

THE
WORLD'S
SHATTERED
SHELL

LAURENCE RAPHAEL BROTHERS

copyright © 2023 by Laurence Raphael Brothers

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, except for the purpose of review and/or reference, without explicit permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design copyright © 2023 by Niki Lenhart
nikilen-design.com

Published by Water Dragon Publishing
waterdragonpublishing.com

SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE EMERGENCY, I woke a little before noon. I didn't realize it till I made it out of the bathroom, dragging a comb through wet hair, but something had changed. There was something different in the air today. Wasn't sure what, though, and didn't much care. Picked up my phone, checked my non-existent messages. No signal, out of service. Just as well.

I walked down the three flights of stairs and opened the front door of the dismal black-and-white-tiled lobby of my apartment building to stand there blinking in the bright sunlight. Something was different for sure.

My neighbor — I thought he was a neighbor — pulled up to the fire-hydrant in front of the building in an old silver Honda, got out and popped the trunk. He had eighteen gallons of water there in plastic jugs and a few shopping bags full of groceries. He looked up at the fourth-floor windows and then looked back at the jugs.

"Give you a hand?" I don't know why I offered. Usually, I wouldn't even have noticed him or that he might need help.

He looked at me suspiciously, hesitated a moment. I thought his name might be Michel. Swarthy guy, wiry and short. Late twenties,

The World's Shattered Shell

maybe. No idea what he did for a living, no more than I knew anything about any of my other neighbors.

"Eh, sure," he said, as if he were giving me something by allowing me to help. Then, he paused. "Thanks," he forced out. French accent, or that's what I thought it was, anyway.

I picked up four of the jugs, two in each hand, the little plastic handles tugging at my fingers and thumbs. He hefted two jugs along with a shopping bag and slammed the trunk, looking both ways as if someone might be waiting to steal his precious trove. I managed to get a finger around the front door handle and levered the door open with a foot. I glanced at the mailbox labels as I went through the lobby. 4C: Delacroix, M. Down the hall from me. Must be him.

The elevator had been broken for a year now, so I went back to the stairwell. Michel followed behind. The dimly lit concrete steps smelled strongly of mildew and faintly of piss.

I put down the four jugs at his door, figuring he wouldn't want to let me into his flat. He paused for a moment, probably wondering whether the jugs would be safe outside his door for the minute or two he'd have to leave them unattended. But if he opened the door, he'd probably have to invite me in. So we trudged downstairs and out the door, and I waited there by the curb for him to unlock his trunk again.

"Hey Michel," I said, taking a chance. He didn't correct me, which made me feel good about remembering his name. "Why all the water? Stocking up? Iced tea addiction? Tropical fish? What?"

I picked up another four jugs.

He glared at me, suspicious again. "For the emergency," he said. "What do you think?"

"Emergency?"

"Surely you know?"

"I know nothing," I said. "Just woke up fifteen minutes ago. Did something happen?"

"But of course," he said. "It's all in the news. Where do you think everyone is?"

Since he mentioned it, there wasn't much traffic around, hardly anyone out on the street. Wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't said anything, though.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"They're all on the highways heading out of town. Or else they're queued at the supermarket, buying water and bread."

“Is something wrong with the tap water?” I wondered if that shower I had just taken was a good idea. Not to mention the water I’d drunk out of the faucet.

He shrugged. “It’s what you do,” he said. “Just in case, you know?”

I didn’t answer. We walked up the stairs again, dumped another load of water jugs at his door and went back down. He said nothing, and I had nothing more to say myself. One more load and we were done.

“Thanks,” he said again when we returned to his front door. He was out of breath and looked uncomfortable. “You really didn’t know?”

“No, really, I didn’t. What’s the emergency, anyway?”

“I — well, you should probably hear it for yourself. Turn on the news. I have to go inside. Sorry.” He said all that in little discrete utterances that could have come out of a machine. He obviously didn’t want to talk to me, so I let him go. He waited until I got to my own door before inserting his key in the lock. Just in case.

When I got inside, I powered up my elderly desktop computer. I used it mainly for Solitaire, Minesweeper, and web surfing. Five minutes later, it told me my Internet connection was down. Great. Not that I wanted to waste an hour on the phone with the company, but I couldn’t if my phone was down too. So I sighed and walked over to my little television, a flat screen perched on the counter dividing my kitchen from my all-in-one everything room. I hesitated. I hated watching it. Turned it on anyway.

