

Cult Adjacent

By Liza Butenop

South Macon, Georgia

Randy looks at his munitions stockpile and sucks on his back tooth. Once he imagined himself a heroic protector who didn't want to choose violence, but was suited perfectly for it and would rise to the occasion spectacularly. He had visions of himself, bandana tied around his forehead (obscuring his prematurely receding hairline) biceps bulging, shooting down enemies and protecting those in his inner circle.

The stockpile in the years leading up to the event was the sole source of pride and confidence for Randy. He spent hours of his day researching and commenting on forums, building up a rep as a weapons expert online. Rifles, shotguns, handguns, revolvers, tactical knives and even crossbows—he knew all the makes and models. In the end, he ended up not using them at all. None of this happened the way it was supposed to.

Salt Lake City, Utah

Chrishell was in an internal crisis. It had been days since she had internet access, and without a constant stream of notifications from her followers she didn't really know what to do with herself. Normally she started her day streaming live from her closet, feeling the glorious hits of dopamine as her followers validated her choices with “omgs” and heart eye emojis. She never called herself an influencer, preferring instead the title Brand Ambassador of Marketing Consultant/Strategist @ Self-Employed. But that's how the whole

world-- her followers, clients, friends, and former colleagues- saw her, and thus was who she was.

As she stood in front of her absurdly full collection of trendy luxury athleisure (color-coded and laundered by hired help,) she felt a gnawing feeling that her job had made her into something that could no longer exist in the new reality of the world Post Event.

She still kept her phone charged and in her hand at all times but staring at it with no badge alerts on the square faces of her social media apps filled her with a strange sense of nauseous hunger.

Friendly's Supermart, I-75

Nicole was young, fresh faced and clear eyed, but Randy could clearly picture her at 40. Tired but happy, still with the easy smile she had now. *This girl is gonna have a bunch of kids with the first man who'll have her*, he thought.

Friendly but conservative and appropriate with her managers, she had a can-do attitude that gave you the sense she could easily run the place herself. She had been checking Randy out for almost 2 years now, never judging his purchases (zyns, slim jims, protein shakes, energy drinks, six packs, countless processed empty calories.)

He looked down on her for working at the gas station supermart and taking it seriously, slaving away for a wage that could barely be described as liveable. He also couldn't help but secretly admire her for trying her best and having respect for her job and herself. It assigned an honor to her labor Randy couldn't ever relate to. The closest he ever came to holding down a real job was the summer he worked construction at his ex-

stepdads company, who needed some on-the-books workers for insurance purposes. He secretly pocketed every other paycheck of Randy's and used it to pay his undocumented workers. They were each worth about two Randys labor-wise, so it was great business.

He hated working in the heat, and physical labor didn't give him the satisfaction some men talked about. The good night's sleep after a long day of honest work never came easily for him. Instead he ruminated on the various masculine interactions he had all day, feeling uneasy no matter what he had said. He didn't last the season.

Really, though he couldn't quite understand it, he was jealous of Nicole's lack of cynicism. She didn't have strong beliefs or convictions that he knew of, but to him she certainly felt *capable* of having them. This capacity for faith, real or imagined, made Randy feel sad about himself.

She was the first person he saw dead, the day it all started. Slumped down over the cashiers counter, her left eye looking towards the ceiling, or at god, the right in a puddle of her own blood. He froze.

He had gone in there after a marathon session of chain vaping and web browsing on his couch, having scrolled through lunch and finding himself hungering for a specific combination of microwave burrito and energy drink. Now, he felt an overwhelming urge to scream or throw up. Instead he swallowed back nausea and looked toward the parking lot. He saw a group of masked men blasting a grossly commercial and outdated heavy metal anthem from one of their car stereos, smashing beer and liquor bottles onto the gravel. "Let's fuck up all these cars man! What is that, a fuckin' hybrid?"

“Leave that old blue truck alone though, it’s got a Thin Blue Line bumper sticker.”

