

AUTHOR'S PREFACE:

This is a prologue for a novel I have had in the works for a few years, which has been a constant victim of rewrites and revisions. The story is of a highway patrolman whose night on the job goes from bored to bad to worse. Worse, as in the end of the world. This story is the origin, or at least one view of it, for a setting where humanity is conquered and scattered throughout the universe as commercial goods.

TROOPER BARRINGTON'S STORY

“SHOTS FIRED”

8:32 PM, JANUARY 14TH

HIGHWAY US-95 NORTH BETWEEN LAS VEGAS AND INDIAN SPRINGS

SOUTHERN NEVADA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Nevada Highway Patrol Trooper Jim Barrington stared blankly at the rear of the vehicle he had pulled over a few minutes ago, his overhead lights flashing and glaring randomly from the faded paint and spots of primer that blighted the aging full-size sedan. Four men sat nervously, trying not to look back at his blinding spotlights and flashing strobes. He smirked as the driver, a younger Hispanic with short hair, shoved and yelled at the fatter, older passenger who was fumbling to find the jalopy's registration and insurance. The registration sticker on the vehicle's license plate was freshly expired, and though he normally would have let the driver go with a lecture and a warning, he was going to have

to write a ticket this time. He let out a sigh as he popped the door to his cruiser and grabbed his clipboard. The bracing winter night air made him gasp, shooting up his pant leg and rustling his stack of tickets.

He was tired of his job, or at least tired of this thankless patrol, where his career was hurtling down a greased pole to nowhere. His sergeant had chewed his ass yesterday for the recent drop-off in the number of tickets Barrington was writing, no doubt because his higher-ups had done the same to him. Nevada's state government was once again facing a financial crisis, and the Highway Patrol budget was one of the prime targets on the legislature's chopping block. No tickets meant no raises, no new vehicles, and no promotions. Not that it mattered to Barrington, but here he was, about to write his first citation of the day anyway, on an offense he probably would have just let slide by in the past.

How the mighty have fallen, he thought wryly to himself. This was a long way from his glory days in high school, or his hitch in the army. From football star and bonafide, no-shit war hero to now writing up violators for burnt-out taillights and unfastened seatbelts. *Some life you've racked up there, Jimmy*, he sneered to himself.

Barrington shivered as a large tractor-trailer roared past the two stopped vehicles. The rush of air turned the frigid night even colder, and had physically pulled him towards the highway, startling him. *Damn semi's*, he thought. That prick would be next, as soon as he was done with these Mexicans. He popped his holster's snap release, more out of habit than paranoia, and pulled his small flashlight out of its pouch on his duty belt. He swept the back seat with the surprisingly bright light, illuminating the two jacketed men sitting there with their hands wringing in their laps, their breath coming out in ragged but visible puffs. The car's heater must not be working, he thought. They gave him quick glances through the grimy window, then darted their eyes forward. They were probably illegals, but if Barrington was unhappy enough about having to write a ticket for an expired registration tag, he sure wasn't about to go out of his way to run an immigration check on this car full of goddamn border-jumpers.

Barrington tapped the driver's window with his clipboard, and waited in the cold as cars roared too close for comfort on the freeway next to him. The driver was young and muscular, with the number thirteen tattooed in embellished Old English print on his right hand. He busily pumped the handle to his window, rolling it down with a series of squeaks.

"Is there a problem, m'friend?"

Barrington's shoulders dropped slightly upon hearing the thick Mexican accent. Reams of paperwork loomed into his thoughts. He swept the backseat quickly with his flashlight to make sure nothing funny was going on, then turned the blinding beam back onto the driver.

"You were doing 84 in a 70. License and registration, amigo."

"This is no my car, m'friend. No mine."

"Not your's, huh?" Barrington had to shout as the growing roar of an oncoming car on the freeway rose and fell. "Well whose is it, compadre? You've still got the registration, right?"

The driver rapidly exchanged words with his passenger in Spanish too quick for Barrington to follow. The driver turned back to him, nervous but smiling.

"No mine, m'friend, no mine."

Barrington started to roll his eyes in frustration. Great, another one. That would make four times this week.

