

APOCALYPSE CHILD

Surviving Doomsday and the Search for
Identity at the End of the World

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For all the Pascua-Yaqui relatives whose stories got lost, and all the other church kids who grew to tell the truth.

This is a true story that explores mature themes of sexuality, racism, abuse, language, pregnancy loss, medical peril and death of a child, as well as overall religious trauma. Please read with care.

Prologue

I stopped looking for the Apocalypse long ago, but every once in a while, I wondered if it still looked for me. My childhood days, weeks, months bled into each other as the years went by, but some of the smells and sounds and sights would never leave my memory.

Today, years later, a cold snap in the weather took me back to that cabin in an instant.

I could smell the winter chill before I felt it. Maybe it was because I'd burrowed myself so deeply inside my blanket, exposing only my nose for air, or maybe it was the stale, brittle quality of a log house that hadn't been warmed in hours. Either way, my eyes abruptly opened as I realized the fire must have gone out in the night. Now I'd have to start over. Would the firewood I'd chopped yesterday even be dry enough to use yet? I groaned and rolled over, not ready to move.

My ears ached; I had fallen asleep listening to music through my headphones again. I could still hear Michael W. Smith leading a worship song. The sound was watery and muffled, evidence that my Discman was suffering from a dying battery. I pulled the headphones off my ears in annoyance and shut the Discman off. *Stop being wasteful. What are you going to do when there are no more batteries?*

"Sing the songs myself," I muttered as I finally threw my blanket off and sat up. A shudder rippled through my adolescent body, making my bones ache with cold even though I was wearing an oversized t-shirt, flannel pajama pants and wool socks. Before my mom and I came here, I wore thin nightgowns to bed, but now I was used to adding layers. As I put the weight of my feet down I heard a loud crack through the floor. I reached down to the end of my bed for my sweater and toque. Mom was asleep in the cabin's original bedroom, on one side of our Jack-and-Jill bathroom, and I was on the other side, in the pantry that was just large enough for my bed

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and dresser. Thankfully, it also had a window, and I gently lifted the curtain to let the morning light in. Frost swirled the glass like lace. It must have been at least twenty below outside, which felt cruel, but at least it meant it likely wouldn't snow again today.

During our first winter here, Mom met a guy named Dave who had a tractor plough. The local logging company paid him to clear McDonell Lake Road past the ski hill, whenever needed. Our road, off Hankin Lake, branched away from McDonell for four kilometres before it reached our property and wasn't logged anymore, so Mom offered to pay Dave extra if he could come by our place whenever possible. He didn't always have time, but it felt like Christmas when he showed up. It meant I could leave this place at least one more time.

Don't think about that, I warned myself as I walked past the front door and into the kitchen. Too late, I ducked down beneath the front window as I heard a chorus of ungodly bleating begin outside. Mom had the animal pens built way too close to the cabin, and now every morning when they saw the slightest movement, the sheep and goats begged for hay as though it was their last meal. Eventually it would be, once we learned how to butcher and cure their meat. It was another task on our Apocalypse to-do list. I suspected Mom was procrastinating. Her belief in the Apocalypse was sincere, and I knew she wanted us to have the skills to survive on our own, but I didn't think she wanted to learn how to butcher any more than I did.

I didn't want to learn how to butcher. I didn't want to live in a closet with a window. I didn't want to worry about my Discman running out of batteries. I didn't want the world as we know it to end. *Don't think about that*, I told myself again.

But it was all I could think about. The coming Apocalypse was all around me—it was in the wind that rushed unabated through the trees into our cleared field, it was in the blisters on our hands and feet, it was in the blood seeped into the ground from the chicken carcasses I found every morning no matter how hard we tried to keep the foxes out. It was why we were here.

Here, in this tiny cabin we'd learned to heat, on this three-hundred-acre, off-the-grid property forty-five minutes from Smithers, in the wilder-

ness of BC, in the middle of nowhere, where we waited for the end to come.

I tried to ignore the animals' hungry cacophony outside. It was loud but Mom still wasn't awake, so I started to twist fresh newspaper into spindles and stack it with kindling like a mini cabin, just how she taught me to. I loved the sound of the match striking the side of its box, seeing the split second where science turns to magic and fire is born of friction. No matter how many times I built a fire from scratch, seeing the tendrils of smoke curl and hearing each crack the wood makes as it burns was so satisfying. Soon, our small cabin smelled much better, as the camping-style coffee pot came to percolating life and warmth returned to the logs.

It was simple here. Not long ago, we were ordering takeout on the phone and watching TV. Now, in front of the stove, we had an ancient dining room table with a bowl of SuperValu grocery store fruit in the centre. We knew we wouldn't be able to grow our own fruit here, so we tried to get some every time we went to town; the red, orange and yellow skins added a nice burst of colour to the otherwise dark and dusty decor. The living room had one couch and one loveseat, overflowing with books. Mom must have been up all night reading sermons and the Book of Revelation again. It was close to 9:00 a.m. and still felt dark, but we were used to reading by candle or lantern light now. It was how we spent a lot of our time.

I wanted to be in the kitchen more, to learn how to live and dine like Laura Ingalls Wilder or Anne of Green Gables, but it was mainly a storage space. One of the only benefits of winter was that we could store more perishable food outside in the snow; items like milk or meat or eggs when the chickens felt like laying them were a special treat. I thanked God every day for the gravity-fed running water that also gave us an indoor toilet, and I prayed that one day I'd master the art of baking fresh bread inside a wood stove.

You won't be here much longer anyway. The intrusive thoughts returned. Thankfully, they were interrupted by Mom emerging sleepily from her bedroom. "Morning, babe. Look at you getting things done so early."