The first channel that came up looked weird. A warping and shearing effect distorted the image and turned it into an abstract smear. Every two seconds, the picture jerked and lost sync, falling apart into a cascade of blocky pixels to reform a moment later, just as distorted as before. The audio was equally messed up, so I couldn’t hear what was going on either. I changed channels and saw the same thing a few times — the underlying distorted image looked the same — and then, finally, I got to a channel that was clear, more or less, though every second the picture still gave a weird twitch. The audio worked too.

“... for the duration of the emergency.” A well-dressed woman at a news desk was speaking, a video image behind her showing a stopped line of cars on the highway. Many of the drivers had emerged from their cars and were standing on the side of the road.

The World's Shattered Shell

Next, they cut away from the newsroom to a reporter interviewing a store manager at a supermarket. Lines of shoppers with piled-high carts could be seen, and while most of the aisles were still full of products, there was no water left at all. Michel must have been the early bird.

"Most of my clerks didn't come in this morning," said the assistant manager, a short heavy-set woman with ginger hair. "I might not be able to open tomorrow."

But why wouldn't they come in, I wondered. What was keeping them away?

Then, over to a situation room where the deputy mayor alternately appealed for calm and threatened the use of deadly force against looters. Apparently, the mayor himself along with the police commissioner were safe in a secure, undisclosed location. Sounded like a pretty serious emergency to me. Next up, said a voiceover, was a list of school closings.

It seemed our leaders had decamped. But now I began to wonder. With no immediate danger, was this report even true?

More human-interest reporting from the news, and I couldn't take any more. I shut off the TV, still clueless after half an hour about what had actually happened.

I sat on the unmade bed for a few minutes, trying to motivate myself to do something. There were lots of things I could do, some I should, but that was the way it was every day. Eventually, the combination of boredom and hunger got me off the bed. Yeah, nothing much in the refrigerator. I decided to go to the store to see if it had any food left to buy.

I had to walk past three blocks worth of tenement apartment buildings to get to the closest strip mall. The side street was almost deserted, strange even for a weekday afternoon. No kids around at all. I crossed paths with an old lady wheeling a shopping cart full of brown paper bags. She wore black wraparound shades and a leopard-print pantsuit that might have been in style forty years ago and, for all I knew, they had just come back around again.

"You're too late," she said cheerfully.

"What? Sorry." I hadn't expected her to address me.

"The grocery is closed. I was one of the last people they let inside."

"Oh, well. Maybe I'll find somewhere else."

"Good luck!" She seemed to mean it.

I gave her a little wave, and she returned it. She was the first happy person I'd met in a long time, it felt like. I was about to keep on walking when something occurred to me.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Yes, dear?" She turned around to face me again.

"I'm ashamed to say that I got up late today."

She smiled, making me feel good about the admission.

"I understand there's some sort of emergency, but do you, ah, happen to know what sort?"

"Pardon me, dear?"

"I mean, do you know what happened today? Something bad, I guess?"

"Why, why —" She was perplexed, unable to answer. I felt bad for flummoxing her like that.

"Never mind," I said, and she smiled again, relieved. "I'm sure it's nothing important. I hope you have a good rest of your day."

"And I hope you find someplace that's open, young man," she said, and we parted ways.

I walked the block and a half to the intersection where my street crossed the avenue. The traffic lights blinked red both ways instead of following the usual red-yellow-green sequence, and there was almost no traffic, but apart from that everything looked normal. The strip mall was right there, so I walked into the parking lot. It wasn't much, just a supermarket, liquor store, dry cleaners, pizzeria, a couple of cheap boutiques, and a McDonalds off by itself in an island in the middle of the lot.

There was a cluster of perhaps twenty people standing around the supermarket doors, the remnants of a larger group now dispersing back down the street in both directions. Like me they must have been latecomers to the store. The lights were off behind the plate glass. All the other shops in the row were closed, security grills rolled down and steel shutters locked in place.

As I walked up to the doors, I heard grumbling from the latecomers who hadn't made it into the store in time, but really, these people seemed more apathetic than angry. None of them seemed to know what to do next, and it made me feel unhappy to be among them, because I didn't know what to do next, either.

I briefly considered walking down the avenue to look for another supermarket but decided against it. I still had food at home — just

The World's Shattered Shell

nothing very appetizing. Then, I saw someone walking away from the McDonald's with a paper bag in his hands. Sure enough, the lights were on inside. I tried the front door and found it locked, but from that vantage point, I saw half a dozen people queued up on foot at the drive-through window around the side. I hadn't noticed it until now, but a police car with its blue lights flashing was parked on the far side of the fast-food restaurant. The car had a monitoring-the-situation feel to it. No one would be looting the supermarket, not right now anyway. I didn't usually eat McDonald's food, but I could afford it and I thought it would be better than the can of chili and box of stale crackers I had waiting for me at home. So I got in line.

