



Going Home: A Novel (The Survivalist Series)

By A. American

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Book 1 of The Survivalist Series

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Editorial Review

About the Author

A. American has been involved in prepping and survival communities since the early 1990s. An avid outdoorsman, he has spent considerable time learning edible and medicinal plants and their uses as well as primitive survival skills. He currently resides in Florida with his wife of more than twenty years and his three daughters. He is the author of *Going Home*, *Surviving Home*, *Escaping Home*, and the USA TODAY bestselling *Forsaking Home*.

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Chapter 1

This had been a good week. I worked from home all week until Wednesday, when I got a call and had to make a quick trip. The next day I had to run up to southern Georgia for a service call, but first I was going to finish polishing this stove. I picked up a little box woodstove at a yard sale. It looked rough, rusted all to hell. A little elbow grease and several wire wheels for the grinder, and she looked great. Now I was just finishing the stove polish.

I was hoping that I could get this thing put in over the weekend. Having this in my bedroom would be sweet. I already had all the pipe and fittings for the stack and plenty of “encouragement” from Mel to get it done. She never ceased to amaze me; in her mind, anything she could think up was *easy* to do. Like adding another bathroom to the addition— never mind the fact that it was lower than the rest of the house. I just couldn’t seem to get it through her head that water flows downhill. I still love her, though.

Depending on where I was going and how far from home, I would adjust my gear. I had two different packs. One was a three-day assault style with a one-hundred-ounce water bladder, and the other was a rifleman’s pack. This trip was taking me to Donalsonville, just north of Tallahassee. Since it was November and a little cold and far from home, I threw the rifleman’s pack in the car. I went out to the shed and grabbed a half case of MREs and threw those into the rear floorboard. The people I worked with would give me a lot of crap about the stuff I carried with me. It didn’t bother me because I seldom saw any of them—that was the nice part about working from home.

I hate my alarm clock. The damn thing went off, and I, of course, snoozed it; fifteen minutes later, I snoozed it again. Finally, at six, I got up and hauled my ass to the shower. After taking care of my morning S’s—shit, shower, and shave—I grabbed my bags and took them out to the car. Back in the house, I went in and kissed the girls, as well as Mel, good-bye.

“When will you be back?” Mel asked as she poured one of my stainless steel water bottles full of sweet tea.

“I should be home pretty early Friday. I don’t think this will take that long,” I replied.

“Good. Try and be home in time for dinner,” she said.

“I’ll try,” I replied, kissing her and walking out the door.

Little Ash ran out to the porch as I was getting into the car. “I love you, Daddy!” she called out.

“I love you too!” I called back to her. She blew me a kiss, and I acted as if I caught it and stuck it in my pocket. “I’ll save it for later!” I said and waved good-bye.

The trip to the facility in Georgia went smoothly; finishing the job quickly, I headed home. Back on the road home, I was eager to start the weekend. I would be home in about four and a half hours and have an early start to my weekend. Coming down 27 into Tallahassee, I stopped in a Mickey D’s to grab a burger and a large sweet tea then jumped onto I-10, heading east. I was blissfully munching on a heart attack helper, listening to the radio, and cruising down the interstate, putting miles behind me; it couldn’t get any better. I had almost 250 miles to be home, just a few hours.

The radio was pumping out a mix of country and alternative rock; I scanned the channels constantly. Crossing the Tallahassee city limits, the music stopped, and the abrasive emergency alert tone came onto the radio. The initial low and grating tone morphed into the high-pitched constant tone. “This is a test of the emergency alert system,” I said out loud to myself. The tone stopped, and so did my car. I looked down at the dash, and all the gauges dropped; the engine was making an awkward noise, being forced to turn over by the momentum.

“Ah shit!” There went my early weekend. I pulled the shifter into neutral and turned the key—nothing. I coasted the car to the shoulder and stopped. Just outside of Tallahassee, I-10 got pretty rural real quick. It also went through a hilly area, up and down. I was in the bottom of a small valley created by two of these hills. There were no cars in the westbound lane, just me. I sat there for a minute, shaking my head.

“Damn you, Murphy!” I said.