“I think I know the guy who drives it. Him and his old lady used to live on Forrest. I recognize the shitty truck bed.”

“Well alright then, just smash up the prius and let’s go to Waffle House. There’s a blue hair bitch that works there that’s always scowlin’ when gettin’ my free refills.”

“Nah, that old bitch was always complaining about my music. Fuck em’ both,” the third man said as he smashed Randy’s taillights with a baseball bat. He then relieved himself on the front left tire and flicked his cigarette onto the windshield.

The contingent of loud pickup trucks were roaring off halfway into the sunset on the I-75 by the time Randy made it to the glass front door of Friendly’s and pushed it open. Still holding his burrito and staring off after them, he had the vague and familiar feeling of being left out of little boy’s play.

When he got home, driving slower than normal and in the dark, he went straight to his laptop to see what his online groups were saying. They always knew where all subversive action was taking place. The second there was a business, politician, or woman to doxx they had the addresses ready. He knew RedWhiteRebel88 and LibTearsLancer would have info on what was happening in the Macon area. He had never met either in person, but they shared local news articles about abortion clinics and LGBTQ centers amongst each other. When he tried to open Parler in his browser, he got a 404 message.

He even tried turning off his VPN (which he never did, because he was a staunch stickler for internet privacy) but it didn’t help. He tried for an hour resetting everything he

could think of, but nothing worked: not his smart tv, not his phone's web browser or apps. Then he did something he hadn't thought of since his grandma was alive. He turned on the radio in his car.

There he learned that over the air broadcasting remained functional. The free tv news channels were still available via antennae that are still in every flatscreen, concealed so that you never have to think about the pre-streaming days. Most of the major conglomerate radio stations were playing the same exact mixes of top 40 and prerecorded voiceover ("Fuckin lame stream media," Randy thought) but the local NPR affiliate station was broadcasting emergency alerts. The fact that Randy signed multiple petitions to defund NPR (because "*Sesame Street* brainwashes kids to be commies!") went over his head in this tense moment.

After many painful minutes of tuning through Taylor Swift and static he heard a newscaster say that there had been a suspected nationwide cyberterrorist attack and that many major cities were facing widespread violent looting. He hoped there was still time, and drove off for the public library.

If he had tried calling someone, he would have seen that mobile calling and SMS services were still working, and local agencies had set up hotlines to call for information about support centers and emergency community shelters. But he didn't trust the government, knew no phone numbers, and had no one to call or text anyway.

But Chrishell did.

ONE WEEK LATER, Somewhere on the I-70

“So basically, there’s this whole network of preppers who predicted this, right,” Saskia explained with three fingers on the steering wheel, two holding a cigarette, and the rest gesticulating out the window as she floored her electric vehicle through Glenwood Canyon. “They came up with all sorts of contingency plans for what to do when the grid goes down. How to hack mobile payment systems, create a shortwave radio mesh network, access the web.”

“You can get online?!” Chrishell exclaimed, her intonation rising dramatically at the end.

“Yeah girl, where’d you think I got this list of jury rigged EV charging stations between here and Oklahoma, the Ford dealership?”

“Why even bother with all these charging stations? We could’ve taken my car. I just filled it up...”

“Gas stations are always the first place people go looting. I think it happens in the movies a lot. Especially in your fancy ass car. We’d be a target.”

With a mounting mixture of curiosity and desperation, Chrishell blurted out, “So, can I use your phone then?” She feared she had failed to not sound like a recovering social media addict in the throes of withdrawal.

“Not unless you got a landline in that Goyard. Dial up only I’m afraid. Besides, you wouldn’t even recognize what’s left on the web as Internet. It’s straight up geo-cities stuff. A

whole lot of comic sans.”

Dial up? Chrishell thought. “Who the hell still has a landline?”

