

The day began like any of a thousand others, with Sara's voice summoning him from bed, while she went about the preparation of breakfast.

Slowly, Ben slung his feet onto the floor, and walked across to the bathroom. His movements were sluggish, for the events at the plant on the previous day had drained his stamina. Bloodshot eyes stared back at him as he leaned toward the mirror and began the daily routine of shaving off the dark, thick bristles.

A mourning dove cooed to its mate in the canyon below the house. It was a soft, pleasing sound, one that was rapidly becoming an oddity in the heavily congested stretch of land that bordered on the Pacific, extending southward from Los Angeles. The gentle, sweet cooing had become such an integral part of the beginning of each morning that Ben had wondered about the eventual time when houses would be thrown up on the sides of the canyon, driving the birds away. When they moved, he and Sara would search for another quiet spot still near a natural habitat, unspoiled by giant earth-moving machines and the strange glass and wood affairs that were designed by eager, far-seeing architects.

A strong aroma of coffee drifted into his nostrils, luring him into the kitchen. "Ah, good morning, sweetheart." He placed a kiss on his wife's neck, lifting her long blond hair away.

The tall, lovely woman returned his show of affection by brushing his chin with her lips, while never taking her eyes off the omelet. She flashed him a tender look of concern. "You're tired, dear. But, then, you didn't rest well."

"No. I had trouble unwinding after the staff meeting last night," he said as he ambled toward the table.

"I'd wanted to wait up for you, but as it got closer to midnight, I finally had to go to bed. Suddenly I need so much sleep."

"You shouldn't have waited at all. I told you I'd be late." He picked up his glass of juice and quickly drained it. Then he noticed the glass by her plate, and its burgundy colored liquid. With his back to her, and wondering about the unusual breakfast drink, he asked, "Did you go in for your examination yesterday?"

"Yes. I had a one o'clock appointment, remember?"

He vaguely recalled she had told him that, but the previous day was such a jumble of events that his wife's visit to the physician had been pushed far aside in his mind. "Well?" he asked, as he turned to her. "What did he say?"

She lifted the omelet onto a dish and moved toward the table. "He said I shouldn't have any trouble carrying this one if I'm careful."

"Careful?" he asked quizzically. "What does that mean?"

"Follow his advice, I think," she answered as she took a seat. He was still standing, absorbed in what she would say. "Did he have any advice about why you had the miscarriage?"

She shrugged, "He couldn't know, Ben. He wasn't the attending physician. Besides, he says there are dozens of reasons why pregnancies are naturally aborted."

Ben lifted the glass of deep red fluid to his nostrils. The scent of wine wafted through the air. Puzzled, he asked, "Is this what you're drinking for breakfast?"

She looked at him out of huge brown eyes, and smiled warmly, "Is there something wrong with it?"

Ben scrutinized the high cheek bones and the rich full lips of his wife. Her head was regally tilted to the side, letting the shining blond hair fall like a curtain behind her as she awaited his answer. "It doesn't seem to me that drinking this stuff in the morning is going to help you with the baby one bit, Sara."

That she had poured it at all was a shock to him. Sara was familiar with the best wines, the gourmet drinks, but she had never cultivated a taste for them. Ben recalled his first visit to the home of her parents. Her father possessed a lavishly-equipped wine cellar, the pride of the older man. Yet, Sara was totally unconcerned with its stock. "Is this a fetish or something—a craving that you suddenly have?" he asked as he set the glass down.

"He prescribed it for a woman during pregnancy? He must be insane, Sara. You'll have to find another obstetrician," Ben said. "You'll never have a child if you listen to some nut like that."

Sara reached out for his arm and pulled him toward his chair. "But you don't understand, Ben. The doctor says that small amounts of alcohol will slow contractions of the uterus. He thinks premature contractions could be the reason why I lost the first one."

"You're only three months along—that seems pretty early to worry about contractions," he said as he watched her pour the coffee. She did it gracefully, as she did everything.

