

THE INVESTIGATOR

Todd Robert Petersen

We shall be driven to great extremities. I know not what to think of it.
—Daniel Defoe, *Journal of a Plague Year*

By the end of the fifth wave, people didn't want to hear about staying safe and healthy. "Liberty" was the only word in play. People wanted freedom from tyranny, or they wanted death. In the end, nobody had to choose. They got both. In a single season, the sickness took half of those who remained.

There were vaccines for the early strains, but many refused to take them because someone on the internet told them the shots would make them infertile or subject them to government satellite tracking devices. And then the virus mutated. Early bioengineering successes could not be duplicated. People grew impatient and followed any of a dozen pied pipers to their doom.

On top of that, wildfires kept burning, which inflamed people's lungs. The virus exploited that weakness and took a third of those that remained. In the sixth wave, we lost half again. This is what they mean by cataclysm.

The factions that remained fought among themselves as food production and supply chains failed. The stores emptied out, and no trucks came to resupply. Some people were able to carry on for a couple of weeks with what they had, but most were destitute. There was nothing left to loot. Things were better for people living in the country or developing countries. Maybe it was a "first-will-be-last-last-will-be-first" kind of thing, but in the cities, where everyone had moved because life was better, our invisible systems began shutting down—internet, Amazon, cell phones, electricity—it all sputtered and went dark, spreading like a mist.

After that, we only knew what was going on around us in a narrow radius of a quarter mile, maybe. In the beginning, we'd hear sirens, then it would go quiet, except for gunfire, which didn't last long, but it reminded us this wasn't a dream, or a game, or a simulation. It was the beginning of the end of things.

Before all of this began, I was working for a locksmith, learning the trade. I knew how to open pretty much any door. During one of the lockdowns, maybe it was the third, I realized the key to my survival would be my tools, so I snuck out after curfew and stole them. It was a risk to be out there, but the cops were "responding" to looters, and I didn't care about what my boss would say. I had a strong feeling nobody would be going back to work. At this point, anyone who could leave had already fled. We weren't a country, a state, a city, or an anything, just people and an absence of resources.

When I got down to the last of my supplies, I moved outward to see what the neighbors had left in their vacant homes. Those few who remained were down to their last rations and had cleaned everyone else out. After scouring my quarter mile and gathering only enough for a week or two, I made plans to leave my condo and scavenge more broadly.

I found one of those baby carriers for joggers, with inflatable tires so I could sneak around the empty neighborhoods. Sometimes I'd walk into an abandoned house that would give me a strange feeling, the stillness amplified, like the buzzing of power lines, but it had to be something else because we hadn't had electricity for weeks. Mostly, the homes would be ransacked, completely picked over, which would leave me feeling sick and angry, though I had no right to feel slighted by others doing exactly what I did.

As you might imagine, poor folk didn't have much, but I found more in their homes than I did in rich houses. It makes sense. The rich were targets. Their houses were vast but empty. I suspect that somewhere once people ran out of food, they just started eating rich people, just like in that Aerosmith song.

This is all to give you a general sense of things, in case the only thing anyone remembers is the wasteland.

People weren't all gone, but I knew to stay away from them. I used to watch a lot of those shows—*The Walking Dead* and all that. So, I had this sense that ordinary people died early, and the only ones left were those who would do what it takes to keep going and come back for more. Those shows seemed like a good way to kill time. Everyone was watching them. Who would have thought it was training for the future?

One day while I was out on the scavenge, I wheeled up to a gated community with a big wall around it. The iron gate had been ripped open and lay mangled on the ground, and there was just enough room to get my little pushcart through.

A road ran up a slight incline that forked into a circle with five or six empty mansions all facing each other. The biggest house on the circle was surrounded by pickup trucks, most of them with flags in the back, mounted on poles. American flags, Confederate, the ones with the blue line, don't tread on me, things like that. They hung down in the windless air. The trucks had their windows shot out, and as I came closer, I saw the lawn was littered with bodies that had been torn apart by animals. What was left of the flesh had blackened, and the bodies had been there long enough that there was no smell. It looked like maybe seven guys spread out in front of the house and fallen in the doorway like they'd died trying to get in. All of them were in camo and red ball caps. Both garage bays were open, and the front door was only hanging from its top hinge.

I masked up before I went in, out of habit mostly, because wearing one worked for me so far, but also because these places could be rank. I'm not talking about the cloth masks we all made before, or even an N95. I had a full-on military-issue Avon M50 gas mask. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

The whole place was shot up. Blood streaks down the walls. Corpses in the kitchen. Women. More in the dining room. In the great room, there were dead kids huddled together in the corner. A happy birthday

banner dangled from the lights. A bunch of those Mylar balloons were down on the ground.

