

The Last Scientist

“Fred!” his father called to him. “The sheep got out last night! Durned storm chased 'em off last night. Go herd 'em back home. Winter’s fast a’comin, and I doubt we’ll make it without food 'n wool.”

“Yessir.” Fred donned his cloak, grabbed the shepherding staff, and walked out the door.

Hours later, Fred still hadn’t found his missing flock, and couldn’t see his shack anymore. “Durned things, running off like that. Thunder won’t hurt 'em. There’s gotta be a way to 'em stay.” Passing over the hill as he fumed, Fred saw a strange house. Its walls were too straight, its colors too bright, its roof a dark, reflective blue. “Sheep can’t have gotten to the Wizard already.”

Suddenly, there was an explosion from within the house, and smoke billowed out the window. “Blast those sheep!” Fred’s ears perked up. Sheep? The baaing confirmed it. Those were odd at the Wizard’s, unlike the explosions. Though the explosions were normally smaller.

Fred ran to the door and nearly went in. Then he remembered the last time he did so: *“See this? It’s called a doorbell. Use it.” His voice softened. “Before you enter, push the button. I’ll then come to you.”* “Wizards,” he muttered, as he pushed the button. *Ding-dong.* Fred fought back the urge to jump back at the sound. The Wizard had told him to push the button, and something obviously happened when he did so. It’s ok.

“Coming!” The door opened, and a man leaned out, coughing and waving smoke away. His hair was white, and so was his cloak. A patch of cloth was on the front, holding a wand in – a pen he called it. “These are your sheep, aren’t they? Well one of them’s dead. Ruined a whole batch of silicon with the blast it caused. But come on in. The others are still in the garage – glad it had use for something. How did that rascal escape? Regular Houdini, that one. Fred followed him inside. “Come on, sit down. I bet you’re hungry. And I just got some food.” The Wizard smiled and laughed a little to himself, pointing to the sheep. Fred didn’t join him. “Well, you can’t very well carry the whole thing home, not with the whole flock to guide. And I’m hungry.

After some struggles that left Fred wondering how the Wizard survived, the sheep was dressed and Wizard was loading more wood into a box he called an oven. The fire started, and the Wizard placed the meat in a tray and on a shelf in the oven. “It’ll take half an hour, I think.” Some time later, the fire was out, and the meat was blackened. “Well, I’m not doing that again. Ovens do not work that way. Sad thing is, it’s still better than those MRE’s I’ve survived on for the last sixty years.”

“Wizard, I’ve not idea how you’ve survived.”

“I’m not a wizard, I’m a scientist. And that’s **how** I’ve survived. I know enough to find a different way to do what must be done. All the food and water I’ll ever need is stored in here, and I’ve got a heater for when it gets cold. Runs off the solar panels – the batteries they charge, that is.”

“Heh? I don’t understand.”

“Well, er . . . by the way, what is your name?”

“Fred Huntsman.”

“Well, Fred Huntsman, let Professor William Hopkins tell you. But it’ll take time.”

“If it means I understand you, I’ll listen.”

“Excellent to hear.”

The year is 1983, and my world is about to end. When it did, it became yours. You see, my world was one of technology. It seemed man could do anything. We traveled great distances riding in things called cars, and even greater distances flying through the clouds in things called planes. And all this knowledge was stored in things called computers.

We knew so much, and yet we were so stupid. You see, these things were not magic. Just as a field does not plow itself, this technology did not power itself. Electricity powered it – the same stuff that lightning is made of. But rather than run around with jars to catch lightning in, we found a way to make it. Several ways, in fact. But one was for some reason thought infinitely superior: oil. A black liquid that burns better than wood. Huge nations (thousands of villages) bought and sold barrels and barrels of it every day. But one day there was no more. Oil comes from deep in the ground, and it’s made by the heavy earth crushing dead things for millions of years. There’s only so much, and then it’s gone.

Despite the dire consequences, it was hilarious when the world finally figured that out. For a century or so we burned oil with no concern. The engines that used it wasted as much as they used, and we put our machines to work at tasks not worth the oil used, just because it was easier. Oil could have lasted another century had we spent it wisely.

*So inevitably came the day when it was gone: July 19, 1983. The US contacted Israel to buy oil. All out. So they called Egypt. All out. Iraq. All out. Pakistan. All out. Afghanistan, Russia, China, Britain, Brazil. All out. The last drop of oil had been harvested, so only the reserve remained. The governments panicked. They were passing laws left and right to restrict energy consumption – ‘for the future,’ they say. To hold it off, they meant. For without electricity, so much would fall: transportation, clinics, computers (fast the dominant source of information), heat, light, **everything**, it seemed, needed electricity. We even needed it to build other power sources. Dams had to be built. Sand had to be processed for solar panels.*

Even windmills required too much. There just wasn't enough power. We couldn't build even half the required alternatives with what remained.

The government forced people to use less power, and scrambled to build the new power sources. But it wasn't enough. Even with the help of new power quotas and sources, each day used more than it gave back. Each day there was less oil, and we couldn't break dependency. Worst of all, no one knew. The government screwed up, but they wouldn't take the heat. They disguised it, told people nothing was wrong, and we believed them. All the while, the government was reaching out to scientists and calling for them to fix it.