The last person in line was a white, middle-aged balding man with a walrus moustache who looked like he should have been at work bossing a construction crew somewhere. He darted a wary glance at me as I approached, not quite daring to look at me directly. I must have looked harmless enough out of the corner of his eye, so he turned back to his place.

The line slowly moved forward — more slowly than usual for a McDonald's, I thought — but, even so, no one got behind me in line till I got to the window. I gave the guy in front of me plenty of space, so I didn't hear what he ordered, but he left carrying a pretty big sack of food.

"Welcome to McDonald's! How can I help you?"

The clerk was a young black woman. She was tall and slim with tight corn-row hair.

"Uh, sorry," I said, "I wasn't thinking about my order. Do you have, umm, a chicken sandwich?"

"I'm afraid we're out of everything except hamburgers," she said, "but they're free today."

"What?"

"Oh yes," she said. "We're giving away burgers. For the emergency."

"Oh."

I thought about asking her what the emergency was but changed my mind at the last moment. Maybe she wasn't the best person to ask, anyway.

"Well," I said, "two hamburgers, I guess."

"Just two?" She smiled. "We have plenty. And there's not much to a hamburger."

"All right. Three. No, wait." I had a thought. "Make it six please, in two bags if you don't mind."

“Not at all. It’ll just be a minute.”

It took longer than that, and she was just standing there with no other customers to deal with, so to make conversation I asked, “Why is only the drive-through open?”

“Oh,” she said, “we don’t have enough staff to man the registers in front. The management thought it would be better this way.”

“I see.”

“Oh, your food is ready.”

She ducked away from the window and came back with two white paper bags.

“There you go, sir. Have a good day.” Strange, but I thought she meant it.

I took the two bags and headed over to the cop car. Made sure I passed in front so he could see me coming and walked up to the driver-side window. Wouldn’t want to freak him out. I stopped a yard from the car, gave a little wave. He rolled down his window.

“Yes?” His tone was annoyed, stressed out. The police officer was young, tanned, with thin lips, wearing mirror shades.

“I was just wondering if you wanted any hamburgers,” I said. “I got some extra.”

He seemed taken aback.

“Oh, yeah,” he said after a pause, “that would be great.”

I handed the bag through the window.

“Listen,” I said, “I don’t mean to trouble you, officer, but can I ask you a question?”

I could see him tensing up, like I was going to hit him or something.

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Well, I got up late today,” I said. “I don’t have a job right now. It was only maybe half an hour ago I heard about this emergency, but I still don’t know what it is. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

His face froze into a mask for a second, and then he shook his head.

“What the fuck,” he said. “Why not? We’re not supposed to say anything, but the orders make no sense to me. No one told me anything official either.”

He hesitated, then shook his head.

“People have been going missing,” he said. “That’s what I hear, anyway. All this —” he gestured at the mostly empty streets, “all this

The World's Shattered Shell

isn't just people trying to get out of town or holed up in their houses. My partner didn't show up to work today. A lot of the people who should be around are just gone, is what I think."

"Wow. It's just here in town? Or outside? The rest of the country?"

"I don't know," said the cop. "I'd expect all kinds of outside attention — stacies, the feds, all the news people in the world. But I haven't heard anything all day from outside town. Internet and phones are fucked, and the only radio and TV is local. Right now, I just want to finish my shift, if you know what I mean."

"That doesn't sound good," I said. "But if no one knows what's going on, at least that explains why no one's saying anything. Thanks for that, anyway."

"Yeah," he said. "Thanks for the food."

I left him, went back to my flat and had lunch. It wasn't bad. I thought about Michel and his plastic jugs as I washed down the burgers with tap water. Then I boiled some water on the stove, let it cool a little, poured it into a pitcher with some tea bags and let it sit to steep on a sunny windowsill. After lunch, I sat around for a while, wondering again if there was something I should be doing. Couldn't think of anything. Every once in a while, a siren wailed in the distance, but there was no sign of anything horrible happening anywhere I could see.

Usually, I'd spend the afternoon walking around town, but I didn't want to today. It was too strange out. I didn't like the lack of people, the way everything seemed to be closed.

I walked aimlessly around my flat for a while, played some solitaire, and eventually I pulled out a book and started reading it. Swann's Way. Got it on recommendation. I'd tried to read the book a few times before but usually got bogged down on the first page. Today I was making progress. Slow and steady — very slow, in fact — but moving forward.

When I looked up, four hours had passed along with fifty pages, and it was late afternoon.