I'd seen a lot of dead people by that point, but I didn't even have a way to think about it. I tried to imagine what chain of events could end like this. Could a person be so hungry they'd go to these lengths? Maybe it was to save their own kids. Was it a mistake, over before anyone realized what they'd done, too late to take it back?

I walked to the front of the house and found more dead. Men. The windows were all shot out, and the walls behind them were in shreds. It didn't take long to put it together. These other guys busted through the gate, probably saw the lights on, smelled the barbecue going, thought they should be sharing the wealth. When they came to rob the place, the homeowner stood his ground. Instead of losing their food, they lost their lives.

The cupboards were bare. Pantry, too. I went room-to-room. Medicine cabinets empty. Down in the basement there was a whole room that was maybe supposed to be full of stored food or something. Flour dusted the floor, and in addition to all these shelves made of two-by-fours, there were these special homemade racks to dispense cans. There were tracks for little soup cans up to big #10 size. There was some rice, dried beans, just enough to kick around. But the place had been stripped bare.

There was also a child's room down there, and a home theater with a Bowflex. In the back of one of his drawers was a half bag of dried marshmallows. I crunched one and felt the burn of sugar in my cheeks. I slipped the bag into my pack and went back upstairs.

I looked around on the wall, and there was a family picture: a mom and dad, grown kids, a couple of grandkids. There was something like twenty people in that picture. They were all in blue jeans and white polo shirts, on a beach somewhere, maybe Mexico. Next to that was a sign that said "Families Are Forever."

I sat with that for a while. In the kitchen was a small desk. On it, there was a blue paperback that said Book of Mormon in gold type.

I picked it up, and stuck inside was a bunch of paper folded in half. Someone had written “Stake Map” on it.

Turns out that was a list of addresses of all the Mormon people in the area. I thought Mormons were all out in Utah, but I guess not. From the looks of the map, there were plenty of them here in Missouri, but spread out. I thought about how somewhere on this map there must be some Mormon house with nobody in it. I never knew any of these people, but I remember people making jokes about their underwear and their Jell-O and their basements full of food and water. None of those things was a joke to me anymore. With a little bit of luck, I might just be able to make it.

According to the map, the closest house was five miles as the crow flies.



The next house was the opposite of the place I left behind, plain and simple, one story with a carport. Easy to overlook. I went around back, checked all the windows. The curtains were drawn. The back door was locked with a cheap Schlage deadbolt, so I was inside pretty quick with a bump key.

The place didn't have much. The furniture was worn but clean. Everything was orderly, especially the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the front room. A half-basement was filled to the brim with food, first aid supplies, and water jugs. It was the most organized thing in the world, like a library. I opened a Tupperware thing filled with those big Hershey bars. I sat on the floor and tore off the plastic, then snapped off one row of squares. I wanted to eat the whole thing right there, but I could not do it. The sugar burned my mouth. I thought about what happened to these people. Did they run, leaving all these provisions behind? Were they taken? The questions were a distraction, and the answers didn't matter.

Occasionally, I would hear others outside, moving along the street. They would pass by this invisible house looking for something better. I

knew that kind of cost-benefit thinking. Sometimes it was just a pair of teenagers in hoodies, pushing shopping carts full of gear. They'd hustle along quickly, looking all around. As each day passed, I saw more and more people dressed in fatigues, moving down the street in formation, in squadrons. This was a pass-through part of town, near stores and gas stations. There was a mall a half-mile away, and they all headed for it. It was a good distraction, I guess.

I was able to live securely in this house for eighteen months without being disturbed or leaving. It was boring, but safety is boring. I didn't think it would be this easy, like getting to the promised land, but luck can't be all bad. I would have liked a little something to keep myself occupied, solar panels and a PlayStation, but this place belonged to old people. The list said their names were Mike and Evelyn.

I worried that I'd get soft and make a mistake, so I had a regimen: pushups, squats, crunches. I did all this to offset the fact that the rest of the time I ate and read. I started with that Book of Mormon because there wasn't any Stephen King. The rest of the books in that house were about the Mormon religion, so it seemed like the only starting point.

To be honest, I didn't take much interest in the book until the end. That is when I felt my story stacked on top of its story, and its story stacked upon the earlier stories, all of it converging in the past like a long stretch of interstate going out to the horizon. I read that book to try and understand the people I was living off. The dull, wandering story of a family following their dad into the wilderness turned into something I felt like I needed to pay attention to. It became the story of a civilization that thought it couldn't fail. I had to read it in bits and pieces. I found some newspapers from the mid-2000s in the garage, which gave me something else to think about. I'd already forgotten so much.

