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## Shortwaves

By

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The floorboards shuddered and the windows rattled as another fireball rumbled through the sky.

"Get away from the window, Sam!" Karen yelled, hugging Josie close.

"That is so cool!" Sam said, staring out an ice-glazed window.

"Sam, get away from the window," David scolded.

The cabin stopped shaking.

"Mommy what is it?" Josie cried.

Sam stepped back from the frosty glass. "It went over that mountain."

"It's okay, sweetie," Karen said, but Josie continued to cry. Karen looked to David for help. David didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to comfort his wife and daughter.

"I'll check the radio," David said, sliding the backpack off his aching shoulders and heading for the far corner of Grandpa's one-room mountain cabin.

The ham radio, an ancient monster of dials and analog readouts and switches, sat cold and gray on a table in the corner. He imagined Grandpa — or the mental picture of Grandpa he'd constructed from looking at faded photos and listening to the gravelly voice on Dad's ham radio — bundled in blankets and hunched over the silver microphone and turning black

dials and flipping switches. He'd always wondered about the people Grandpa talked to on the radio, but mostly he'd wondered why Dad had talked to Grandpa only once a year. On New Year's Eve, no less – yesterday, coincidentally. Now, David wondered about the significance of New Year's, why Dad and Grandpa had chosen the last day of the year and why not Grandpa's birthday or Christmas. He remembered how he'd made Grandpa a Christmas ornament at school one day, only to bring it home and watch Dad throw it in the trash.

"Grandpa doesn't believe in Christmas," Dad had said, and he would say no more.

"You're getting heavy, sweetie," Karen said, setting the wailing Josie down in the middle of the room.

"Oh shut up, Josie," Sam groaned, removing his own backpack.

"Sam!" Karen snapped. "Be nice to your sister."

"Mom, she's been crying since the car broke down!"

"David?" Karen said.

"Sam, be nice to your sister," David said. "Come help your dad with this piece of...thing." David wriggled out of his parka and threw it on top of his backpack, then sat down at the table where Grandpa had probably spent the last twenty years of his life.

"She's tired and hungry. Let's see what we have to eat, huh J?" Karen said as she lifted Josie to her feet and led her toward the "kitchen," which consisted of a wall of cabinets over a long countertop. A sink was nestled in the center beneath a frost-caked window, and next to it sat the oven and electric stove top. At the end of the countertop, in the corner of the cabin, crouched a claw-footed bathtub. No curtain. This was going to be a treat.

"Can we get heat in here, David?" Karen said, flipping through cabinets.

"Hey Dad, what's down there?" Sam asked. He pointed at the trapdoor that led down to the cellar.

"I don't want you going down there," Karen said. "David, what about heat?"

"One thing at a time!" David said, noting the cloud of breath that souged from his mouth.

"Well, it's pretty cold in here," Karen said.

David stood up from the radio and clapped his son on the back. "It's all yours." Sam grinned and sat down in the radio operator's chair.

With a quick glare at Karen, who simply stared tiredly back at him, David grabbed his parka and stomped to the door. "We'll be fine," he said. "I'll build a fire, and I remember checking the stuff in the pantry when I was here in June. The expirations weren't for another year or so."

"Let's see what kinds of good food Grandpa left us, Josie!" Karen said, pulling a box of granola bars from a cabinet. She popped it open, pulled a few bars out, then replaced one. "Can't have the peanut butter. Do you want oats and honey or apple cinnamon?"

"Peabut nutter," Josie said.

"You can't have peanut butter, sweetie," Karen said. "Oats and honey or apple cinnamon?"

"Why can't she have peabut nutter?" David asked.

"She's allergic, David."

"When..." David started. Then he decided he didn't want to get into it.

"You get apple cinnamon," Karen said. She crushed the bar in her hands, then tore open the red wrapper. She handed a few small pieces to Josie, who dutifully put one piece in her mouth at a time.

David watched his four-year-old daughter waddle like a pink penguin in her thick parka as she followed Karen from cabinet to cabinet. Glancing over at Sam fiddling with the radio, David felt sick. His children were completely alien to him. He wondered whether Dad had felt that way about him, and whether Grandpa had felt that way about Dad. Again he thought of Grandpa's gravelly voice crackling through the receiver once a year.

