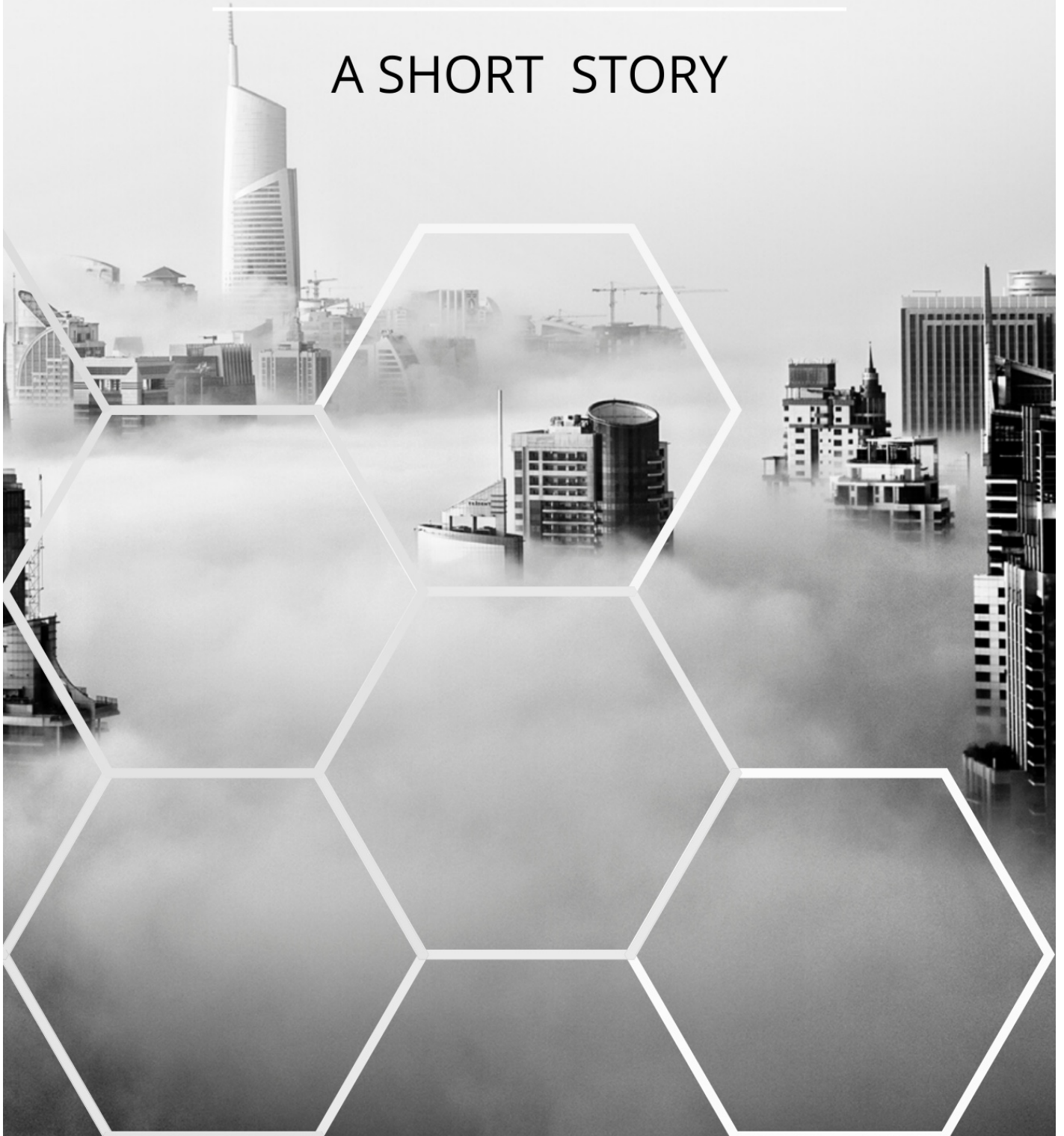


**DEGEN HILL**

# **TRANSITORY**

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A SHORT STORY



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## TRANSITORY

by Degen Hill

The days were getting longer. Or at least they felt that way. Dust flew into the air as Karl Neesham's tattered boots plodded through the streets. Cars with broken windows were strewn about, and the houses that still remained had metal blockades over the doors. The sound of gunshots ripped through the silence of the deserted streets. Karl pulled his black trench coat a little tighter as the wind whipped dust against him, as if trying to permeate the already dirty clothes he was wearing. The cans of soup and assortment of electrical parts in his cracked leather bag weighed heavily upon his back. Scavenging was now a necessity, but each outing carried risks. Risks that Karl had deemed worth taking.

He walked on, taking in the quiet around him. The perpetual moving, shifting, and aggravating momentum of society had come to a grinding halt in 2043. People around the world had become unsatisfied with all the rules and regulations and societal norms and everyone just stopped. They quit working, they stopped contributing, and as a result, society, as it had come to be known, now ceased to exist.