Some people believe they have a guardian angel following them and looking over their shoulders. If anyone was following me around, looking over my shoulder, it was Murphy, and that prick had a horrible sense of humor. I often cursed him and “the gods” for messing with me. “The gods” refers back to when Greeks believed there were gods above that interfered with the lives of men for entertainment; sometimes it really felt that way. And this was one of those times.

I reached over into the seat beside me and picked up my phone. The BlackBerry had a black screen—dead. It was plugged into the charger, so what the hell? I looked at the charger, and the little red LED that was always on wasn’t there. Oh, this was just fucking great—the car died, there was no power, and the phone went at exactly the same moment. I sat there for a minute, and the calculator in my head started doing some math. First, no car had passed me since my car stopped; nothing was moving east or west on the interstate. Second, the emergency alert on the radio just stopped right when the car did. *One and two equal I’m screwed*, I thought.

I stepped out of the car and put on my light coat. People think it doesn’t get cold in Florida, but this November was rather cold. Fortunately, the wind wasn’t blowing, and it was clear and sunny. I looked both ways and didn’t see anything moving. I walked around to the passenger side and opened the door. Lying on the passenger seat was my everyday carry, or EDC bag, a Maxpedition Devildog. I am a gear freak and love Maxpedition products. I unzipped it and pulled out my Springfield XD .45 and tucked it into my waistband on my right side and covered it with my shirt and coat.

I decided to walk back toward the west. Having just passed Tallahassee, it was the closest thing for help. I started walking west and crested the hill after about fifteen minutes. My knees got a little weak. There were cars all over the road—on the shoulder, in the travel lanes, and in the median. There were people milling about with no clear purpose. I looked back to the east, and it was the same sight over the next hill.

Walking back to my car, I carried on a rather lively conversation in my head.

Okay, there are only two things that could cause this: an electromagnetic pulse, EMP, or a coronal mass ejection, CME, I said to myself.

Does it matter? I replied.

Not really; the result is the same, I countered.

Getting back to the car, I sat down for a minute and started to think. *Okay, you have prepared for this very thing; you have everything you need in the back to walk home. Oh, shit, the girls, Mel. Where are they? Are they okay?* I was nauseous. I had to close my eyes and lay my head back. The bile was rising in my throat; throwing the door open, I vomited violently until I thought my throat would tear in half. I closed the door and sat back in my seat, leaning my head on the rest. Reaching over to the bag in the passenger seat, I pulled an OD green handkerchief out and wiped my mouth.

“Oh, God, the girls and Mel!” I groaned out loud. What were they going to do?

“I know what they are going to do. We’ve talked about this. There is a plan. You need to get your ass home!” I spoke out loud to myself. Living in a small town has benefits. Mel can walk to the school if she has to get the girls. But she has the Suburban, and its Cummins should start no matter what. I looked at my watch; it was almost five o’clock, too late to try to leave but still enough light to start getting ready. “I have to get home as fast as I can!” I said aloud. Time to get moving. My watch was an inexpensive Armitron automatic that my wife bought me. It didn’t need a battery, and as long as I moved around or wound it every forty-eight hours, it worked.

With the sun heading toward the end of its arc on this side of the rock, the temp was dropping. I got out of the car and opened the rear door. I pulled the pack out and laid it on the hood. I took off my light coat and put on the mother-of-all coats, my Carhartt coat with arctic lining. This thing had been with me for years; it’s worn, and I love it. Just putting it on reinforced my resolve. I thought of those days in Wyoming when the truck broke down out near Hell’s Half Acre. The little shop was closed then. The area had a sign that said Keep Out, but Mel, the girls, and I all walked down into the alien hole in the ground and looked at the formations.

I decided to spend the night in the car just in case, by some weird coincidence, it was to be “fixed” in the morning. I pulled the MREs out of the back and opened them up. I went through and stripped them down. All the boxes and the outer bag were thrown into the floorboard. I stuffed what I kept from the bags into the sustainment pouch on the right side of the pack with what was already there. With the car not working, I couldn’t open the rear window or hatch; both used a solenoid for operation, and neither worked. I unlatched the rear seat and pulled the seat backs down to get to my tools. I grabbed my Klein linesman’s pliers, a six-inch Crescent wrench, and a small pair of Channellocks. I looked at the wrench—“Anything you can do, the Channellocks can”—and threw the wrench back into the bag. I also pulled out a ten-in-one screwdriver. It was versatile enough to win a spot in the pack. I had to be careful, though. The pack was already heavy. I’m six feet tall and weigh about 260 pounds, not all muscle either. But I had carried this bag before, and I knew I could.