When I came back to the Book of Mormon, I noticed there were a lot of people in it like Superman's dad, shouting warnings, being ignored, calling people out, getting killed for it. So much of that book seemed like it was speaking to this moment. I wondered why Mormon

folk hadn't said anything about it. I mean, like I said, I didn't know any Mormon people, but I would have been interested to hear what they were saying in their churches about how the world was coming apart. Then it hit me, why would they say anything? People killed their prophets. It looks like they kept their mouths shut out of self-preservation.

When I came to the end of the book, I realized I should keep some kind of record myself, tell people how we got to this point and put it out there like a message in a bottle. Someone in the future would want to know what happened.

As the days passed, I moved on to other books about hope and faith and history and these Mormon pioneers who had fled from here in Missouri out west to Utah, fearing for their lives. I read about how they built Zion out there, and I learned how they massacred a group of people in a place called Mountain Meadows.

Winter came and went, and I read. If I had been religious when the end came, I don't know that I would have become more that way. I think I would have been angry. I can see now that this wasn't about there being no God. It was about God walking away from us. One of the books said God could weep. That caught my interest. Maybe God needed some alone time. Maybe it hurt him too much to see what we were willing to do to each other.

In the spring, I found the journals of the people who lived in this house in the back of a filing cabinet. Mike and Evelyn married when he was twenty-three and she was nineteen. He went on some kind of mission, preaching to people in the Philippines, then he came back and tried college, but he didn't like it. He joined the army and found himself headed to Iraq. He came home because an explosive device flipped over his vehicle. He thought he was going to lose his legs, but some other Mormon officers gave him something Mike called a blessing, and somehow the surgeon was able to put him back together. He came home and met her at a church dance. After that, the journals for both of them got thinner.

Every now and then, I'd read something like, "I should probably start keeping notes, for the family history." There would be a start, then nothing for a while until something sad happened: a miscarriage, a lost job, the car and the fridge going out in the same week. There were a lot of January 1sts in there. There was only a little happiness. Religion didn't seem to stop trouble. Not really.

Evelyn kept some scrapbooks of high school and had an envelope of class pictures of the kids. There were seven of them. Four boys. Three girls. There were pictures of other families all over the house, and one that showed them all together. This wasn't like my family at all, which was just me and my mom and a guy named Jerry, who my mom said left us a week before I was born.

Back in the first Mormon birthday party house, you could see they went down hard. It was scorched earth. But it looked to me like Mike and Evelyn had been taken out of this place in a helicopter, like they vanished. Mike's wallet was on the dresser, next to the keys for his Kia, which was sitting there outside covered in grime and dust. They took no photos, no supplies. There were no bodies, no blood, no bits of glass, only a stillness, and I was grateful.

When I ran out of Mike and Evelyn's food, I knew I had to leave, but I didn't want to. I fled to the next house on the list at night to avoid the patrols that still went by regularly.

I found it on the map and made it there in about an hour. It had already been broken into, so I didn't expect to find much, but in the front room, the skeletons of the family were laid out in the living room next to the piano on one side and the fireplace on the other. The mother was holding a chalkboard, and on it was written the message, "RETURNING WITH HONOR." Next to each skull was a small cup. The whole thing left me cold.

In the kitchen, I saw bottles and bottles of pills, and there was a bowl filled with dust and the empty capsules, like a heap of dead bugs. This had happened so long ago, there was no longer a stench, but the

house was stained with a feeling of unease. I couldn't stay there, but I felt like there was enough food here to get me through a month.

While I was downstairs gathering supplies, I heard footsteps. It seemed like two, maybe three people. They moved through the house and stopped in the living room. They spoke in clipped voices. Then I heard them leave. I stood there in the unfinished basement staring at the ceiling, listening to the emptiness of the house until I could hear my pulse and a ringing in my ears, like static on a radio that couldn't find a station. How did I go so long at Mike and Evelyn's without anyone coming? It had to be something a little more potent than luck. That's clear to me now, you know, in hindsight.

A verse from the Old Testament came into my mind. A prophet went up on the mountain to stand with God. The Lord came but passed him by. A strong wind rent the mountains, but the Lord was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake and God was not there. Then a fire, and still no God. But after the fire was gone, there was a still small voice.

I listened and listened for it, for those people to come down the stairs, for the ghosts of that dead family to stir. I strained so hard to hear something, like I was trying to roll a boulder with my mind.

Then, with my heartbeat climbing, I heard a voice. Was it mine? It said, *What doest thou here?*

"Where else should I be?" I whispered, which I know was ridiculous, but it made sense then.