Karl looked over and saw a broken microwave on the side of the road. His thoughts shifted to when he was young and how he would take apart his mother's kitchen appliances, ever curious about the inner workings. Later in life, he became an engineer, working on tech for the military. Despite his early ambitions, he, like billions of others around the world, had grown tired of the hierarchical structure of not only their jobs, but of the social class system that had divided society so aggressively.

For Karl, the long hours, the low pay, the glass ceilings, and soul-crushing day-to-day duties had finally proved to be too much. Monotony and tediousness had eaten away at him until there was no other choice. Around the world, humans unequivocally and resoundingly stopped working. Naturally, society descended into chaos, a world where rapacity ran rampant, and survival became paramount. The individual overcame the collective in the most barbaric way; apathy had overcome empathy. A year after The Stop took place, there was no region left on Earth that could be classified as a functioning society.

As Karl walked on, he passed by a green military jacket lay strewn in the street and he thought of the day he had quit, unaware of what the future would hold, but convinced that he was making the right choice. Now, seven years later, Karl was beginning to have his doubts. *Be loyal to what matters* he would tell himself, uncertain if he was reminding himself of his values or trying to justify the irreversible situation he was part of.

Making his way around the back of a worn-down house, he dropped his utility bag to the ground and looked around before rapping three times against the cellar door. The rusted joints creaked, and the doors popped open, revealing a young face smudged with grease and soot. Karl handed the young man the bag, looked around once again, and then entered the cellar, quickly closing the doors behind him.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” asked Lew.

“Let’s hope so,” said Karl while hanging up his dusty black coat.

Lew walked towards the metal table in the middle of the room and turned the bag upside down, dumping out the contents. Along with the soup cans were various cables, assorted engine parts, and odd bits of machinery that Karl had thought might be of some use in the future.

“More soup?” asked Lew, picking up a dented can of beef stew.

“Sorry, they were all out of caviar.”

“Well, at least you got the cables. You think we’ll be able to finish it?” asked Lew, glancing at the supplies. At 25, he was just as curious as he was as a child when he had first moved in next door to Karl. However, everything else changed. After losing his parents at the start of The Stop to violent marauders and moving in with Karl, he had become tough, willing to do whatever it took to live in this new world.

Karl thought about how many times he had answered the question posed by the young man. Over the years, Lew had always been by Karl’s side, helping him tinker with small projects and the impending question of “you reckon it will work?” never failed to get both men thinking about what the future held in store.

“With some luck, we just might have what we need,” said Karl, looking at the blueprints he had painstakingly drawn up. For years, Karl had designed and built advanced radars for the military. The authority on micro-radar systems, Karl had written several articles on the subject. Despite his interest in the work, the monotonous years spent grinding away for the U.S. military had finally pushed him to his breaking point.

After soldering one of the recently acquired wires into place, Karl pushed the welding goggles up his forehead and looked at Lew, “Ready.”

Lew flipped a switch on the side of the machine and the green screen lit up, emitting a quiet hum throughout the sparse room. He looked up at the ceiling, hoping the jerry-rigged antenna on the roof would work this time. The beam on the screen's surface quickly moved around in a circle as both Karl and Lew looked at it, quiet, but hopeful. A faint pulse flashed on the screen. Again, the beam circled around, and this time, the pulse was stronger.

Karl grabbed a map and began calculating the distance to the blip. He set the pen down, turned to look at Lew.

"It's from beyond the city. Less than six hours by foot."

"What is it?"

"I," he began, unsure of how to answer. "I don't know." The darkness in the room illuminated the light coming from the screen as both were transfixed on the pulsing dot.

"You think someone's out there," asked Lew, looking up at Karl.

"Looks that way. Could be a broken piece of tech, but maybe it's something else. Something valuable." Karl couldn't be sure what exactly the blip was, but like Lew, he was eager to find out. Supplies in the city were running low, and if there was a chance of finding something useful beyond the city limits, he knew the risk could be worth the reward.

"I'll check it out tomorrow," he said.

Before Lew could protest, he continued, "It would be foolish for both of us to go. Someone has to stay here and man the fort; keep an eye on all our precious items."

"Precious," Lew muttered with a smile while picking up a spark plug from the table, "how silly of me to forget."

Karl smiled and then looked back at the pulsating light, closed his eyes, and thought *The most important step a man can take is the next one*. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would head out, and for better or for worse, find out what exactly was causing the blip.

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Karl woke before dawn and quietly got dressed. He grabbed his utility bag, checked to make sure his knife was strapped to his belt, opened the cellar door, and headed out into the early morning hours.