I decided to inventory the car. I looked under the seats and found a personal survival kit, or PSK, I had forgotten about. It was basic—water purification tabs, a small Uncle Henry folder, a coil of wire, a very small fire steel, and a short piece of a hacksaw blade. There were some first-aid items and some other things in it; it was coming with me. Lying in the center console was a toenail clipper that went into the Devildog. In the compartment under the armrest was a cheap xenon flashlight that took CR123 batteries. I knew I had four

spare batteries, so I put it in the Devildog too. In the door was a map of Florida; I took that and put it in the little bag. I pulled out of the back the suitcase that I always packed when traveling and went through its contents. There were about a dozen assorted bottles of hotel shampoo, body wash, and some mouthwash in the mesh compartment on the inside of the lid. There were also a couple changes of clothes. I pulled the skivvies and socks out and set them aside. I took my spare glasses out and set them aside. There was a small bottle of saline solution for my contacts; I set it out along with the spare contacts.

I knew the contacts would become an issue, but I would use them as long as practical. I set one pair of green TrueSpec pants to the side as well. Another pair was in the pack, but if they would fit in the bag, they were going. I took the Q-tips out of the hygiene kit as well and set them aside. I opened the outside zipper pockets and found a Glo-Toob lithium light, an Energizer headlamp, and a two-liter Platypus bag. I thought about that for a minute and remembered putting them in there right before I left because I didn't feel like going out and getting my pack out to put them into it; I set them on the pile.

Lying beside the driver's seat by the door was my ESEE 5; I laid it on the pile. I put the Devildog on the pile as well. As my EDC, it had a number of things in it that I would need. There were two spare mags for the XD, an Otis tactical cleaning kit, a Sylva compass, a Wilderness Outfitters SOS survival kit, Swedish FireSteel, and other assorted items that I thought essential. I opened the pack and began trying to stuff all the items in. It was already pretty full. I could hear the guys on the board now screaming that any pack that weighed more than thirty pounds was stupid. When I was done, I estimated this thing weighed about sixty pounds. I do not subscribe to the "less is more" theory. I believe in having tools to provide for survival. If it turned out that I couldn't carry all this, then I'd start dumping it. But for now, it was all coming with me.

I put the pack into the backseat again and leaned against the hood. It was twilight; the orange glow to the west was beautiful, though fading fast. I looked to the east and saw a few people walking down the eastbound lane toward Tallahassee. No one was going east, everyone I saw was walking west. I went back and sat in the car; the windows were all up, and I couldn't put them down. I cracked the driver's door so it was open but latched and did the same to the passenger doors. I didn't want the inside to build up too much condensation and hoped this would help. The sun was dropping, and so was the temp. It was going to get cold tonight. I reached back and unzipped the lower pouch of the pack and fished around until I found the stuff sack with the poncho liner in it. I pulled it out, pulled the liner out of the sack, and wrapped myself up in my woobie.

No one that was heading toward the west came by the car; they all stayed in the eastbound lane. I reclined the seat back as far as it would go and kicked off my shoes. I wound my feet up in the liner and closed my eyes. All I could see was my wife and daughters; they were scared and far from one another. I hoped they would be back together soon. Their four faces were the last image in my mind. Sleep.

The sun's rays hitting me in the face woke me up. I had slept all night. I was *stiff*, though. The world outside was starting to lighten up; I looked at the inside of the car, and a light coat of condensation was on all the windows. Opening the driver's door, I stepped out. I had to piss, and bad, so I walked around to the passenger side and relieved myself by the front tire. No one was on the road in either direction.

"When the sun gets higher, there will be people heading west." I was talking out loud to myself. Just out of curiosity, I walked back around to the driver's side, leaned in, and tried the key. Nothing, not even a click. I reached in the back and pulled out my laptop bag. I set the laptop on the hood and opened it up and hit the power button. Dead as a doornail.