He opened the door, admitting a puff of snow from the frigid, breezy mountaintop, then headed out to the woodpile. An axe leaned against the side of the cabin nearby.

As David was wresting the axe from a particularly stubborn stump of wood – he hadn't chopped wood since his Cub Scout days – there was a crack of thunder. Five fireballs roared across the crystal blue alpine sky in a V formation, thousands of feet above the radio antenna extending from the roof of the cabin, and went down on the other side of the next mountain to the south.

It was a squadron of fighter jets.

#

"There are like a million frequencies on this thing, Dad," Sam said.

The crackling of the radio syncopated with the fire just beginning to crackle in the stone fireplace. He watched snow, still clinging to the logs, melt and run down through crevices in the bark. It made him think of jet fuel burning on a mountainside. David shoved a few more twigs of tinder beneath the logs, then stood up and noisily replaced the fire screen.

"Shhh," Karen said softly. Josie was sleeping in Karen's lap on the hearth. The flames danced in Karen's eyes.

David stepped quietly toward his son. The floorboards creaked and thunked hollowly. He thought of the cellar below and wondered whether Grandpa had left anything useful down there. He hadn't thought to check out the cellar when he came up in June after Grandpa died.

"A million frequencies, huh? Good. Maybe we can get someone. Scootch over." David sat down as Sam slid out of the chair. "See if I can remember how to use this thing."

Sam pointed at the button on the base of the microphone stand. "I think you just press that to talk."

"And we've got our tuner dial here," David said. "Power, AF gain, RF gain. Yeah." The hours he'd spent with Dad tuning and tracking were coming back to him. Right now the receiver was tuned into the shortwave range. He began dialing through waves of static in search of a signal, an emergency broadcast, a person, a station, anything.

At first David thought it was Josie crying again. Then he realized the child's scream was coming from the radio. There was an explosion of static, and then another voice, distorted and liquid with interference. David tuned upward a fraction of a frequency. David felt Sam grip his shoulder as the voice blasted through the cabin.

"...another fireball...headed into the mountains. Looks like it's going down just south of Mount Evans."

Karen gasped. "David, that's where we are."

"We're going into the cellar," David said. He pulled Sam by the arm toward the trapdoor in the floor.

"Ow, Dad!"

"There's a flashlight by the sink," Karen said, slowly standing up with Josie cradled in her arms. David saw tears in his wife's eyes. He gave her his best reassuring smile. The thought of the next fireball headed straight for them....

"Open the trapdoor, Sam," David said. He ran to the sink and grabbed the flashlight.

The trapdoor groaned open.

"Dad," Sam said, "it smells bad down there."

David went to the trapdoor and flipped on the flashlight. A breath of cold, putrid air soughed up from the cellar. A short flight of stairs led down to an unfinished, dirt-floored room with concrete walls. Cobwebs filled the gaps between the open-faced steps. Karen looked ill. Even David didn't want to think about what Grandpa had left down there. He kicked himself for not checking it out in June.

The earth began to tremble.

"Go!" David yelled, and Sam was down the stairway, followed by a teary-eyed Karen, who passed Josie off to David. David carried his daughter down the stairs into the musty basement, handed her back to Karen, then trotted back up the stairs and swung the trapdoor shut.

David gathered his family on the floor beneath a support beam. Dust sprinkled from the floorboards above, then showered and clouded the air, and the crackling roar grew louder and louder and shook the earth. Josie screamed. Sam started to cry. Karen hugged their

children and covered their ears, and David wrapped his arms around them all. They huddled close to the flashlight's glow as the world came apart above them.

#

The cabin was still there. David lifted the trapdoor all the way open.

"Can't you wait a little bit?" Karen said from the foot of the stairs. "The kids..."

"I want to raise somebody on the radio. We gotta find out what's going on."

"Just don't..." Her voice trailed off.

David stepped down to hear her. "What?"

"Just be careful. We shouldn't let too many people know where we are."

"What? Why?"

"That food won't last forever, David. If we invite everyone out there to--"

"Karen--"

Sam started to climb the stairs.

"Where do you think you're going?" Karen said, grabbing Sam's arm.

"I want to go up there with Dad."

"No, you're staying--"

"Stay down here with Mom and I, Sam. Keep 'em safe, k?"

"Oh come on, Dad!"

"Just stay here, damn it. Play some cards."