The minutes turned into hours, and hours turned into discomfort as Karl made his way through the forest. Step over step of rubble, broken glass, and rugged terrain had begun to take its toll on Karl's worn boots. He had been walking since 4 a.m., hoping to avoid the ever-watchful thugs who didn't believe in the notion of 'individual property.' The outskirts of town posed the most risk, so Karl twisted his route to ensure his trip out of the city remained unharried. Now, walking through the forest, amidst green trees, wild bushes, and most noticeably, a cleaner sort of quiet, Karl took a deep breath.

He had never gotten out much into nature as an engineer. Projects and deadlines and meetings and drawing boards and bosses in decorated uniforms had kept him busy. He stopped walking and pulled out a map and a compass. The sun was overhead, and from his position on the map, he knew he was close. To what, he wasn't sure, but he felt it. The wind played with his light brown hair and blew across his face.

“State your name and business,” a voice yelled out. Karl turned towards where the voice had come but saw nothing but trees. His hand moved down towards his waist, ready to draw his knife if need be.

“I’m not gonna ask twice!”

“Karl,” he responded. “Saw the blip.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a woman in a white robe and a broad-shouldered man in a black jacket emerge from the surrounding trees.

As the woman got closer, Karl noticed her long blonde hair and the way she moved, uncharacteristic from the agitated pace of those in the city.

Standing about a meter from him, her blue eyes bored into him.

“Why are you here?”

Karl could feel his heart beating but looked into the woman’s eyes and said, “Saw a blip on my radar. Figured it would be worth checking out. Due diligence and all that.”

The woman stared back at him with a hint of a smile. *How is she so clean?* thought Karl. Everyone in the city had a certain grime to them, including himself, but this woman, in her white clothing, was immaculate. He looked over at the man and saw a gun holstered on his waist.

“And who might you be exactly?” he asked, turning back to the woman.

Without responding, she simply asked, “What did you do before The Stop?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“You came to us,” she said. “Answer the question.”

“I was a weapons and technical engineer for the military. Missiles, sensors, radar, those sorts of things. And you are?”

“You can call me Arella. Please, follow me.”



“Follow you where exactly?”

“You’re here because of the blip. So, let me show you.”

The woman turned to walk from where she had come. Karl, looking around the forest for some sort of confirmation of the absurdity of the situation, followed her, with the man following behind.

“So, you were part of The Stop?” she asked.

“Well, me and the rest of the world.”

“Not everyone,” she said. “Why did you stop?”

“I don’t think society was happy with where it was going or what it had become. So, we took the next step forward. Technologically backward, perhaps, but ideologically forward. I guess you could say that sometimes you have to break the wall of your house to get a better view.”

“Yes, but you, Karl, why did *you* stop?”

As they continued walking, he thought for a moment before answering, “People are always going to have problems regardless of what type of system we live under. But this is the fallacy of empires, rulers, masters, and leaders. No one is primary. Men should not rule over men; people should be working together, the same way that all the cells of your brain cooperate, you don’t have to force them together in association. You don’t have to make your brain cells cooperate. You don’t have to arrange a treaty of some kind; they just do so. I can’t remain indifferent to the fact that I was living a life controlled by someone else and controlled by ‘technological innovations.’ I had become a slave to society. I was living a middle class life, caught up by consumerism, and going to a job that I wasn’t passionate about. In the end, I, like so many others, wanted out.”

“And are you out now, Karl?”

“I’m free from the social constraints of what society was before The Stop. I had reached a point in life where I could actually step outside myself and see who I was based on the sum of influences I’ve had on my life up to that point. I took control of my own narrative, freed myself from the bonds of the me defined by those prior experiences, and now I’m living a free life.”

“Life is transitory.”

He turned to respond, but wasn’t sure how. As the group stopped walked, she gestured ahead at what lay before them. A huge valley unfolded below as the clearing around them thinned out. Green, lush grass with trees that seemed to form a wall around the valley below. In front of them, the scenery appeared to flicker, like a tv trying to maintain a clear signal. Arella grabbed something, almost out of mid-air, and moved it to the left. A 3-meter-tall flickering hexagonal panel swung open, and then, for the first time since The Stop, Karl heard sounds from a life long ago, sounds he thought he would never hear again. Cars, people talking on the street, laughter, music. Arella guided him around the panel and through the opening. Karl’s eye’s widened as he took in his surroundings.

“What is this?”

“It’s life.”

“It’s a functioning society,” he said, staring at what he saw before him. It was nothing like what the city he had left this morning had turned into. He looked through the hexagonal space and saw a new city, full of life, one that was clean, and moving, almost alive. Huge buildings reached towards the sky, small shops flashed their neon signs, and both people and white tramcars were moving about, something that seemed to be non-existent where Karl lived, a city that Lew had once referred to as “post-apocalyptic.”