There was no answer, but I kept staring ahead, waiting. In the dark, at the end of a corridor, sunlight crept in through one of the basement egress windows and fell across a photo of a huge building. It was kind of familiar. I went up to it and read that this was the St. Louis Temple. I'd seen it before near the interstate. It looked like a fortress. I thought, that's where I'll go.

I loaded my stroller and backpack and found the temple, which was close. Maybe just a couple of miles. I had wanted to wait until dark, but I

just couldn't stay. The streets were silent. To get there, I had to cut across a golf course and follow the interstate on the frontage road. There was a college football stadium near it.

I came to the front doors and was able to get in, but it took a while. Good locks. The doors swung inward, and I pushed my jogger inside. When I closed and locked them behind me, I could feel something new. I guess you'd call it security. It looked like a very nice hotel on the inside, but it had offices, sofas, telephones. There were no signs of disarray. It was the most organized place I'd ever been in. The air was neither fresh nor stale, but still. The furniture had been covered with sheets as if someone had prepared this place to be shut down.

The place was dark inside. The only light was right there, by the entryway. I sat on one of the couches and was so overcome with peace that I fell asleep. When I woke, it was dark. There were no blankets, so I dug my sleeping bag out and went back to sleep on the couch, feeling the safest I had felt for as long as I could remember.



In the morning, I rose and ate a sparse meal that did not require cooking, then I cranked up the hurricane flashlight I used for my early supply runs and explored the dark corridors. Based on everything I'd read in Mike and Evelyn's place, I expected something else, something more mystical maybe. There were a lot of chairs. As calm as I felt in here, there were rooms I did not enter. I shined a light inside, and at the threshold, I told myself no. There was no force field or feeling of dread, just a simple, wordless understanding that these floors were not for me.

I returned to the ground level and continued looking through the offices, found a laundry and a kitchen, which, if there had been power, might have turned this place into a good option for a permanent residence while I waited for whatever was going to happen next.

I slept and woke, stared a little, thought about this path I was on, then slept and woke again. Long yellow slats of daylight angled through

the windows. It was late afternoon. I gathered my thoughts and considered how I might occupy a building that was this dark even in the middle of the day, then I saw movement and heard a thump on the doors.

I rolled to the floor, waiting for the noise of shattering glass that never came. After I got my breathing under control I crawled along the floor until I could see the entryway. A person was out there, spray-painting a biohazard symbol on the glass. The last few lines were very light, and the spray can quit working. They shook the can, banged it twice against the glass, and threw it against the concrete. After that, there was nothing. I waited a few minutes. Then I moved through the shadows to a place where I could see out. The vandal joined a legion of others moving together down the frontage road.

I had a pair of tiny binoculars in my backpack. I got them and scanned the army. I'd seen one or two of this kind before: shaved heads and their skin and jackets stained red. Some wore goggles or yellow sunglasses. Others wore clear face shields because, in the final days, people believed the blood of the infected might make you sick. A single droplet would do it. These people were the type to spread that kind of talk around.

They turned sports equipment into armor, which looked like rhinoceros plates under the morning light. Some drank from cheap plastic bottles. Others rested on spears they planted on the asphalt. Eventually, they turned and marched on, a phalanx of the most heavily armored out front, a few dozen others in the middle, and another few rows of foot soldiers bringing up the rear. At the back of the column, people pulled wheeled carts behind them on yokes made of rope and silver duct tape.

I thought about who these people had been in their other lives. They must have been regular salt of the earth types turned from honest work into people who needed to survive a fallen world that had fallen even further.

I remember reading that Mormons came to these temples once for themselves then returned to care for the dead, but there were no dead

here, not even the feeling of haunting I felt so often in the homes I relied on. It was clear to me that these glass doors wouldn't protect me. I would always be worried about the next group of whoever came along. That was life at this point. Now that the building had been marked, maybe there would be a kind of protection or warning or something.

I sat in the dark, listening to the silence, eating small meals, and exploring more of the rooms. There was a sterility here, like a tomb, but an empty one. For the first time since I was a kid I knelt, and I asked this building if it thought I could stay. It had spoken to me earlier, and I wanted it to clarify itself. I asked only once and sat until the answer came: "This is the house of the Lord."

I knew I could not stay, and I had no idea where I might go that might be secure. I prepared myself to leave, wrote out these events, and stashed it here in the temple so my story will not be lost, and I will set out to find others, hoping that if I meet my end, it will happen suddenly, without hesitation. I hope I might feel peace like this again, but I fear that once I leave, the heavens will close up behind me.