Smiling, she pushed the toast toward him. "You wouldn't allow the doctor to tell you how to run White Water, dear. I would imagine that your qualifications in medicine are as limited as his in nuclear energy. So perhaps it would be best if we did this his way." Shifting the conversation, she asked, "What were your visitors like yesterday?"

"Who? The senators? They were all right, I suppose. One, the older fellow, a short, snoopy little guy, was kind of irritating. He came on fast—interrupting to ask something, then switching off to another interest of his—without waiting for the rest of the group. For a while I thought that he was being too curious, like he had some ulterior purpose for being there. But then I decided it was my imagination. The other one was a nice guy."

"Did you find out why they were there?" she asked.

"Visiting—or at least that's what I was told. You know how politicians are, always trying to get a finger in the pot." He was reluctant to tell her about the flare up over the shutdown report, and about his earlier suspicion that the senators were inspecting the facility as a result of a request from the Southern California Society of Environmentalists.

"They must have been there quite a long while," she said.

Ben knew that she had obliquely referred to his arriving home at a very late hour. "Actually, they weren't. I had anticipated them spending much longer in the plant, but Senator McCauley seemed anxious to be on the way."

She was silent, apparently waiting for him to explain his delay more fully.

"After the politicians left, Pettengill decided we should have one of his infamous meet and confer sessions. On the spur of the moment he decided on it. When I phoned you I had no idea of being as late as I was."

Raising her eyes to his, she replied, "It must have been a very important meeting."

He had no wish to assuage her curiosity by explaining that the S.C.S.E. letter had filtered down to Pettengill, and the long hours spent in conference were in regard to that. "Routine business, just routine," he said off-handily.

"What are your plans for the day?" he asked. "A meeting of your sorority alumni club, isn't it?"

"No, I'm not going to those gatherings anymore. Didn't I tell you about the last one I attended?" she asked.

He shook his head, "I don't recall. But you didn't say you weren't going back."

"Well, no matter. I'm not. It's vacationing all the time."

"Videos?"

"Yes, home made smart phone videos. Sue Anna's vacation to Hawaii, and Joan's last trip to Europe, and Debbie's three children in their pool—and those because they haven't been able to afford to go anywhere since they built it. It's just all so inane."

"You're bored with them."

"Yes, I suppose. But what I really would like is to find them on some subjects that are meaningful, instead of discussing the color of tea napkins. Just once."

"Whatever you think, Hon. I'm sure you have every right to be bored with that group." Having other things on his mind, he glanced at the clock above the sink. "I've got to go. Must get a backlog of paperwork done before this day ends."

"I'd like that," she answered softly.

For the briefest second they stood close with their arms around each other. His very tall, lank frame dwarfed her as he held her to him. Her wan, porcelain skin was in marked contrast to his dark complexion. Releasing her, he turned and walked out the door.

It was a beautiful morning. Later, there would be smog creeping in to blanket the sky; but as yet, it was a day free of the troublesome, tainted air. Out to the right the ocean was clearly visible, a sailboat bobbed gently up and down on the calm blue water.

Edging the German-made sports car deftly into the parking slot, Ben grabbed his briefcase, and with a dozen long strides, stepped into his office in the front of the control room.

At 8:28 am the huge reactor was already underway, splitting the U235 atoms and producing tremendous amounts of heat. Ben smiled to himself, the self-satisfied smile of a man who had complete understanding of the complex working of this monstrous unit. It gave him a comfortable feeling to be in this dust-free room, with control boards and buttons, and with the ocean less than six-hundred feet away.