"Alright, man, step out of the ca-"

Time stopped as he noticed the glint of silver coming from the car's passenger seat. A searing orange flash blinded him as the giant maw of a .44 caliber revolver emerged in the light of a passing car. His body arched reflexively to the side, his face pulled back in a pained grimace, and his hearing was instantly reduced to a high-pitched squeal. His stack of tickets exploded in a cloud of swirling shreds as the gumdrop-sized copper and lead projectile hammered him low in his bullet-proof vest at over 1500 feet per second.

One hand covered his battered gut and the other went for his pistol as he tried to stagger back to the safety of his cruiser, blind panic flooding his senses.

The passenger tracked Barrington as he fell back, too caught up in the act of hasty murder to notice the car's shocked driver now sitting directly in front of the swinging hand cannon's muzzle. The driver's initial whoops of triumph turned to shouts of horror. The passenger thundered the trigger, punching a magnum slug into the neck of the young man. Blood geysered through the interior of the car as the driver bucked and spasmed in shock, gurgling a shriek as his severed jugular and carotid artery vented hot blood over his freezing compadres in the back seat. The man in the rear passenger seat filled the car with screams as he wiped the blood from his lips and eyes. The shooter cursed and slapped the blood off his face, and began to bark orders to the other passengers.

Lurching in reaction to the second shot, Barrington dropped the hand on his belly down to his radio to call for help, but the passenger on the rear driver's side slammed open his door, knocking the radio from his hand, and him to the ground. As Barrington watched his radio bounce away, the passenger began to emerge from the car, a knife in his right hand. Still shocked that this was happening at all, Barrington spun on the seat of his pants and kicked the door violently, pinning the knifeman.

The attacker cried out in pain, and yelled over his shoulder to the front passenger for assistance. Barrington pulled his pistol from its holster, snapping the safety off with a panicked speed that he hadn't felt since his time in Afghanistan. He made sure the hammer was back on the pistol, and continued the pressure on the door, keeping the squirming man at bay.

The trapped Mexican continued to struggle, swinging his knife in an attempt to slash the trooper's leg. Screaming, "Stop! Stop!" Barrington brought his pistol to bear while the pinned attacker tried even harder to stab him. Jimmy held his breath in anticipation of the gunshot, pulled the trigger, and put a round into the car door. He quickly adjusted his panicked aim, and put two into the attacker's chest and head. He pulled his leg back from the car door, and the short man fell dead from the door, a blood-soaked cough escaping him as he slapped the rough pavement of the highway's shoulder. The gleaming knife

glittered in oncoming headlights as it scattered into traffic. Passing cars were beginning to slow down. *At least there'll be witnesses to tell my boys*, he thought.

Through the muted whine tearing through his eardrums, he heard the thunk and groan of the front passenger's door opening on rusty hinges accompanied by excited calls in Spanish. Barrington rolled to his side, his head near the car's exhaust pipe as he looked under the car. A pair of booted feet, the fat passenger's, scurried around to the front of the vehicle. Barrington scrambled over the knife man's dead body to get behind the car, keeping it between him and the shooter. He didn't dare try and make it back to his own cruiser, since it was a good ten yards back, ten yards he would never make without some cover. He crouched behind the trunk lid, keeping the frame of the sedan between himself and the shooter. The fourth and last Mexican popped his door open momentarily, then hurriedly pulled it back shut just as Barrington swung his pistol towards him and let loose a shot that hit the open front passenger door, shattering the window. The fat shooter came yelling from around the front of the car, holding up one hand to block Barrington's cruiser's blinding floodlights and pulsing red and blue strobes.

Another shot rang from the seemingly-giant forty-four magnum. The car roof to the side of Barrington made a hollow popping noise as a crease erupted on its primed surface. Barrington was looking over the top of his pistol, aiming more with instinct than the sights, and touched off a round. The shooter crumbled as the hollowpoint round caught him in the upper chest, sending him to the ground. The Mexican fired a round after he hit the pavement, taking the heel off of Barrington's boot and yanking his feet out from underneath him. A blinding pain told him more than shoe leather had caught the round, and he yelled through gritted teeth as he dumped the remaining two rounds from his forty-five automatic at the Mexican's legs, which weren't blocked by the rear driver's tire. One bullet caught the shooter in the meat of his calf, the other bounced with a whine out into the desert night. He pulled the trigger again, and the weapon

clicked anticlimactically without a resulting thunderous boom. He quickly turned the pistol sideways to see the slide locked back on an empty chamber and magazine.