It has been three years since I left that temple, and I have now returned. When I zipped up my story and left it behind, I thought there would be nothing more to add. I knew I couldn't stay, and I had no idea where I would go. I wandered as others have wandered at the end of their stories, wondering why God didn't just end it for them. They looked for direction and found none. That was the most baffling part of this Book of Mormon. It ended in catastrophe. How do you pin your hopes on that?

Many times, in desperation, I thought I might take my own life. It took so much time and energy to find enough food, shelter, water, and for what? It seemed to be for the purpose of making me able to find more food, shelter, water. As I moved about, I saw many churches had

been marked with the biohazard sign like they had done to the Mormons' temple. It seemed to be a commentary on the times. I can't say they were wrong to suggest that religion was toxic. It was in line with what I learned from scripture. The righteous always have the farthest to fall.

My exhaustion was complete. Reality became elastic. I saw movement where there was silence. I heard voices where there was emptiness. I would drift off to sleep as I walked, sometimes waking as I stumbled. Sometimes I found my way to houses on the map. Mostly I took shelter where I could. I zigzagged, foraged, and grew frail. Eventually, even with my skeleton keys, I could find no sustenance other than that which I could catch or kill, but I was a poor hunter, so I ended up gathering.

Eventually, I came to the last house on the map. It was beyond the city limits, isolated, next to an open field that had become choked with weeds after years of lying fallow. The door was unlocked. Like so many other places, this house had been picked clean. I stopped there because I could go no further. I had not eaten in days, so as the sun slipped low against the horizon, illuminating the tree line in a belt of pink and crimson, I sat in a chair in the front room and asked to be taken up. The heavens did not open. I prayed to find others who believed. I had so many questions the books didn't answer. And what good is a church of one? I looked, but they did not reveal themselves. I prayed for ravens to feed me but saw only crows.

In the silence that followed, darkness gathered and fell. I let go of this place and drifted off. During the night, I dreamt I was traveling along a road that cut through a dark wilderness. I followed the road for some time, noticing lights in the distance, dancing for brief moments before extinguishing themselves.

After I traveled the road for what seemed like hours, I came to a figure seated in an oversized stuffed chair. He wore a white seersucker suit and was fanning himself in the darkness. He smiled and gestured around himself then swiveled in the chair and pointed in a direction

that ran perpendicular to the road. I followed his finger with my eyes, and in the distance, a tree flashed for an instant like it had been lightning struck. Blue energy coiled around it then flickered and went out. When I turned back, the man was gone. I walked ahead and struck an iron rail that did not follow the road but led off into the darkness in the direction of the tree.

I ducked under that rod and continued on until I came to another rod that likewise crossed the road. I followed it until I could no longer see the road. My feet sank if I stood still, but if I stayed in motion, I moved along just fine. There was a flash behind me, and I saw the tree fizzling, so I turned and followed the rail in the other direction. As I walked, I crossed a river then heard voices speaking in a distant room. Eventually the way led upward, and I often stumbled in the darkness.

When I awoke, the house was filled with sunlight.

I was lying face down on the floor, and under the sofa, I saw a yellow plastic Easter egg. It was so far back, I had to lift the sofa to retrieve it. It rattled. I cracked it open, and three small chocolate eggs fell out into the palm of my hand, along with four jelly beans. Saliva welled in my mouth as I ate the red bean, chewing until it dissolved completely. The sweetness was overwhelming. I then picked the foil off one egg and bit into it. The chocolate filled my mouth with a full and delicious warmth. I ate the rest of the candy, alternating between bean and egg until it was all gone.

I looked back under the couch, and of course, there was nothing. I stood and left and went out through a small side gate. As I closed it, I thought about how many times at Mike and Evelyn's I'd read about the gate through which we must enter. In all that time, I couldn't remember any discussion of leaving, only coming in. Was there any difference between an entrance and an exit? I never read the words "straight is the gate through which we must depart," but it makes sense. Coming into this world and leaving it are two sides of the same coin.

For a time, I thought I had died.

But the hunger returned almost immediately. I took the empty egg, clicked it shut, slipped it into my bag, and continued on, looking for any small thing that might have been placed here for me. Mostly there was nothing. But if I kept looking, I would see wild berries, gardens that had reseeded themselves. Orchards.

Where had all this abundance been hiding?

TODD ROBERT PETERSEN {toddrobertpetersen.com} is originally from Portland, Oregon, but now lives in Cedar City, Utah, where he is a professor of film studies and creative writing at Southern Utah University. He is the author of the story collection *Long After Dark* and three novels: *Rift*, *It Needs to Look Like We Tried*, and *Picnic in the Ruins*.