Donning his lab coat, he picked up a clipboard and began making his rounds as he routinely did each working day. This would be the last round he'd make for a month. His vacation began at the end of the day. He casually nodded to his colleagues as he checked his readings against previous records and dutifully noted them in the proper spaces. The main control center was a sterile, ultra-modern room, its control consoles in white and the men in white lab uniforms. All indicators, buttons, and levers for the normal and emergency operations of both the reactor and the generating plants were contained within these four, heavily-insulated walls. The plant represented the finest in engineering design, the ultimate in construction. The facility was built on the beach because of the need for vast amounts of cooling water for the reactor. No other spot had been feasible in arid southern California. The area was laced with old fault zones, the San Andreas fault itself being nearby, but the structures were created to withstand the most violent earthquake.

The reactor was housed apart from the control center. Dome covered, the reactor building was equally well constructed to take the shaking's from the earth without being split or damaged. Inside, the reactor core and its thousands of fuel rods were protected from the incoming coolant by metal jackets within their steel reactor vessel, which was completely encased by a thick, steel dry well.

It was an extremely efficient operation and Ben appreciated that efficiency as much as any physicist. He wasn't blind to the potential dangers of nuclear energy, but he knew that so long as the machinery functioned properly, and there was no human error, and no accidents, then there was no way that the enormous quantities of radioactive poisons could escape into the environment. True, every two years the fuel rods would have to be removed and transported to a reprocessing plant for cleaning, removal of plutonium and burial of the remaining radioactive wastes; but again, it was simply a matter of everyone doing his job properly. It was over a year ago that White Water had been refueled last. Ben remembered getting a queasy sensation in his stomach as the diesel truck, groaning, had pulled onto the freeway with its heavy load of radioactive fuel rods en route to the reservation. But the two-year accumulation of radiation was well contained. Nothing short of sabotage could release its deadliness to the air.

Glancing at the clock Ben noticed that the time was 8:42 am. Precisely at that moment, the cement floor began to slide under his feet. His head snapped around in surprise as he instinctively reached out to steady himself, grasping onto the edge of a console. His feet were firmly planted on the floor, perhaps twenty-four inches apart, yet he felt like he was on a large skate board as his body was thrown first forward, then backward. Attempting to regain his balance, Ben dropped his papers and held firmly to the console with both hands.

Across the room, Michael Percy had been cast broadside into the front of the master control board. Scrambling to latch onto something stable, Mike's hands frantically waved over the instrument panel. "Jesus Christ!" he yelled, "what's happening?"

"Mike," Ben shouted, "it's an earthquake! But watch it! Get your hands away from that panel!"

He didn't think Mike heard him. The man seemed to be yelling, his mouth wide open and his face contorted in shock.

Desmond Anderson, the third member of the crew was lying partially under a desk, his back and feet exposed, but his head securely protected.

In what seemed like minutes but was actually less than sixty seconds, the shaking ended. California experienced numerous earthquakes each year and, as would be later determined, this one was not particularly forceful. To the three men frozen in the control

Finally tearing his hands loose, the knuckles as pale as the console to which they had been firmly attached, Ben switched on the scanning screen to the reactor building. No one was in sight. Strange, he thought, there should be someone down there. Snatching up the intercom speaker, he began calling, expecting any minute to see white coated figures moving about. Ben's absorption in the eerily empty picture before him was interrupted by a shout from Mike.

"Ben! There's something wrong! The reactor temperature's rising!"

"Shut it off! Drop all the control rods." Ben's command was instinctive as he wheeled away from the screen and strode over to the master control board. He quickly checked the instruments for the cause of the problem, eyeing the temperature-gage needle. Mike was seated at the other end of the board intent on the switches in front of him. About to speak to him, Ben was distracted by the crackling sound of static from the intercom switching on. Then a voice came through the speaker, a voice filled with fear.

"A coolant pipe has cracked! We're getting flooded with water over here!"

Ben spun toward the screen in time to see the floor of the reactor building take on a shiny, liquid glaze.

"That may be hot!" he bellowed, grabbing the microphone. "Get out of there!"

Turning aside, he roared, "Des, throw the emergency coolant switch! Fast, man!"

Without coolant, the interior of the reactor core would quickly become overheated. As the intense heat built up to a sufficient level, fuel rods would melt and the fission process would cease, with tremendous damage to the reactor. Theoretically.