I was in college at that time, a junior working on research. Things were so bad, even I was drafted. And I saw it was futile. Too little too late. I couldn't save the world, but I preserved what I could. I found and printed everything I could: science, history, art, literature. Everything in every language. And I bought all I could. A lifetime supply of fresh water and Meals Ready to Eat. A truckload of solar panels. Tools and instruments to build more. All of it was stored in my bunker, to hide in if things turned ugly. I'd do what I could. Pockets of civilization would remain where there was power. If I could just expand those pockets, then they could do the same. And I wouldn't be alone. I wasn't the only to know; surely I wasn't the only to prepare.

But then it happened. December 24, 1983. The Blackout. If you didn't have a solar panel or dam nearby, you had nothing. Why that day, I don't know. Perhaps too many made an exception to quotas for celebration. Perhaps it was a sign: the day before mankind's salvation (oh we were so close to averting the crisis!) we fell into darkness. Or maybe it was coincidence, and an eccentric, senile old coot just needs to connect things together.

Regardless, the Blackout had come. By the New Year, all was dark. The last cars were dry. Panic broke loose. Books were burned for power. My records were safe, but little else was. Whole libraries are gone; even the Constitution fueled a desperate, if futile, attempt to power a defibrillator and save a man's life.

And with all that knowledge destroyed, we were worse off. We had forgotten how to do simple tasks without powered machines. Many froze in the cold of winter. Others starved, their food sources hundreds of miles away once markets emptied. I helped those I could, but my supply could not feed the world. I couldn't even feed my town, and in fear I sealed myself away in my bunker; I hid and let them starve. Long ago I gave up rationalizing. I didn't do it to work full time on righting things. I didn't do it to avoid starving before fixing things. I did it to avoid starving, period. I was afraid.

One hundred and seventy-one days I remained locked up. When I emerged, the town was abandoned. No corpses, but no signs of survivors either. I set up my house again. Solar panels, equipment, all you see around you now. Since then I've worked in here, building what solar panels I could with the limited power and tools I have. Then I'd go out and travel to the cities, hoping to find someone to use them, seeking a fellow remnant. All for naught, I fear. Too few still live today. Too few understand. Too little remains that can use the power. The decades have worn them down.

cough *cough

"I fear the decades have worn me down too. I doubt I've a year left in me."

Fred Huntsman stared as he digested what he had learned. So recently the world had been much grander. To have fallen so far, so rapidly! It boggled the mind. “I . . . I want to know more.”

“I’ll make sure you do. But I’ve taken too much of your time today. You’ll be needed at home. Especially with those sheep.”

“But I don’t know when I’ll be back. I’m needed at home.”

“I’ll work something out. I’ve got plenty of food. And not just those horrid MRE’s. I was saving the good stuff for a special occasion. It’s about time I touch them. And I’ve some warm clothes that’ll fetch a few sheep.”

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Over the next several weeks, Fred left home with a head filled with questions, and returned with an armful of supplies and more questions than he left with (all of them new). One day he even returned with Prof. Hopkins to build a fence **with** a gate for the sheep.

Fred’s mind constantly swirled with his education. *‘Electricity exists because of the flow of itty bitty electrons.’ ‘I’m not really a professor – never got my degree. But I know more than anyone else.’ ‘Solar panels use a special setup so light knocks electrons free.’ ‘Galileo designed a flying machine centuries before any were built – and it would have worked.’* Each day Fred rediscovered more lost knowledge. And each day Prof. Hopkins’ health deteriorated.

“Fred.” *cough *cough* “The First Age of Technology is over. At last I see that I can’t reverse it. Nor can any other Wizard. And don’t you try. When Rome collapsed, we lost years of discovery in the ensuing Dark Ages. And now it is a second Dark Age. But it too shall end: what we discovered once, we can again. There shall be a Second Age of Technology, and perhaps we shall prove wiser the second time.” Then Professor William Hopkins closed his eyes and died.

Fred cried at the loss of the Wizard who became his teacher, the teacher who became his friend, and the friend who had changed his life. To Fred’s eyes, the man deserved better than the unmarked grave his body would have. But what could Fred do? He had not the power.

Afterward:

With all the recent issues over the oil supply and prices, I decided to take a look into a world without oil. I decided I could best explore this idea some time after the “Blackout,” the time when the oil supply runs out. I could show the life of one boy who lives in an archaic world where most technology is obsolete, from sheer lack of power. I soon realized this would take some rewriting of history: renewable energy sources had to have been negligible. But was that all I had to change? For the world to be so changed, when would the oil supply have to run out? When is it expected to run out?

From my research (see below) I found that there is serious debate about when the oil supply will be used up. Besides, if I wanted to have my main character meet one of the few sages who remember the time of power, the Blackout had to have occurred in the 1980’s (the time of one energy crisis in history, now expanded). Finally I had to research the different forms of alternative energy. The “sage” was likely working on a way to restore power to the world; what did he use? What could possibly be built with limited power? And so the Wizard had been enlisted by the government to help fix the problem – a job that the Wizard abandoned, in favor of preparing for the Blackout, saving what he could (texts and a personal power reservoir. But how could the loss be more devastating? If, like in the Dark Ages, years upon years of knowledge was lost. Logically, computers would have to be more commonly used than they were in the 1980’s. And to further culminate the loss, people at first panicked, and burned all they could for power. And so most written records have also disappeared.

<http://www.popsci.com/popsci/science/c5eb0b4511b84010vgnvcm1000004eecbccdrcrd.html>

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