I beamed with pride, then quickly diminished it. "Well, I forgot to hide from the animals again, as you can probably hear."

Mom's cackle filled the small room easily. "They're a bunch of brats, aren't they? How was your sleep?" She poured herself a cup of coffee, and I

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knew what she was really asking. *Did God send you any more dreams?*

I hesitated. “I fell asleep listening to my music again, so I don’t really remember. Did you read anything new last night?” I poured a packet of instant oatmeal into a bowl; I’d heat water for it in a moment.

“Yeah, ever since I started reading the Amplified version of the Bible. It sheds light on so many more things. When you pair it with the Matthew Henry commentary, it packs a wallop! Just like this coffee—thank you, babe. I think I’ll do some more studying after breakfast and morning chores; what passages are you going to read today?”

I thought about my answer as I walked to the sink to fill up the kettle, but the water didn’t come on. I turned the faucet again and again. Nothing.

Mom’s shoulders slumped. “Oh no. Did we forget again? God, what are we doing out here?” Her voice shook with angry tears.

When the temperatures dropped drastically and we neglected to leave the faucet on a tiny bit to keep the gravity-fed spring in motion, everything in the pipes froze up. Which meant we had to add collecting snow in pots to melt on the stove for drinking water to our list of chores, an exhausting and unrewarding task as the snow always yielded half the amount of water we expected. And we had to use the outhouse.

Even though I was almost a teenager, watching my mother fall apart at the kitchen table made me feel small again.

“Mama?” I asked gently. “Are we still Spartans?”

That seemed to shake her out of what she would call her navel-gazing.

“Oh yes, babe. And you know we’re even stronger because we’re in God’s army. We’re gonna figure this out and claim this land for Him and anyone else who needs it, one day. I was just having a moment.” She wiped her eyes and straightened her shoulders. “Let’s go get our snow and feed those animals.”

It took hours for us to melt the water we needed, and I ate a precious apple instead of instant oatmeal while I waited. Mom’s words had time to turn over and over in my mind, as well as the intrusive thoughts from earlier.

They weren’t new, certainly; I’d been asking Jesus to save me from Hell and from myself since I was four years old, and asking Father God to delay His judgement upon a wicked world since I was eight. But every adult

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I knew had been telling me that since there was nothing I could rely on other than Heaven's finicky grace, I might as well resign myself to His will. Be wise enough to predict the approaching collapse, and harmless enough to survive it. Or, we die as martyrs for our faith. Either way, we win.

So why did it feel like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from?

I bundled myself up from head to toe in L.L. Bean gear to collect more snow. The sheep and goats happily ignored me now, eating their hay and settling in for a nap. It was cold and windy enough that a thin layer of ice had formed on top of the four-foot snow drifts, and I awkwardly braced my bulky frame into the depths so I could keep digging.

After ten scoops or so, I stopped to catch my breath. The wind bit into what little remained exposed on my face. I scanned the property in a circular motion. Across the field and frozen creek was Nick's Nest, the cabin we stayed in when we first moved up from Montana. It had two floors and a whole bathtub but ended up being too costly to keep warm for just the two of us. Now it waited silently for future occupants in need.

Between the road and our cabin were three barns. One barn was for the sheep, goats and daily-diminishing chickens. The other two were for supplies, which included two ATVs; two snowmobiles; six gasoline kegs; guns and ammo; and approximately fifty garbage bins full of rice, beans, garden seeds, clothes, tools and menstrual products.

I felt like we would never use it all and it would never be enough at the same time.

I turned my eyes back to the road and my heart leapt. I could see lights and hear the low rumble of a large vehicle. For a moment, I forgot that it was probably Dave the ploughman coming to rescue us and I believed that I saw advancing army tanks. Did they have Russian or Chinese symbols? Too far away to tell. The binoculars were inside; I picked up my snow pot and ran as quickly as one can through white concrete.

I burst through the door to see Mom smiling. "Looks like we'll make it to town this week after all!"

The adrenaline left my body in a whoosh. I set my pot on the stove and started stripping my layers off. It was barely noon and I was ready to go back to bed.

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Mom bundled herself up to go greet Dave, and through the living room window I watched them chat. I wondered, did Dave ever have questions about us? Or did he just take the cash and drive? Mom never let on.

The town of Smithers usually looked like a magical snow globe village during this time of year, and I couldn't wait to see it. Not for the first time, I wished I had a camera to remember these places long after they were gone.

We had been waiting for years for Y2K; it was supposed to be any day now. Mom said it was the modern answer to biblical prophecy. Everything relied on computers now, including the creature comforts that led to our spiritual complacency, so once the computers crashed and our comforts were gone, World War III would begin. God would use it to find His true disciples, during a seven-year period called The Tribulation. Maybe He would have mercy and Rapture us to Heaven halfway through it, maybe not.

But no matter when or how it happened, America was no longer safe. This little chunk of Canadian wilderness was our best shot, no matter how much I fought thinking about it.

I had wanted to grow up and old, get married and have babies, write stories, see the world, be remembered somehow. But God and my mom knew better; they always did. I would be a witness to the end of all things, and would write down whatever I could.

Starting today.

Before Mom came back inside and saw me, I ran away from the living room window to find a pen. She was always writing notes during her studies so it didn't take long. I returned to the windowsill and paused. I'd never vandalized anything before.

Pressing down as hard as I could into the wood, I made my mark: "Carly M. Butler's SHELF ONLY."

I blew on it to make sure it dried, and then I stacked all of my books across the shelf to hide what I'd done.

I didn't want to claim this land, I just wanted this shelf. Maybe no one would ever see it, maybe it was destined to burn away.

But no one could ever say that I wasn't here.