

# **A Warm Wind at the End of the World**

**J.D. Strunk**

I had thought I'd seen desolation before, but this was something new. It was less a landscape than its negative—a sepia photograph rediscovered in an attic after a century, all ghostly browns and bleached whites. But what struck me most was the inchoate blandness of it all; the unending desert outside my car window could be observed but not internalized. No matter how long I gazed at it, the moment I closed my eyes I found myself unable to recreate it. Memory requires texture on which to build, but here, in this gloom of unending porcelain sands, there was no texture, only some half-conceived vision, the afterthought of an exhausted god on his final day of creation.

The driver stopped the car earlier than I had anticipated. I had been prepared for a long ride away from the airstrip—possibly hours. Instead, we pulled off the road after only forty minutes. I had recently entered the body-maintenance phase of life; always something aching or lacking adequate blood flow or else the blood flowing too vigorously. Cardiometabolic events. Beneath slowly loosening skin lurked an internal alchemy I'd successfully ignored for sixty years but which was now making itself known. The car ride, short as it was, had succeeded in aggravating my sciatica, and I exited the car with a limp. The driver was kind enough not to notice.

If anything, the area where we stood was even more bleak than the ride in. All shrubbery had been removed, all dunes graded flat. A twelve-foot-high barbed-wire fence surrounded us. Affixed to the fence were signs warning against trespassing. It was the usual fearmongering: minimum fines, maximum sentences. The midafternoon sun was brutal. The air had an alkaline edge that itched the back of my throat.

We were greeted at the facility by a young scientist leaning against an unpainted concrete structure no bigger than a bus

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stop. The man—boy?—wore aviator sunglasses and was smoking a cigarette. He leaned casually, one foot raised, the sole of his sneaker flat against the concrete structure. He was handsome in a bland, unblemished way. The young man appeared to have been waiting for my arrival, as upon seeing me he flicked the mostly unburned cigarette to the dusty ground.

The concrete structure was not, I knew, representative of the facility's true scope. The substructure was below us, a labyrinthine catacomb of tunnels and silos built out over a century. Whole mythologies had been written on its mammoth dimensions, and on this matter, I knew the mythologies to be correct. I made a final cursory spin—stole a last glimpse of the desert nothingness that surrounded us—before surrendering all autonomy to my guide.

One full face of the concrete superstructure was devoted to a steel door, epic in its proportions. It was the kind of door you see in old heist movies, guarding bank vaults. The young scientist's keycard gave us access to this outer door, the young man pulling it slowly open, then slowly closed behind us. We were now in an anteroom of sorts—before us stood a second door. This second door was less brawn, more technology. To its immediate left was a computer panel. My young guide put his hand against the screen. I was expecting to see a laser read the contours of his fingers, or at minimum a flash of green light. But there was no light. Nothing visible, at least. The door unlocked, and we moved into the facility proper.

After a minute-long ride down a freight elevator, we found ourselves in a well-lit corridor: twenty-foot ceilings, reinforced concrete, recessed track lighting, white-tiled floor. The corridor sank at a slight but noticeable decline, offering a comfortable descent into the earth. The walking area was paralleled by a narrow lane, itself wide enough for an ATV or golf cart. I wouldn't have turned down this convenience, but no such offer was forthcoming.

We walked.

“Any news from the front?” the young scientist asked shortly into our stroll.

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I hesitated.

He smiled. "Worth a shot. They don't give us much news down here. But you're visiting us. That means we haven't lost. Yet."

I gave an awkward smile but said nothing. Nothing was all I had clearance to say.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked him, unwilling to believe my reputation extended into his generation.

"Some big brain, I gather. We get them from time to time."

He wasn't wrong. Before the war I was the Larmorian Professor of Mathematics at an admired English university. But that was years ago. My post had since been...terminated.

Every hundred yards or so there was a latch that said "Do Not Pull." An escape route, I imagined, though the ladder to the outside must have been hundreds of feet high. Even more frequently there were fire extinguishers inlaid into the concrete wall. I found this interesting, considering I saw nothing around us that could burn.