"Shit, this is bad. I mean, this is it. We're all fucked. At least most people are. I need to get home. I have to get home." I seemed to have started the odd habit of talking out loud to myself.

Okay, time to get a plan. I grabbed the map I set aside the day before and unfolded it on the hood. I was just to the east of Tallahassee. I had to decide whether to take I-10 to I-75 and turn south there or Highway 19 south. Nineteen was just a little way to the east of my current location. I knew for a fact that 19 would cut thirty-odd miles off my trip home. The GPS always showed that way as shorter but taking more time. It would take me through several small towns, Perry, Cross City, Chiefland, Bronson, and Williston before getting me into Ocala. Once I was there, I had to cross the forest and would be home.

While I was weighing the options on the route home, I realized I was hungry. I pulled out the pack and opened the pouch with the chow. I had the stripped-down MREs as well as some other stuff—foil packaged SPAM, tuna, and salmon, as well as a pouch full of condiments that I acquired from convenience stores over time, such as mayo, mustard, dill relish, and the like. In the sustainment pouch on the left side of the pack was my mess kit. It was a large single MSR pot. Inside it was a folding spoon/measuring cup for cooking, as well as a one-quart Ziploc bag full of rice. I had a smaller bag of quick-cook oats, a small bottle with a couple ounces of honey, a small bag of powdered milk, half a sponge/scrubby, a small bottle of cooking oil, and a small bottle of dish soap. A bag of bouillon cubes topped off its contents.

Looking at all this, it looked like I had a lot of food. But when you stopped to think about the fact that I was over 250 miles from home, I didn't have nearly enough. I decided to make breakfast my big meal of the day. I would need the energy to get through the days ahead of me. Lunch would be light or not at all. Dinner would be light as well. I fished around and pulled out a single-serve SPAM pouch and an MRE Wheat Snack Bread, more like a Wheat Snack Heels. Nonetheless, I opened it up and sliced it open. I put the piece of SPAM in between and squeezed a packet of mayo onto the bread. This made a decent sandwich. I ate this while looking at the map and thinking about options. Opening the passenger door, I pulled out my stainless water bottle to wash down the SPAM.

I saw the first person heading west about eight o'clock. A small group in the eastbound lane was heading west. I leaned against the hood and watched them come down the hill. There were five of them. I could clearly see one of them carrying a laptop case. *Poor fool*, I thought. My laptop was back in the bag lying in the backseat, where it would remain, as far as I was concerned. I stood there watching these people go by. One of them broke off from the group and came across the interstate toward me. It was a young white guy wearing Dockers, a long-sleeved shirt, and a light coat.

"Hi, there," he said by way of greeting.

"How's it going?" I said.

"What's happened? You have any idea?"

"Well, there are only a couple of things that could cause this to happen. It doesn't really matter which it was. The result is the same," I told him. "Where's your car?"

He pointed back to the east. "Just over the hill there. It was so damn cold last night. We are looking for some help."

"Well, good luck," I said.

He looked at the ground kind of nervously and then looked up and asked, "You wouldn't happen to have any water, would you? My bottle is empty." He held up an empty Evian bottle and shook it back and forth to show it was empty.

"I have some water, but it's not Evian. I'll fill your bottle for you." I reached out, and he handed me the

bottle. On the outside of the pack were one- and two-quart canteens clipped to the MOLLE. I pulled the two-quart out of the carrier and filled his bottle for him. As I handed it back, I noticed he was looking at the SPAM pouch lying on the hood.

“You, ah, wouldn’t have any food, would you?” He was nervous when he asked the question.

“No, that was what was lying around. I have to go find some more food too.” He accepted that answer.

“Yeah, sure, thanks anyhow for the water.”

“Good luck to you too,” I replied. I was glad they were close to Tallahassee, or they would have been screwed.

You would think that leaving would be easy; just grab your stuff and walk away. But I found myself procrastinating leaving. A few more people were heading west; now they were in both lanes. A few of them stopped to talk and ask the same question they all asked, “What happened?” My answer was always the same: “I have no idea either.” I didn’t want to appear any more prepared or aware than the rest of them. So far, everyone was polite and civil. No one was rude. No one was panicked. I knew that was going to change; the question was how long until it did.