Two orders had been issued by the supervisor, both of which should bring the problem under control.

"Done!" Des answered as his fist pushed the switch that shot the stand-by coolant into the superheated core.

"Ben, there's something wrong! The control rods won't go down!" cried Mike as he worked the release buttons. In response to Ben's first command, he had quickly located the buttons that, when pressed, would lower all of the cadmium control rods into the reactor core. Those rods absorbed the excess neutrons and were the brakes for the fission process. Without them, the reaction within the core would continue unchecked, and an unchecked nuclear reaction would result in a great explosive force building up until it was released in a violent discharge.

"I don't understand it! The red lights are on!" bellowed Mike. "And I can't get these damned rods to drop," he said as he feverishly alternated the buttons.

"What do you mean, they won't go down? Why not? They've never failed to before!" Ben shouted.

"They won't! They won't. I think I may have accidentally hit a button during the quake and that raised the ones that had been down."

"Do you mean there aren't any controls in there? Jesus Christ! If we don't get those rods to drop we're going to have a blowout." Red lights flashed all across the panel as Ben stood there frantically mashing buttons.

"Ben, the temperature is still rising in the core," said Mike excitedly.

"What? Still rising? Isn't the coolant...?"

"The emergency coolant must be evaporating," Des yelled out. "The fuel rods can't take too much more before they start melting, Ben!"

"At least the god damned reaction will stop once the fuel rods melt!" said Ben, reassuringly.

But the situation was becoming critical to the reactor. The men, relying on what they knew to be the best opinions of certain scientists, were convinced that a burn-out would destroy the reactor but would prevent a nuclear explosion. There was no reason not to believe this since a burn-out was commonly touted as a built-in safety factor with the reactor core. Still, a burn-out would be an extremely costly occurrence for the company.

"Des, keep an eye on the temperature gages! Mike, come with me," snapped Ben.

Taking his assistant, Ben left the consoles and passed into a smaller, circular cubicle. "There's one other chance for dropping those control rods." By now they were in front of a gray metal console with the face closed off. "There's a lever that's used during refueling...maybe it'll jar them loose."

More damage was done than was obvious to Ben, in fact. The sudden shifting of the earth beneath the plant had caused a hairline fracture to traverse the top of the reactor dome. This meant damage to the pressure suppression system.

"It's no use," Ben said dejectedly. "The damned thing is jammed."

"Ben, what are we going to do? Without those rods...?"

Ben ignored the question and ran back into the master control room. Des looked up as he entered.

"It's still going up, Ben! That core is an inferno!" said Des.

The scanning screen showed the reactor building to be empty of people. The crew working around the reactor had exited at Ben's order. Now the scene was a flooded, innocent-appearing chamber with its gigantic steel reactor vessel and metal catwalks overhead. In the center of the vessel was the multi-ton core of radioactive fuel, and it was quickly, with deadly accuracy, speeding toward a monumental release of its immense powers.

Realizing that the members of the crew had escaped from the reactor area, Ben turned his attention to the board again. In the absence of liquid coolant, internal temperatures within the reactor continued to rise. Although the theory had never been tested, Ben just assumed that the very worst that could happen would be the melt-down of the overheated radioactive fuel rods. That would in turn shut down the chain reaction of splitting atoms.

Although some skeptical scientists had warned of the possibility of the melt-down actually resulting in a pooling of molten radioactive substances in the bottom of the reactor, the consensus from most nuclear physicists was that even with such a pooling, there would be insufficient fissionable matter present for the formation of a critical mass. Relying on these conclusions, Ben considered the danger of an explosion from the nuclear source to be almost non-existent.

Having exhausted his efforts at forcing the control rods to drop down inside the over-heating core, Ben returned to the temperature gauges. The needles were rapidly climbing to their limits on the dials, A melt-down would completely destroy the reactor, but at least the damage would be confined to that area, and the remainder of the plant would be spared.