David pulled a deck of cards from the pocket of his flannel. It was the last thing he'd grabbed on the way out of the house. The TVs were splashing news of fire in the skies around the world, of cars dying in the streets, of planes crashing... And yet he'd thought to grab a

deck of cards on the way out the door. Always have to think of ways to keep the kids busy.

Briefly he wondered if their house was still there.

"Josie'll be hungry when she wakes up."

"I'll bring down some food after I check the radio. D'you want to see if you can find some blankets down there?" David thought back to June, when he'd had to stuff Grandpa's comforter and bed sheets into trash bags and cram his mattress into the truck. It had looked as though Grandpa had never washed the blanket or sheets. David's skin crawled at the memory of the stains and the smells.

"Didn't you stuff one into your backpack? I had three blankets in the back."

"You didn't tell me you grabbed blankets!"

"I thought you saw me put them in."

"No, I didn't," he said, which was a lie. He just hadn't thought to stuff one into his backpack when they were getting ready to hike up the mountain. Damn it. "I guess I'll go down and..."

"Don't go back down there," Karen said. "Not right now."

"Karen, we need blankets."

"What if that...fire comes down again while you're out there?"

David imagined one of those fireballs hitting the cabin. They weren't going to be safe in the cellar, either.

"I'm serious, David. Just throw our coats down."

"Mom, I really want to go upstairs with Dad!"

"Samuel David Elbert, I'm really losing patience with you."

David went upstairs, grabbed his family's parkas and took them back down.

Karen tugged on his pant leg as he was leaving to go upstairs. She was looking up at him plaintively. He was still mad at her for making him feel stupid for not grabbing the blankets. He knelt down to kiss her anyway. She smiled and stroked his cheek once before he pulled away.

At the top of the stairs he looked down at his family gazing up at him from the shadows.

He left the trapdoor open.

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The crash was a roiling ball of flame and thick smoke that blew southeast like an endless flag. Even a mile away, the heat of the burning jet fuel made him sweat. Nothing moved amongst the scattered wreckage.

As he headed back to the cabin, David tried to think of anything but the blackened rows of seats and the blackened things sitting in them.

#

"Scattered reports, really," the rough-voiced man on 17.4 MHz said. "Most people are blaming it on terrorists, of course. Over."

David pressed the transmit button on the microphone base. "What about an invasion? The Chinese, maybe? Are people talking about that? Over."

"You kidding? Jetliners crashing? Satellites falling? Cars dying? Riots everywhere? No, this is something else. Over."

"Yeah, our truck quit down the mountain. I just had it serviced, too. We had to hike up through the snow. Over."

David glanced out the window next to the table. All he could see was the dark outline of a pine tree. The glass was fogged with condensation. The heat from the fireplace was spreading efficiently.

"You still there, Elbert? Over."

"Right, sorry," David said. "This is all a little crazy. I wish we could get some real news..."

David had a strange feeling in his stomach. He thought of his grandfather again, huddled over this microphone once a year to talk to a family that wouldn't visit him. Every New Year's Eve Dad would take David down into the basement to talk to Grandpa on the radio. David couldn't remember anything they talked about. He just remembered frequencies and dials and needles and static. And then Grandpa would wish David a happy new year, and David would go upstairs while Dad stayed at the radio. He remembered that Dad always waited to continue talking until David was upstairs and had shut the door. Several times, David had tried to listen at the door to hear what they talked about after he left, but all he ever heard was Dad's muffled voice and crackles of static.

David's father had been a mystery to him: a quiet man, always leaving early in the morning for work and returning late at night, much like David now. His strongest memories of Dad were holiday memories, for holidays were when David saw his father for more than a few minutes at a time. Holidays like New Year's Eve. David remembered wondering, during

those static-ridden conversations with Grandpa, whether he would one day talk to Dad only once a year, perhaps on a holiday. But Dad had passed away six years ago.

"Come back, Elbert."

There it was again. That feeling in his stomach. There was something about the man's voice.

"Do you read me, Elbert?"

He hadn't told this man his last name.

Static whispered from the speakers. There was the occasional click or pop or hiss. A soft buzz. A tortuous burrowing of interference.

"You're right," the man said. "You didn't tell me your name."

David stared at the radio's glowing readout.

"No, I thought you might like an old voice to keep you company up here. God knows I always wanted one. Over."