Part of my EDC was an ESEE4. I carried it recon style, horizontally. Only I carried it on my belt where my buckle would be. I would slide the buckle to the right and clip the Tek-Lok on the belt in the front where the buckle would be. I pulled the knife out of the Devildog and clipped it on the belt. I sat down in the driver’s seat and changed into my Bellville boots. They were US issue, GORE-TEX with Vibram soles, and then strapped the Merrells onto the back of the pack. Then I strapped the Carhartt to the outside of the pack, using some paracord to keep it tight. The last thing to add was the foam sleep mat. I slid it under the two straps that held the top flap down. That was it; there was nothing left to do. I stood there for a minute, watching a couple walking in the eastbound lane. The girl was wearing flip-flops; she held a flannel shirt tight to herself. The man with her had on jeans and a T-shirt and a camo ball cap. His hands were shoved into his pockets, trying to resist the cold. I could only think of all the people that were waiting for help to come, help that might never come.

I grabbed the Devildog and pulled the waist strap out from the pouch in the back. I unclipped the shoulder strap and stowed it inside. Then I pulled the XD and its holster out of my pants and put it inside the pocket in the main compartment. After refilling the SS water bottle from the two-quart canteen, I dropped it into one of the mesh pockets on the outside. Then I strapped the belt around my waist with the bag in the front, kind of a reverse fanny pack. Standing the pack up on the hood, I slipped into the shoulder straps and took a step forward, taking the full weight of the pack.

“Ugh, holy shit, this thing is heavy!” I shouted, and then grabbed the waist belt for the pack and pulled it around me and then hitched the pack up and clipped the belt together just above the other bag, adjusted the shoulder straps, and clipped in the chest strap. The load was pretty well balanced; it didn’t feel as bad now. I hoped to make ten miles a day. I set the goal low on purpose; if I made better time, all the better. After adjusting the Tractor Supply cap on my head, I tucked my thumbs into the shoulder straps and started walking east.

The weight of the pack settled on my back and shoulders, but I knew that they would be sore tomorrow. Walking along on the side of the road, I passed several cars, some with people and some empty. Some of the people would try to talk; I just waved and said, “I gotta try and make it home.” Most didn’t try any further conversation.

I pulled the map out of my left cargo pocket and took it out of the Ziploc bag it was in. I was ten miles from Highway 19, give or take. Looking at the map though, I saw that 59 would take me to it in more of a straight line and get me off this damn interstate sooner. People were still civil, but I didn't want to be around them when they started not to be. I made it to the exit for 59 without too much trouble. Several people were walking on the interstate now. Many of them stopped to ask questions. It struck me as odd; with their normal routine interrupted, they just didn't know what to do. I knew there was a truck stop at this exit, on the south side, so I walked down the exit and turned to the south. This five or six miles had taken me over three hours, trying to get into the art of trekking with a pack.

The truck stop was pretty crowded. A number of trucks were in the lot, a few cars, and more people than there were cars. It had only been one day, so no one was totally crazy yet, although from some of the talk I heard, they were getting scared. I got a few looks from some of them; I was the only person there with a large pack. I went into the store; it was open, although there was no power. There was a little Indian guy behind the counter, dot not feather. When I came through the door, he looked at me and said, "Cash only."

"No problem. No power, no POS, huh?" I replied.

"I hope they get it back on soon. I can't sell fuel without it." He was totally clueless about the magnitude of what had happened. Who in the hell did he think he was going to sell fuel to? I walked around and grabbed a couple of bags of Jack Link's Beef Jerky; all I could think about was the Sasquatch commercials. Chuckling to myself, I went to the aisle with the little packs of meds and grabbed a few Excedrin packs, some Roloids, and two packs of Imodium pills. Since the power had only been out overnight, the cooler was still pretty cold, so I grabbed two Cokes. I was trying to think of what else I would need. This was countered with the thought of how much more I could actually carry. Deciding that I couldn't carry much more, I took my shopping to the counter; he did the math on a calculator. "Nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents," he said.