The wounded man pushed a blood-slicked hand around the side of the tire he was hiding his head and torso behind, blasting off his last two rounds as well. Neither unaimed round hit Barrington, but bits of highway and shards of bullet stung his face. Barrington slammed another magazine into his pistol, fumbling through the adrenaline to find the slide release. As he did this, the last remaining passenger bolted from the car into the desert, throwing his hands up as he repeatedly screamed, “No *arma*, no gun!”

Barrington let the slide go forward on his pistol, which put a fresh round in the chamber. He saw no movement from the shooter, and heard only painful yells that were growing weaker and more sporadic. The bastard didn’t have any more ammunition, having expended the big revolver’s six shots in the firefight. Three more fruitless pulls of the revolver’s trigger, and the Mexican realized this as well. The heavy steel piece clacked to the ground, the shooter panting and groaning as he bled from a pair of wounds next to his already-ventilated friend with the knife.

The wounded man wailed out the dead man’s name, Miguel, and moaned in pain. From his limited Spanish, Jimmy gathered that the two were brothers. He got up, cautiously came around the rear of the car, and watched as the life bled out of the man, adrenaline dumping from his own system and giving him the shakes. He hopped over the two prone figures, favoring his wounded heel, and kicked the revolver away into the traffic lanes. Something began to boil up within him. Fury replaced fear, and only the realization that he now had an audience kept him from putting another round into the back of the wounded man’s head.

“Freeze! I said *FREEZE!* You move, you’re dead, cocksucker!” It was not his usual custom to curse, but being shot at with large revolvers tended to unhinge his lingual restraint.

Motorists who had stopped to watch the debacle unfold slowly began to come across the freeway's center divide, while other cars kept roaring past. The cold of the night came back to Barrington suddenly, his breath coming in steaming, ragged gasps and grunts as he put his knee on the back of the wounded Mexican man. The man whined and bucked as Barrington dropped his other knee against the back of his neck. Jimmy cursed and reached for his handcuffs while he fumbled for his knocked-away radio, grinding his knee to make sure that it hurt.

"Rosa, Rosa, this is Jimmy, come in, Rosa." Barrington skipped the normal radio protocol, opting instead for first names with the middle-aged latin lady who usually handled his patrol's radio traffic.

"Hold still, you fuck," he barked at his attempted killer. He holstered his pistol once the cuffs were on, and finally looked at his armored vest's midsection. He peeled off the flattened bullet slowly as his tender abdomen protested even being touched. The bruise underneath his vest was going to be a monster.

After a pause that seemed to take forever, Rosa answered.

"Go ahead, Jim." She knew when he used first names, something was wrong.

"Rosa, I'm gonna need backup out here on mile marker," he paused to look, "mile marker 109. Shots fired. I'm hit, and I need you to roll medical for three suspects down."

"Jimmy, I'm getting cellphone calls about something happening out on northbound 95. Did you say shots fi-

The radio squealed and cut out mid-transmission. He looked at it, puzzled at first, until he began to feel heat on his face and shoulder. The night sky over Las Vegas, some twenty miles away, lit up bright, brighter than any blazing Nevada afternoon. Barrington was blinded as a thermal flash caused his face to sting worse than the near misses from the bullets minutes before. His arm came up instinctively over his eyes, but nothing made the growing flood of light diminish. He smelled his sleeve start to smoke from the heat, and he twisted and

turned his back to escape the searing brightness. The Mexican underneath him screamed, despite his blood loss, and bucked frantically to get on his side. The patrol car's tires burst and began to fuse with the asphalt. The entire world seemed to be erupting into flame around him as the screams of the Mexican joined his own.

As quickly as it erupted, the monstrous light and heat faded, though Barrington was left blinking away the wall of white that had overloaded his optic nerves. His singed hands appeared first before his eyes, then he saw the horror rising from Las Vegas.

"Sweet Jesus," were the only words his lips could muster.