Ben stood, watching the needles as he ground one fist against his other palm. Mike stood behind him, and together they heard Des throw the switch that would release the second stand-by emergency coolant. This was their last resort to forestall the meltdown.

"Is anything happening?" yelled Des from his console, hoping Ben would announce a temperature reduction, showing that coolant had entered the core.

"No!" shouted Ben as the needles continued their upward swing. It was apparent that the water which should cool the reactor was not getting to it.

Mike grabbed Ben's arm. "Why hasn't it burned out?" he asked as his fingers clamped into flesh. "That's what it was supposed to do, wasn't it, Ben? Melt, then die out?"

Ben nodded dumbly. "Yeah. But I don't think it's going to do that. Look at the Gage!" The needles had reached their limits. They could go no higher.

Des was suddenly behind them. "It's not burning out!" he shouted. "The reaction isn't stopping, Ben."

Mike wheeled away from them and broke into a run toward the door yelling, "I'm getting out of here. This thing is going to blow!"

For a split second Ben took his eye off the dial to glance at the clock overhead. It was 8:46 am. In the next instant an unearthly hell exploded through White Water.

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Ben thought he had been dreaming of the pain, but when he opened his eyes it became a reality. It seared his body, seeming to touch each nerve as it sliced through the tissues. And it worsened with each inhalation that was more than the briefest gasp, tearing at his lungs with every effort of breath. Slowly, carefully, he blinked, the dryness of his eyeballs causing a raspy sound that carried to his brain. It was funny that he should hear that when all else was quiet.

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The next time he lifted his lids the sun had gone far past its zenith and was beginning its descent. Was this possible, that no one had attempted a rescue mission? Aware that the reactor had exploded sometime before nine o'clock and he had lain there for hours without anyone making an attempt to help, Ben was convinced that aid would never come.

Gazing overhead, he saw that the day had become smoggy. It was the kind of gray foggy haze that always accompanied a temperature inversion. A high pressure system had trapped the heat near the earth's surface, forcing the industrial and auto wastes of smog to blend with whatever other particles might be present in the lower atmosphere. The pollutants, including the radioactive fallout, would hang suspended low over the area until winds blew them away, or rains carried them to the ground. An inversion was most deadly when confined by a natural basin, as in Los Angeles. Open to the sea on one side and closed off by mountains on the other, the Los Angeles basin was sure to lock in the poisoned clouds.

Tugging painfully, Ben began working his body from under the chunks of rubble. Discovering that his left arm was tightly wedged beneath a slab of building material, he concentrated on getting the limb free. At last it was exposed, and to his dismay he found that about midway between the elbow and wrist, the forearm had been turned around. The palm faced out instead of in. Grimacing, feeling jagged ends of bones scraping flesh, he gingerly lifted the wretched hand up and folded it into his shirt, close to his chest. Clearing the last of the rubble away from his legs, he cautiously tested each one and learned that they were capable of motion.

The stillness was a foreboding of things to come. Not even the slapping of ocean waves could be heard. The plant had been destroyed. Piles of metal and concrete littered the grounds. Warped, twisted bodies of automobiles were scattered over the land. The nine o'clock crew had been arriving at the moment of the explosion. Normally there would have been thirty-two people within the plant; now, Ben saw no one.

The stupendous release of energy had virtually flattened White Water Nuclear Power Plant. Its personnel were as ragged and ripped as its reactor. None escaped who were in their cars or defenselessly walking across the parking lot or on the grounds.

Disoriented, Ben pulled his painful body to its feet. It had become obvious that having alone miraculously survived the blast, he would have to try to help himself. He laboriously reached inside his jacket pocket for his smart phone. The screen was black. He punched the power button. It lit up. He dialed 911. Nothing. Nothing happened. He brought up the district office number. Nothing. There was no signal – not for sending or receiving.