I pulled some cash out of my pocket and handed him twenty dollars. "Keep the quarter," I said. I was scooping up the stuff when I had another thought. "Let me have a can of Copenhagen."

He reached back and pulled one down and laid it on the counter. "Six dollars." I handed him a ten, and he made the change.

I had quit chew last year; I loved the first dip of the day, and the one after a meal. I figure what the hell now. Not like I would be able to get any more anytime soon. He had put everything in a bag, so I carried it outside and walked around the building. I found what I was looking for on the far end, away from the interstate. I set the pack down and pulled the canteens out. Opening up the pack, I took the Platypus bladder out. I topped off all of these from the hose bib on the wall; lastly, I filled the SS water bottle. The water pressure was still pretty good; I knew that wouldn't last either, and that gave me another idea.

While topping off the bottle, I heard a voice behind me. "Where ya headin'?" I looked over my shoulder and saw a large man in a red flannel shirt, jeans, and a Redman hat with what I was sure was a large chaw of the same in his left cheek. He was over six feet and barrel-chested.

I stood up and said, "Home, if I can make it."

"Whur's home?" He leaned to his left and spit a large brown puddle on the ground; it actually hit the ground before it broke from his lips.

"Down near Orlando," I replied as I stood up.

"That's a long walk. I need to get to Dothan."

“That’s a pretty good hike too. You driving one of those rigs back there?”

He motioned with his shoulder. “I was drivin’ that flatbed with the Cat on it.” He spit a string again. “I shore don’t want ta walk ta Dothan.”

I looked past him and saw an old Cat front-end loader on the trailer. “Well, why don’t you drop the chains on that loader and drive it till it gives out? Get some fuel out of your truck. If you find enough jugs, you might be able to carry enough fuel to make it.”

“I was thinkin’ the same thing,” he said. “What cha think happened?”

“Well, I would guess it was either an EMP or a CME. The radios are all out, and I guess no one knows for sure.”

He looked at me for a minute and drawled out, “I’ve heard of EMP. That’s a nuke that causes that. What’s a CME?”

“Coronal mass ejection, solar fl are,” I replied while putting some of the shopping into the pack.

“I heard about that on the news. They’s been talkin’ about it fer a week now. An’ that would knock out the power?”

“It could. I heard about it too. Didn’t think it would do all this, though. I guess why doesn’t really matter, though.” I stood up and was looking at him.

“I don’t much reckon it does. Well, good luck gettin’ to Orlanda.” He turned and walked toward his truck.

I shouldered the pack on one shoulder and walked back into the store. “You got a restroom I could use real quick?”

The little guy pointed to the back. “Back there. Don’t piss on my floor, and flush it when you’re done.”

“Thanks.” I figured I should take advantage of the chance to take a dump in comfort.

I walked out to the road and stopped for a minute. In the distance, you could hear chains being pulled through pad eyes on a trailer. I slipped one of the Cokes out of my cargo pocket and took a long drink. Man, I was gonna miss this. After screwing the lid on and dropping it back in the pocket, I slipped the can of Cope out. I tapped the can in the palm of my hand for a minute while I thought about what was lying ahead. This damn pack was freakin’ heavy. I needed a walking stick. I drew the ESEE4 from its sheath and poked the blade through the paper on the lid of the can and ran it around it and sheathed the blade. Popping open the can, I grabbed a pinch and stuck it in my lip. Man, she would piss if she knew; I smiled to myself as I thought about how angry Mel would be if she knew what I was doing. Not that it really mattered at the moment.

I hitched up the pack and started walking south on 59. I needed to keep my eyes open for a walking stick. I knew what I wanted: a piece of wild myrtle. The wood was bone hard and light. It would be perfect. Several people were walking down the road, some coming and some going. At this point, no one appeared panicked; there wasn’t any violence or trouble. It had only been one day, though, so it was certain to change. The walk down 59 was quiet. I encountered no one, only the occasional person who waved from a porch. Even that was rare, as there aren’t that many houses on this stretch of road—lots of acreage. Smoke could be seen drifting from chimneys and smokestacks on some of the houses. About five and a half miles down the road, I came to Highway 19; this would be the road that would take me the farthest on my walk home. Turn south

and keep on keeping on.