On occasion there was a random door, blocking further progress, further descent. Despite his youth, my guide seemed to have privileged access to the whole facility. Keycard, passcode, hand on screen, and on we went. I had feared the walking would further aggravate my troublesome hip, but in fact it soothed it. Sometimes the body surprises you.

"I didn't smoke until I came here," the young scientist announced, as if I had previously commented on the matter. "I mostly use it as an excuse to exit the facility. There are only three reasons granted for exiting during the day, and smoking is the least complicated. If I didn't smoke, I'd never see the sun."

"Why don't they just command everyone to stop smoking?"

"We're fighting half the world so that people can kill themselves slowly if they choose to. If they told us to stop smoking, we may as well surrender today."

We walked the concrete hallways for what felt like half an hour. A glance at my watch confirmed this to be accurate within a minute. It was then that we came to a new type of door: bulletproof glass, retinal scanner. My guide provided the credentials, and the door swung open. I was directed inside.

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The room beyond was cavernous, filled with dozens of men and women in lab coats spread across multiple levels. Screens, computers, metal stairways, catwalks.

Behind me, the young scientist nodded his respects before leaving, backtracking toward the direction from which we'd come.

I had made only a couple of steps into the palatial command center before I was intercepted by a crowd of a half dozen military men. Standing before them was a grizzled, old sergeant major in full dress whom I recognized from a file folder I'd been given some time back. Of the group, only the sergeant major addressed me.

"Thanks for coming out," he said. "We still prefer doing things the old-fashioned way."

"Happy to," I said.

"By *old-fashioned*, I mean *face-to-face*."

"I understood," I said.

"We'll get right to it, if that's okay with you?"

"Certainly."

"You're familiar with the concept of an autocatalytic mechanism?"

"Feedback loops."

"Precisely."

"Why not just say *feedback loops*?"

"Simple. This is the military. We needed an acronym. Three letters, minimum. Preferably something with some zip. We settled on ACM—autocatalytic cataclysmic mechanism. Alliteration, consonance, internal rhyme. Checks all the boxes."

He paused, allowing me a chance to speak. I had nothing to say. "ACM," I echoed.

He nodded. "The Lowry Limit inherently restricts the vertical reach of the weapon to the midtroposphere—the blast all but dissipates at thirty thousand feet. The lateral explosion, however, is self-perpetuating until it meets a sizeable body of water, at which point the hydrogen is ionized and the autocatalytic mechanism is halted."

He paused. "That is, in theory."

"Science," I said.

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“You’re here for one question. I know it, and you know it.”

“Yes.”

“You know the question?”

“I do.”

“You’ve studied it?”

“Yes.”

“But you’re going to make me ask it.”

“Yes.”

“I thought so. You seem like the type to make the person ask. So this is me asking the question: Does it ignite the atmosphere?”

Anticipating the reason for my visit, I had spent the past week reviewing the math related to this inquiry. Now, in the presence of these military personnel, I was moved to a private room, where I reviewed the numbers once again.

“The calculations look correct,” I said, exiting the room after a time. “And so I agree with your men, as well as Rossdale, Lelande, and Smith, who I know have all been here. I think it stops at the water. I don’t think it ignites the atmosphere.”

“Don’t think?” said the sergeant major. “Rossdale and Smith said ‘impossible.’ Their word—*impossible*. Lelande said one in a million chance, tops.”

“I suppose you could call me a pessimist.”

“Care to place some percentages to these words?”

“Not really.”

“We insist.”

“Eighty-five percent chance it doesn’t ignite the atmosphere. Maybe ninety.”

“Why not higher?”

I shrugged. “Unpredictability. Unknowns. Unknowables.”

“I see. Any other reasons?”

“Those cover a lot of ground.”

“Humor us.”

“Superfluous fluctuations. Anaerobic entanglements.”

“One more.”

“Quantum flatulence.”

