shoot us.”

“Oh, no,” the other girl said, breaking down in tears. “Why don’t they understand?”

“It’s all right, Corey. Josh, hold her,” the first girl said.

The boy held her to his shoulder and patted her head.

I did that, John recalled. I did that for a girl once. That’s what we did; we held each other. Emotions, horrible, vulnerable emotions flooded through him. We used to do this.

“My name is Eve,” the girl said. “What’s yours?”

“John.”

“John, you know what you have to do. We made a pact,” she said, indicating the other two. “If we could not convince you, we would all die.”

“Convince me of what? Your insanity?” John said.

“No. That death might be better than living the rest of our lives alone.”

“You’re crazy. You don’t understand. Humans spread bacteria; we can’t fight it. It will kill us. You kids look smart. You should understand that,” he said.

“If we can’t live like human beings, we choose to die. At least we will have experienced a little of what life is like together,” Eve said.

She moved toward him; he flinched back against the grocery shelves.

“Don’t be afraid, John. I’m not going to touch you,” Eve said.

She touched the barrel of his gun and moved it to the soft mound over her heart.

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“I should be brave, but I’m not,” she said. “I’m going to close my eyes. Then, you shoot. Okay?”

Horror washed over him.

Yes. That’s right. He must shoot them. They were totally wrong; he was totally in the right. The law, society, civilization, survival was on his side. No one would question him. The monitors would probably praise him and maybe even forgive his transgression with the open visor. He could do it.

“No. No, I won’t,” he said, dropping the weapon to his side.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a debit card and handed it to Eve.

“The PIN is 9-8-7-6. Go buy something to wash your face and cover your cut,” he said to Eve.

The three children stared at him.

“Go on. Kill yourselves if you want. That’s your right, but I’m not going to kill you just because I can,” he said.

He holstered his gun, pivoted toward the front of the store and slowly walked away, muttering to himself.

“I won’t do something just because I can. I won’t.”

The End.