It looked like footage he had seen in high school history class about above-ground atomic testing. The ragged oval of cloud filled the horizon, framed by the now-burning mountains that surrounded the Las Vegas valley. The rising monstrosity slowly formed a thick stem as it crawled into the burning heavens. Roiling orange currents of smoke and flame snaked like magma flocs throughout the sinister mushroom cloud as lightning pulsed and crashed through the charred night. As the nightmare unfolded before his seared eyes, Barrington tore his view towards some of the motorists who had stopped to help him. Most of the cars were smoking or engulfed in flames, the occupants who had been outside their cars were milling about screaming. His cruiser parked a few yards away had taken the brunt of the heat flash, creating a shadow from the horrific assault. He and the Mexican beneath him had suffered, but were not charred like those that had been caught completely exposed outside their cars.

Barrington looked at the cloud as he absent-mindedly patted his hair, making sure it wasn't on fire in the back. As far as his injured eyes could see, the desert burned, the yucca and sagebrush winking like a million torches in the now-retained darkness. The ground rumbled beneath him as a wave of darkness spread from Vegas, snuffing out the flaming sea of burning vegetation. The shockwave from the blast hit with a thunderclap, knocking him to the ground and shattering the cruiser's windows. Barrington's ears, already assaulted by the

crack of multiple gunshots, nearly burst under the deep strain of the arriving concussion. Only the expansive distance from the epicenter in Vegas had spared them. The radiated heat, though two dozen miles away, had still been abominable. He couldn't imagine the hellish temperatures that were probably still boiling ground zero.

Jimmy crawled back to his feet and quickly thought about his boys. Hopefully St. George, Utah, had been spared. Barrington's mind raced as he sifted through his priorities. People were now coming up to him in the dim light of the fires, crying for help or medical assistance. He ignored them or told them to get away, since there was little he could do now beyond the obvious. He stepped over the moaning fat Mexican on the ground, who by now was fading in and out of consciousness from his burns and gun shots. He pulled out the first aid kit from his cruiser's battered and heat-blistered trunk, and turned to sit on the rear bumper to remove the shot-up boot from his wounded foot. He gave the melted plastic of the bumper a second look, thought better of it, and decided to sit in the car's rear seat.

"Callete la boca, puto," Barrington yelled, "You'll be lucky if I don't smoke your fat ass."

The man's moans faded to whimpers, blending in with the low cries of the others burning and dying on the highway.

He held his breath, and wrenched the boot off with a slow groan of pain. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but he could still put weight on the ball of his foot. The bullet had taken a chunk of flesh off his heel, but the bleeding stopped once Barrington applied a packet of quick-clotting powder to the wound. Hopefully it would hold; it would have to if he were going to see his boys again.

His attention was drawn back to the churning chaos that boiled over the horizon. A blazing pinpoint of red light emerged from the mushroom cloud over Vegas, growing larger far more quickly than any helicopter or plane he had seen. He watched in amazement as the red shape grew, soaring swiftly over the once-fiery desert. Soon the thing was overhead, crimson lights pulsing along the

edges of its speartip-shaped body as it tore through the flame-lit night. It was enormous, easily the size of an aircraft carrier he had seen as a kid. Its approach was eerily silent for something so huge. Once it was overhead, however, a low, pulsing drone reached his shattered ears. It had luminous lines, mostly red but with some greens and blues here and there, in strange patterns all over its massive surface. As it banked over him, he saw the myriad of pulses and lights jumping and swirling across its sky-blocking body begin to change.

What the hell was it, and how had it survived the nuke, he thought. Then cold, stark reality hammered him: this thing, whatever it was, hadn't survived the nuke. It had delivered it.

Rage and awe fought within him as the giant craft passed over the scorched countryside. Lights along its forward edges danced as he watched it approach the two sprawling correctional facilities just west of the freeway. Both complexes were burning from the Vegas blast, but thin glowing beams stabbed into them, causing giant explosions. The huge shape's deep, rumbling whine changed as it slowly made a wide orbit of the two prisons, raking them with flickering lines of energy until every visible structure was destroyed and aflame.