“Lost, but not forgotten,” Arella said, looking down at the sprawling city. “Karl, I’d like to ask you a favor, and perhaps, I could do you one in return. This panel,” she said, pointing at the hexagon, “is part of a system of sensors that have allowed us to sustain our way of life. But, like all things, they need maintenance. Otherwise, our way of life might be vitiated.”

“What is it you’re asking?”

“Our society has needs. What we have created, or in other words, continued to maintain, requires constant efforts. For some time now, we’ve needed more engineers to help maintain our shield,” she said, gesturing to the giant panels of hexagons that, from the inside, gave a view of the outside world while still maintaining their geometric outline.

“You’re offering me a job?”

“A few weeks ago, we put out a signal, the blip, and you’re the only one who has had the means to check it out. So, to answer your question, I’m offering you a chance to be a part of something bigger than yourself.”

Karl stopped, remembering the same slogan being said when he was first interviewed with the Army’s Robotics Division. At the time, it had sounded like a grand statement, a promise of a future that he could be a part of. Now, it sounded like a stranglehold on the life he had sacrificed so much to have.

His eyes fixed on Arella and he said, “This might look like the world we knew, but it’s not. Your offer comes with expectations and requirements, and I assume you’d want me to stay here?”

“Running water, electricity, transportation, the rule of law -- our society has everything you could want.”

Karl sensed a small, dull ache in his chest as he was again reminded of his first job interview, where they had promised him a salary, bonuses, holidays, and all the other perks that came with a job provided he gave up his time to help their corporation grow. The thought of it made him sick.

“At what cost?”

Arella smiled. “There will also be responsibilities and an agreement to abide by our society’s laws, our system of governance, and way of life. I understand that choosing to be part of The Stop must have been liberating, cathartic even. Look at your life now, out there,” she said, gesturing to one of the transparent panels, “is it how you imagined? It all seems a bit futile to me.”

He thought of his small workshop and his life in the city, foraging for food among the broken-down buildings and the amenities of life that no longer existed. He thought about the feeling of stability he had felt before The Stop when everything seemed locked in place, secure, stable, and suffocating.

“There’s a kind of hope in futility.”

“But is it fulfilling?”

“I’m living the life that I want to live, with no strings attached or deadlines to meet or anyone to answer to except myself.”

“Are you living or surviving?” She knew he had thought about this question before, just like many others who were now “free” on this Earth, or however they now described themselves. “I’m offering you an opportunity. You can go back to wherever you came from and continue living, or surviving, or whatever it is you do out there. But if you want something more, a purpose, a *life*, you can come back and live here under our rules and as a member of our society.”

“I could just help you fix them and then go about my business,” suggested Karl.

“Working with our technology and familiarizing yourself with our first line of protection is too great a risk having you come and go as you please.”

“Well, I appreciate your offer. It’s a lot to process. I had wondered if there were people who had carried on with the old way of life but never thought I’d see it for myself. Tell you what, if I ever return here, you’ll have my answer.”

Arella nodded. “I know you think of it as sacrificing your values, but think what you’ll be gaining.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Karl as the man in black gestured up towards the open hexagonal panel from where they had entered.

“One last thing,” said Arella, “If you ever come back here and do not intend to stay, life as you know it will cease to exist. We must preserve our way of life and will go to great lengths to do so.”

“Understood,” said Karl.

“And remember, our history is not our destiny.” Karl nodded as he turned his back to the thriving city and stepped back into the forest on his return journey to the barren city he called home.

The walk back seemed to be quicker than his journey out as Karl became lost in his thoughts. Thoughts about what he had seen, what he had been offered, and thoughts about what he’d tell Lew after he got back home. Arella’s words echoed in his mind, *our history is not our destiny*.

When he arrived back at the house, he went around back and found Lew, occupied with a mess of wires leading into the cellar.

“So, what’s out there?” he asked, looking up from his work.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Karl said.

“Let’s hear it!”

“A job offer.”

“A what?”

“I couldn’t believe it either. There’s a god damn city out there, insulated behind some kind of holo-dome, which, I take it, needs a repairman. There’s an entire society. Electricity, cars, money, everything we used to have. I guess some people haven’t made peace with what’s happened. Or maybe they’re happy with the life they’ve created for themselves. Either way, what’s out there is nothing more than an idealized version of the life we lived before, full of constraints and expectations and statutes.”

“I don’t want any part of whatever’s out there,” Lew said

“I expected as much,” said Karl, thinking about the rigorous expectations Lew had had as a college student, being forced to study philosophy because his parents thought engineering was not meant for someone of his intellect.

As the wind whipped against both men, and dust swirled up from the streets, Karl looked back towards where he had come, thinking of the society under the dome that had refused to stop. *Our complete ignorance of what the future held in store might have taken us unaware, he thought, but at least it was our choice.*