

Something To Tell Them About



The Crowd, Guy Pène du Bois, 1934

They say the worst part is the waiting. I wouldn't know, because I've never been through what's about to happen, but it can't be much worse than hearing the Action Plan for the gazillionth time. Hell, we've heard it, with the same lame jokes, so many times we're all about to puke.

"Remember," he says, tapping an old-style wooden pointer on the wall map, trying to sound sure of himself, "these barricades here, here, and here will just break up their initial rush. Slows 'em and scatters 'em, but they'll keep coming." He looks out at us because somewhere a training manual says to pause from time to time to ensure that the recruits are still engaged. We practice the art of wearing engaged expressions while tuning out.

In hard situations you want your leaders to drip leadership from every pore or, dammit, at least look the part—Daniel Craig from “Skyfall” or Sigourney Weaver from “Alien.” No such luck. Our own brass in charge of this operation is like a young Steve Buscemi from “Fargo.” Actual name’s “Harris” but we all call him “Remember” since he’s seemingly incapable of lurching into a line of thought without that imperative.

Satisfied that we are still intent on his every word, he turns to the map and taps the pointer again. “Remember, the medical station is here,” tap, tap, “and our reserve personnel here,” tap, “will serve as stretcher bearers until they are needed on the line. Remember, after that, if you go down, you’ll need to make your way to the station on your own.”

He looks out at us. Pause. We still pretend to listen. Praise be to the gods both great and small, he puts down the damned pointer. “Remember your training, keep sharp, make sure your gear’s ready to go, and get it done. It all starts at 0700, which is,” looks at his watch, “twenty-two minutes from now. Remember, after today, you’ll have something to tell your grandchildren about.” Not funny, not even original, but what the Hell, we laugh anyway. The damned tap-tapping is mercifully over and he hurries off, still trying to look sure of himself. We head out to our assigned positions and settle in.

McKenzie looks over at me and gives a reassuring smile. “You’ll be fine, kid. It won’t be a walk in the park, but not as bad as you’re thinking. Stay calm and we’ll get through this. In spite of Remember’s efforts, we’re trained, organized, and hold the defensive position. They’re an untrained mob with no real control—I’ve even seen ’em turn on each other.”

That helps. I like McKenzie and am glad we’re side-by-side on the line. “I guess I look scared,” I say. “At least my teeth aren’t chattering.” I think for a second, long enough to let

the uncertainty set in. "They aren't, are they?"

McKenzie laughs. "You're afraid your teeth are chattering?" Another laugh. "Hell, my first time on the line I was afraid I had wet my pants, but didn't want to look down to be sure. I'll take teeth chatter any day."

I hand him a letter. "Would you do me a favor? Make sure that my wife gets this if ... if I ..." He nods as he puts it away.

A shout goes up from off to the right: "It's Brubaker! Let him in." Hurried words as Brubaker brings the latest from the east outpost—something about a screw up. There's always a screw up. "They've already broken through in the east and are only seconds away," someone yells to us on the line.

I notice vibrations at my feet as the pounding mob races nearer, see the human wave flow around the corner by Foot Locker, and watch in horror as it crashes through the front doors, barely unlocked in time. The PA opens up, but has no effect. "No need to rush, valued shoppers. We have storewide specials today with plenty of—Oh, my God!" The PA spews static then goes off as the greeting station is overrun, the poor bastards. No way would I volunteer for that job. The mob fans out, but it seems the most determined ones come straight at us in Entertainment and Electronics. Hundreds of credit cards held high gleam menacingly in the fluorescent light, countless voices chant "Sale-price, Sale-price." Somewhere a woman shrieks, "That's mine, you bitch!" and triggers a melee that spreads like flaming oil on water. People flail away at each other without knowing why, other than it is the spirit of the season.

McKenzie shouts to me over the din. "Back in '96, stores ran short of Tickle-Me-Elmo dolls after hyping them for months. Elmo-crazed shoppers fought for 'em like twentieth-century gladiators. Emergency rooms bulged at the seams with proud victors grimly clutching the little, giggling Muppets."

McKenzie dodges as a set of Beats Studio3 Wireless Headphones (Reg \$349.99, Sale \$199.99) misses his head by inches. "That the best you can do, fella?!"

It's pure Close Quarters Combat that should be analyzed and taught at Ft. Benning Infantry School. Overstressed MasterCard and Visas reach the melting point but most people have quick-change spares. Some old, clueless, white-haired guy holds up a checkout line to write a check. A bleepin' check! Security pulls him away for his own safety. A savvy young man scores a Klipsch 2.1 Soundbar System with Wireless Subwoofer (Reg \$599.99, Sale \$399.99) and uses the long packaging box to batter his way through the mob toward the cashiers. Gotta admire his cool professionalism.

No struggle lasts forever.

Much later in the long day, a few remaining shoppers pick through the wreckage and overturned shelves, find nothing else they want, and drag themselves home to nurse wounds and exaggerate their tales of bargains sought and won. We put out a small fire in Appliances without too much trouble.

McKenzie looks my way, grins, steps over some other clerk who's curled into a trembling fetal position on the floor, and limps up to me. "We made it, kid. Not so bad, eh? I see your teeth aren't chattering." He hands the letter back to me.

"We made it. And I see you didn't wet your pants," I answer with a smile.

He laughs. "Well, a couple of times it was a near thing. You going to do Black Friday sales again next year?"

"Me? Hell, yes! If I ever have grandkids it will give me something to tell 'em about."