Barrington watched as the black and red horror moved north from the shattered prisons, and another, smaller nuclear detonation was seen over Indian Springs Air Force Base, some ten miles away. This explosion's flash and heat were momentary, its shockwave arriving a short time later with the sound of heavy thunder. Barrington felt more than heard the blast, his mauled ears barely registering the monstrous rumble. Knowing there was nothing he could do now beyond what he could control with his own two hands, he bandaged his heel and slipped the boot back on with a pained grimace. He looked into the trunk of the car for what he'd need most for the foreseeable future. He clumsily dumped the crash investigation kit and half a box of road flares on to the pavement as he reached for a long aluminum case situated under his road spikes. The latches of the case popped smartly, knocking his scorched knuckles. He cursed at the startling pain and flipped the lid open.

Trooper Barrington pulled his AR-15, the civilian version of the military's M-16 rifle, from the trunk of his burned and blistered cruiser. Though his boys lived in Utah with their grandparents, his ex-wife Angie was still in Vegas. Even if she was dead, he'd still have to pass through Las Vegas to get to Interstate 15, which led north to his sons.

As he racked the rifle's action, putting a round in the chamber, a motorist with moderate burns on one arm and a pistol tucked in his waistband approached cautiously. Barrington swung the rifle to cover the man. Jimmy was still shocky and a little nauseous, and the pain rasping across the heel of his foot was making matters only worse. Barrington flicked off the safety to the rifle, and brought the buttstock up to his shoulder.

"Stay where you are, sir."

The big man's hands went into the air slowly, deliberately, his eyes never leaving Barrington's. Two sobbing boys remained sheltered behind him. They didn't look too bad off. They must have stayed in their car during the blast.

"Don't shoot, officer. I was in the Marines. You don't have to worry about me."

"Keep your hands away from that pistol, mister."

"I will, I will, just don't shoot me or my boys...are you heading back into Vegas?"

Barrington evaluated the man and his children in the soft glow of the city burning over the horizon. They were no threat. The man hadn't quivered or panicked, even with a rifle pointed at him. Jim's throbbing foot told him he was going to need some friends if he was going to make the painful walk back to civilization, or what was left of it.

"Yup. You?"

"My wife's back there in town. We were headed back from Reno. The boys' grandparents live up there. My truck is a wreck, and the engine won't turn over. I think it was the pulse from that blast. Your cruiser probably won't, either."

Both men sized each other up, neither wanting to say the obvious in front of the two crying boys. Their mother was probably dead, but like Barrington, the boys' father had to know. He brought the rifle down from its ready position, and tried his car's ignition. Nothing. Not even an indicator light. The wiring must be fried.

"You used to be a Marine, huh?"

"I did a four year hitch in the grunts. I was at the second Battle of Fallujah. You?"

"Afghanistan. I was Army before this job. You know how to handle an 870?"

The motorist hushed his crying boys without bringing his hands down, and answered calmly, "I've a pair of Remingtons at home. Can you spare the one in the front seat?"

After a pause, Barrington unlocked the shotgun from the cruiser's gun rack, and tossed it to the man.

"You can put your arms down. Take this. It's loaded with alternating buckshot and slugs. Chamber's empty. Safety's on."

The motorist thumbed the safety off and pumped the shotgun into a full load with one fluid movement. Not bad.

The trooper held out his hand. "Jim Barrington."

The motorist returned his unburned hand in kind. "I'm Mike Lebowitz. These are my boys Jake and Eric. Say hello, boys."

"Hello, sir," came the words between hesitant sniffs and sobs from the boys.

"What about them?" Lebowitz motioned to the dying shooter and his brother, Miguel the corpse.

"One of 'em's dead. The other's not long. Fuck'em both. Them and their crew tried to kill me just before the bomb went off."

"Good enough for me. Come on, boys."

They turned to face the slowly disintegrating cloud that loomed over the horizon. The night was still dimly lit by the smoldering desert. The shockwave-snuffed ocean of fire had rekindled to a landscape of dull, swirling embers. It was a true vision of hell on earth.

They began walking towards the remains of Las Vegas, little boys in tow and weapons in hand. Burning people and cars stretched along the freeway in ragged clusters. Thick gray ash began to drift like snow onto the charred desert, and the wind was no longer cold.