With my late start and the stop at the store, the day was getting late. I looked at my watch; it was almost four. I figured I would look for a place to sleep for the night. Since this was my first night out, I wanted time to sort out camp.

On the southeast corner of 19 and 59 was a wooded lot. It looked like a good place to spend the night, so I walked into the tree line right beside a sign that said, "Perry 35 Miles." There was a field wire fence off the road behind the sign, I undid the straps on the pack and dropped it over. It felt like I would float away with the load off me. Crossing the fence, I walked out into the woods a little and found a camping spot. While there was still light, I took a minute to do a quick recon of the immediate area. All was quiet; no other sounds indicating people were on the air. The area I was in had no houses in the immediate vicinity; this satisfied me that I should be alone tonight.

Back at my pack, it was time to decide what kind of shelter I wanted. In my pack were my Eagles Nest Outfitters hammock, Slap Straps, and bug net, as well as my seven-by-nine tarp and rigging. Since I was going to be moving every day, I wanted an expedient camp, something quick. For tonight, I decided on something real quick. I pulled out the sleeping bag and set it aside. Then I unrolled the sleeping mat, pulled the bag out of the compression bag, and unrolled it on top of the mat. Then I pulled out my GI poncho and threw it over the whole thing. The outer bag of the sleep system is GORE-TEX, but I didn't want dew all over it, as I planned to be off early in the morning. With my camp set, I decided to build a small fire. I didn't really need one, but since this was only the first day after, after what? *I guess I'll call it the Event.* I figured I could do this and not draw any undue attention. Later this would probably not be advisable.

I pulled my U-Dig-It trowel out and scraped a small fire pit after scraping the fallen pine needles away from a small spot on the ground. The combination of mostly pine and scattered oak provided plenty of firewood with very little effort. Using a butane lighter, I had a nice small fire in no time. I cut several palmetto fronds and made a break between the fire and the road, probably unnecessary but better to get into the habit now. I opened the chow pouch and fished around, pulling out everything in it. There were nine MRE entrées, six side dishes, six crackers, four pouches of MRE bread, six cheeses, five peanut butters, five packs of crackers, five accessory pouches, two pouches of MRE shake mixes, half a dozen drink mixes, and seven heaters. There were also four SPAM single-serving pouches and four foil packs each of tuna and salmon. Add this to the stuff in the mess kit pot, and it was not a bad start.

I was hungry; that SPAM sandwich wore off hours ago. I wanted to eat something else but didn't want to because once I did, it would be gone—the only food I had was what I was carrying. Finally, I settled on a pouch of cheese squeezed onto some crackers. While munching on this, I went through the pack and pulled a couple of other things out—my Steiner Predator binos and the night vision, and a Pulsar Edge GS20. The bag for the Pulsar had four sets of batteries in it, plus the four spares in the Devildog bag. I should have plenty of batteries. There was also a Goal Zero Guide Plus kit; this would keep batteries charged for flashlights and whatnot. I wish I had found a way to charge the CR123 lithium batteries with it but hadn't got around to it. I started putting things away so that I could access them easily later. I pulled the mess kit out of the side pouch and took a bouillon cube out and then pulled the canteen and cup out of its pouch, poured in some water, dropped in the cube, and set it beside the fire. I figured a hot cup of broth would be nice before going to sleep.

After finishing up my broth, I rinsed out the cup and stowed all the gear. I had the NVGs lying beside me and pulled the XD out of the Devildog. Climbing into the sleeping bag, I laid the XD on my chest and threw the poncho out to cover me and everything else up. I pulled out the NVGs and slipped them on. Looking up into the sky, the stars were magnified and washed out. I looked over to the side and could see into the woods.

Happy that they were working, I put them in their pouch and set them down. I flipped the hood up on the sleeping bag and covered my face with the poncho.

As I lay there waiting for sleep, I started to think about my wife and girls. I missed them more than words could describe; that's partly why I tried not to think about them too much. My thoughts were interrupted by the report of several rapid shots drifting up into the night. They were far off, and there were no more; they were the first of many more to come. It was the first indication of the change that was already taking place in people.

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