"What...?" David said without pressing the transmit button.

"Every New Year's Eve. Once a year. To see if I was dead yet, I suppose." The man laughed. It sounded like stone grinding stone. "But I always answered. Your old man was probably pretty disappointed."

David hit the transmit button. "Who is this?"

"Do you know why you talk to someone only once a year? Because you want to throw them away. Because you want to forget about them, but you still feel that little tug of genetic obligation." The man's voice was like gravel.

David spun the dial up into the CB radio range. Nothing but lakes of static.

"Hi, David," burbled the voice through the static.

David spun the dial into low band television wavelengths, then up into FM.

"Hi, David."

David felt sick to his stomach. He spun higher, into upper band television, into cellular ranges, air traffic control ranges, on up into the frequencies of deep space radio communication.

"I searched everywhere, David," Grandpa said.

David cradled his head in his hands.

"I just wanted someone to talk to. It was so quiet up here. Sometimes I'd hear the crack of a rifle in the middle of the night. I'd go out in the dark with my flashlight and yell at shadows."

"Who are you?" David asked.

"On the radio, sometimes I'd find someone in Europe. Usually German. Sometimes I'd get someone over in the Ozarks."

David stared at the receiver.

"I'd have wonderful conversations, David. But they were all very lonely conversations. Everyone else was satisfied with the novelty of finding and talking to someone a thousand miles away, two thousand miles away. No one else was looking for...contact. Eventually everyone signs off. I've never signed off."

"You're...dead."

"No. Never. Not anymore. I found them, David. They were alone. They were dying. Just like me. But now we're celebrating. We're celebrating new life. The turning of the Earth. A new era."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're alive, David. Richly, wonderfully alive. At first I thought they might be in the F layers of the ionosphere. Shifting with day and night. Charged by variations in electromagnetic radiation. And I was picking them up by bouncing signals off the layers. But I was wrong. They were in the shortwaves, David. Living between the waves. Hiding between them. Feeding on them. They'd hear our voices sometimes. They'd consume our transmissions. But they were alone. They were dying, like me. I asked them why they didn't move. Why they didn't migrate to higher bands. They didn't know about them! They didn't know there were other places to go! I opened their world, David! All these years they've been migrating. Colonizing the higher bands. And now they're celebrating their new freedom. On every frequency. Even brain waves, David."

"You're crazy."

Grandpa laughed. "That's what your father said. That's what we talked about. You always wondered what we talked about after you went upstairs."

David switched off the radio. He stared at it for a moment, expecting it to turn on again and speak to him. A pine branch tapped at the window.

"They can do amazing things, David."

David jumped up, sending the chair tumbling backwards.

"Wonderful things."

David looked around the room. There was someone else here. It wasn't Grandpa. It was a trick. It wasn't real. They had buried him.

"Lovely things."

The voice was in his head. Crackling and boiling with static, but it was there. David covered his ears.

"They want to show you something."

The Earth rumbled. The cabin shook.

"No!" David yelled.

Infernal light blasted through the windows, illuminating the cabin with smoldering crimson. The fire in the fireplace growled and flared up into the chimney, then fell again as another fireball thundered over the cabin and faded away.

"They can control it all."

David ran to the trapdoor. He was going to get his family and they were all going to leave.

The trapdoor was closed.

David felt sick. He tore the trapdoor open. Cold and rotten air crept up into the cabin. It was pitch black in the cellar. They had turned off the flashlight. "Karen! Everyone! Get up here! We're leaving!"

"In return for my guiding them to freedom," Grandpa said in David's mind, "they have guided me."

"Karen! Sam!"

"They have taught me wonderful things. I have done amazing things to myself."

A joker and a nine of spades sat on the third stair from the top.

"Sam! Josie!"

"They have taught me wonderful things in the dark."

"Josie sweetie!"

David cried.

"There's one frequency they don't like, David. The visible spectrum. They prefer the dark."

Something black wriggled past the foot of the stairs, its writhing like hisses of static.

"Come see what I've made for you in the dark, David."

"No!" David screamed, his face soaked in tears and his mind afire.

"Come see what I've made for you in the cellar."

David ran downstairs.

The cellar was cold and fetid and dark. It was even darker when the trapdoor closed.

There came a pop from the fire in the fireplace.

**The End**