The sergeant stared at me until it became uncomfortable. “I’m told using the ACM will be our last resort,” he said. “I’ve

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devoted a decade of my life to it, yet nothing would give me more pleasure than seeing that decade wasted. Having the ACM sit unused would bring me great calm. Seeing it disassembled would bring me enormous pleasure. Turn it into new cars. Lawnmower blades. Playground equipment. Make it anything but what it is.”

“I share your hope.”

“Even so, contingencies must be accounted for. And eighty-five percent is less than ideal.”

“So is a global war.”

“Is that another joke?”

“I don’t think so.”

The sergeant major stared at me again.

“Can I see it?” I asked. “The ACM?”

“Absolutely not.”

When I said nothing more, he nodded and left the cavernous room.

The rest of the men and women seemed to take his absence as instruction and soon lost interest in me as well. Within a matter of seconds I found myself standing alone inside the heart of the most secure building in the western hemisphere.

A woman walking past noticed my bewilderment. “I believe you’re free to go,” she said.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Do I need a guide?”

“Not to exit.”

“Oh.”

“You should eat before you leave,” the woman said. “Cafeteria is in section Seven-H. The tater tots are surprisingly good. Ask for them crispy.”

“Thanks,” I said, walking toward the first of many doors leading to the surface.

Two hours after descending into the bowels of the facility, I was exiting through the same door from which I’d entered. The same young man was there, in the same student-slacker position, smoking a cigarette in his aviators.

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“He’s back,” said the young man, offering me a cigarette, which I politely declined.

“You don’t need a guide to exit,” I said.

“I could have told you that.”

We stood in silence for a while as I waited for my ride to arrive. I hoped he wasn’t coming from the airstrip, but then, where else would he have gone? Was there a town over those distant mountains? Doubtful.

The sun, now nearing the far end of its parabolic journey, was no longer angry. It felt good on my skin. A warm wind, dry but pleasant, rustled what remained of my hair.

“The word from downstairs is ten, maybe fifteen percent,” said the young man, flicking a cigarette butt to the ground and fishing out another.

“Word travels fast,” I said.

He held up his phone.

“Science,” I said.

“Fifteen percent chance we light the atmosphere on fire. Global destruction. An ELE. Know what that stands for?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Extinction-level event.”

“I know.”

We stood silently for a long while.

Eventually, my phone buzzed. A text from my driver—ETA of ten minutes. I surprised myself when I wished him to be further away. Over the past half hour the sun had lowered steadily, and it was now spectacularly enormous on the horizon, an orange bauble fighting through an ethereal blanket of smog. But the chemical haze didn’t diminish the view; if anything, it elevated it. A desert that had appeared monochrome upon arrival was now dripping with synthetic color. Distillations of ruby rose meandered over distant mesas; tints of tangerine canted down steep escarpments; silver rivulets glinted across an archipelago of remote mountain lakes. I had seen this landscape before, not half a day before, but had noticed none of it. The beauty had lay buried. But now, gazing upon it all—and with the countdown to my imminent departure no doubt adding some

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emotional heft—there was some atavistic euphoria brewing from deep within me, some primordial joy unfelt since the war began. Longer.

The young scientist noticed me noticing the sunset. “I’ve been here for two years. It gets more beautiful every day,” he said.

“It’s haunting,” I admitted.

The young man was silent for a bit.

After a few minutes, I squinted. “That’s my car in the distance.”

The young man nodded.

“It’s a Cadillac,” I noted. “I’d never buy one, but I enjoy riding in them.”

“We’re losing the war, aren’t we?” the boy offered.

“I just don’t see myself as a Cadillac person. Too much car. But if someone else chooses it, I enjoy riding in them.”

The car pulled up beside us.

The young scientist shook my hand, and I entered the idling American icon.

As we drove away from the facility, the desert settled into a uniform burnt sienna. Soon I was at the airstrip, and then I was in the air. Outside my small oval window was desert, then mountains, then forests. Reclining my seat, I closed my eyes and thought of the desert I’d left behind. To my surprise, I continued to see it all so clearly.