Home. Home was his goal, but the direction to take was the problem. Spying the chain link fence in the distance, he started toward it in hopes that upon reaching it, he could continue eastward until reaching the freeway. Then, with luck, he would be picked up and carried home.

Once he was moving, the pain became less noticeable; not less intense, but less noticeable. Complete concentration was required to avoid the hunks of wreckage that lay in his path. Only strong-willed determination to live forced him to place one sluggish, bone-weary foot after the other.

The fence, the dully metallic, heavy wire wall that enclosed the White Water facility was still standing. He could see it more clearly as he lifted his glance. A huge dark blob seemed trapped in the mesh of wire a short distance above the ground. The blob became no more distinct, however, as he laboriously closed the distance between himself and the fence. Then finally he was there, directly abreast of the elongated mass. By now it assumed human characteristics. Two arms thrown back in surrender. It was Mike Percy.

Mike had evidently been running across the parking lot after dashing out of the control room. His body was horizontal to the ground and about two feet above it. He had been blown into the chain link fence with such force that the metal links had sunk deeply into his back, firmly attaching him by the meaty shoulders, buttocks, and thighs. The charred features were barely recognizable.

Ben stared in horror. Unwilling to leave the corpse grotesquely snagged by the fence, he determined to pull it loose until it could fall to the ground. Suppuration and body fluids had plastered the clothing to the body. Selecting a hem of the dead man's shirt, Ben closed his fingers weakly around it. The fabric crumbled into ash. Steeling himself, he placed his hand behind the nape of the neck and gave a short tug. The skin slipped. Indeed, the skin and the prickly hairs at the base of the skull slipped off into his hand, adhering its wet, yellowish pink tissue to his own flesh. With revulsion, he disgustedly slung his hand, throwing the sticky mass aside. It was no use. He simply didn't have the stomach to pull Mike free. The heat had literally cooked the body to the point where flesh was beginning to fall from the bone.

Stumbling along the length of fence, nearly blind with pain and fatigue, he finally found the opening. The journey to the freeway, less than two hundred yards, seemed interminable. Yet somehow he made it. His reasoning faculty had not been functioning well, for he'd thought that once he made it out to the highway, he'd be picked up and carried to safety. Now the six lanes were before him, stretching endlessly in opposite directions. But there was not a single vehicle, not a single evidence of people, in sight. Nothing moved. There were no birds in the sky and no glittering reflections from airplanes up in the gray overhead. It was almost as if he were the last man on earth.

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"The Disquiet Survivors of the Nuclear Catastrophe"

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The following is an excerpt from the novel "#BETRAYAL"

#### PROLOGUE

The white walls and the white linens surrounded her. The bareness of the room was overwhelming, not cozy and comforting. For the moment she was alone. Sara watched the clock click away and wondered if these were the last moments of her life. She wanted some more morphine but was afraid if she increased the dosage she wouldn't wake up again. She fingered the pump. The pain hit her with an intense wave.

As the relaxing drug flooded her body she floated away. Help, she was too young for this! And she thought back.....Sara thought back to her first baby that had been born after the devastating San Mirado nuclear catastrophe. When her child was delivered they had wrapped it in a towel and given it to her to hold. They thought she didn't notice. But she did – she could feel that it was too small and too thin. Ben's baby – their son. Delivered in the presence of Dr. Bernard Parsons.

It had been the nuclear catastrophe that could never happen. Her then husband, Ben, had been the supervisor of the local nuclear power plant. He never failed to assure her how safe the nuclear plants were, that they had thought of everything in the planning. They were fail safe. They had thought of everything except the earthquake that had frozen the control rods. The control rods that couldn't be lowered into the core of the nuclear reactor to slow down the speed of the atoms splitting. The control rods that were necessary to keep the reactor from overheating. The reaction kept increasing in speed, releasing more and more heat as more and more atoms split, until a terrible explosion of pent up energy and overheated gases blew the place apart, causing a meltdown and a tremendous release of radiation.