Middle Georgia Regional Library

Randy should have been impressed with himself, really, for remembering how to get himself to the library which he hadn’t been to since he was a little kid. His grandmother used to take him there every week once he started living with her. He should have also been impressed that he managed to find the back up power generator, modem, and cable that got him onto the site that told him what he needed to know so he can finally start doing this whole thing right. Instead, he was so angry at himself for believing that in every single doomsday scenario he had prepared for, there would still be internet. Just the other day he commented on a thread about post internet survival tactics, “Big tech would never let that happen! They’d lose TRILLIONS.” *Idiot*, he thought.

He also should have been thrilled he actually remembered the URL he had saved in a post just so he could check it out and make snarky comments about it in his favorite prepper forum. Considering his self diagnosis of ADHD and stress related short term memory loss, things were really looking good for Randy.

And for some reason- miraculously, perhaps for the first time ever in its life and with so much at stake- the library printer worked. With his printout of directions, lists, passwords and instructions in hand, Randy pulled out of the library parking lot and set a course for Oklahoma.

Chrishell and Saskia

“When we get there, try not to, like, stand out too much,” Saskia said to Chrishell from the passenger seat with a side eye.

Chrishell bristled. Saskia really didn’t get that to be an influencer you had to perform conformity. “I know. I was in an MLM before. I got pretty high up. You just gotta like, say what they say and stuff. Repeat the phrases, be enthusiastic and helpful. Fit in, without ever really drinking the koolaid, ya’ know?”

“I’m not saying it’s a cult,” Saskia’s eyes widened. “I don’t think. I’m just saying we don’t want to make waves.”

They arrived at what looked like a massive airplane hangar in the middle of the plains at dawn, and spent a few days on cots filling out intake forms and confirming medical histories. The volunteer staff kept odd hours. There were rumors that they were experimenting with unihemispheric sleep “down there” and it was well known that the days there were 25 hours, to be more in tune with the human circadian rhythm. “You try functioning with *that* adjustment and no natural light! Haha,” they’d chime good-naturedly.

The boredom of filling forms in an industrial metal shack and the empty vastness of the plains outside made Chrishell feel excitement when they announced the new arrivals would finally be invited to descend. Meanwhile, Saskia grew more and more apprehensive.

“They like you more than me,” she said to Chrishell, as much a warning as an accusation.

“I told you, you just gotta have a good attitude. Then you can get away with the bare

minimum.”

“They already have you training to greet newcomers, and we haven’t even gone down there yet!”

“Eh, it’s just a job. We’re all supposed to do one. I guess they think I’d be good at welcoming people. You know I was a hostess before we worked at the PR firm. Maybe I put that on one of the forms.”

“Just... don’t get too caught up in this whole thing. This is only a stopover,” Saskia reminded her friend.

Chrishell tilted her chin and frowned at her. Sometimes she really felt that Saskia didn’t understand her at all. This was about survival.

Talihina Underground Commune

It had taken Randy 3 weeks to get to Talihina with his arsenal. There was still technically a federal government, and they still looked down on transporting a massive weapons collection across state lines. He had to avoid checkpoints, increasingly hostile roving gangs of looters, and suspicion to be able to make it with his stockpile intact. Luckily the collective had advice for all these issues. However, after three weeks of sleeping in his car even he had to admit he really fit the lone school shooter profile.

His contact- a guy named Mike- sent him coordinates, and when he was thirty minutes away gave him the signal that he neared his destination. He pulled into a small concealed underground garage about a mile from an abandoned commercial aircraft bay

sometime around midnight. He made to unhitch his cargo hold from the back of his truck when Mike hopped into front seat of Randy's truck and said, "Don't worry bout that, I'll just drive her over from here. Someone will pick you up shortly."

"Oh. Okay," Randy said lamely concluding the only human interaction he had in days. He forgot to ask if he was supposed to go back outside and walk to the hangar in the freezing cold autumn night. After some time, a light turned on in a previously unseen corridor and a form appeared.

This can't be happening. Not her, anyone but her.

"Hello," she said, each syllable like a bell's twin chimes. "I'm Chrishell." She didn't remember him. He felt a tinge of relief where he should have felt pain.