All in all, it was about as productive and useful a day as ever. I was tired of reading now, so it was just a dull three-hour wait until eight. Couldn't take doing nothing anymore, so I turned on the TV again. The one working station was doing human interest stories now and in no case did the reporters or interviewees talk about what was going on. Orders, or an aversion to facing the facts? Strange, either way.

Time passed with painful slowness. At last, it was eight. I let myself out of my flat and went downstairs without seeing anyone at all. Summertime dark, still some glow in the sky. It was half a mile to Caernarfon. I was almost there, walking the familiar path, when it occurred to me the place might be closed. Caernarfon was a brick-walled corner pub in the middle of a residential section. Being dimly lit inside at the best of times with no plate glass facade and no neon, there was no way for me to tell for sure until I got right to the front door. Open, thank God.

The pub wasn't much, a tiny little place wedged into the corner of an anonymous apartment building, but it was where I spent most of my nights. A minute at home doing nothing was painful. Here it was relaxing ... comfortable, even. Maybe too comfortable, which was why I only came here at night. I had the idea that if I hung out here during the day, I'd vegetate completely.

Rhys was there as usual behind the bar, big bushy red-brown beard and all. He was my closest friend, I guess, in the whole world, even if I wasn't his. I don't know why I looked up to him, really. Looked at logically, he was just the owner of the one place I spent time at. He'd never asked me for a favor, not even once, but if he ever did, I knew I'd do it for him, whatever it was.

Only a few regulars were present and no one I didn't know.

At one of the high, round tables in the middle of the room, Nora was perched, as usual pecking away at her laptop. Slight and energetic, pale skinned, with straight brown hair. Quick to take offense, and a biting wit to her too, but I liked her anyway.

At the bar, Quaid, a big heavy-set black guy with a blocky jowled face, was nursing a beer trying to ignore Steiner, who was talking at him, if not to him. Another silent type, like me. I imagined he concealed some deep sadness, something I'd never dared to ask him about, something he never gave any sign of, but I thought it was there anyway. And I liked him for the strength he showed in bearing up under the burden.

The Professor sat in the corner, a shot-glass at her elbow, playing her endless chess games with herself. Rightfully speaking, I didn't even know her a little bit, as she spoke even less frequently than Quaid and almost never mixed with anyone. Even so, I trusted her and respected her. No good reason, I just did. She'd been the one who recommended Proust to me.

The World's Shattered Shell

They were all friends, that's how I thought of them anyway, even if they weren't the kind you'd go bowling with, invite for a dinner party, or even ask out on a date. Not that I ever did any of those things anyway.

So Caernarfon felt like home. Rhys nodded to me, drew a pint of pilsner and pushed it to me across the bar. Whenever he had nothing better to do, he stood there in front of a faded old wooden sign on the wall. The thing was grey with age, and you could just make out a red snaky dragon, the paint mostly gone, only a scattering of scarlet flecks remaining to outline the form. I asked for some nachos to go with the beer and, while he was microwaving the sauce, I took out my wallet to pay.

Rhys held up his hand, shook his head and said, "No charge today."

For the emergency. Right.

Steiner turned to talk to me. He had a lined face, not old though, with a permanent five o'clock shadow, black stubbly crewcut, a diamond stud in the rim of his left ear, and steel-rimmed glasses. Always talking, I think to cover up his anxiety. He told me once he was phobic, but what it was he was afraid of kept changing. He never knew what it was going to be. Traffic this week, spiders the next, sharp objects for a month after that. He'd got the stud in his ear to fight his way through that one. The way he put it, the old fears never quite went away, but there was always a new one to worry about. For him, the worst time was in-between, when the old fear was fading and the new one hadn't yet formed. Whatever it was this week, he was here tonight, just like me. I liked him for making the effort, for overcoming his fear every night, for fighting through his troubles.

"You think George will show up tonight?" asked Steiner. "With Patrick? Or Jane and Allen?"

I didn't see what he was getting at. Both couples were occasional patrons at the bar, but not here just now.

"How should I know?"

"Yeah," he said, "it's just they have families, don't they?"

"I guess so. What does that matter?"

Steiner nodded. "I don't think we do, do we? I mean, those of us here now."

"Hey," said Rhys, rumbling through his beard, "I have a family."

"I mean, married-with-kids family," said Steiner.

“Oh.”

“George and Patrick don’t have kids,” said Quaid.

“Yeah, but they do have rings, anyway.”

Steiner turned and called out. “Hey, Nora, you’re still single, right?”

“So?” She answered without turning her head.

“Just seems like a pattern, is all. Trying to figure things out.”

“What,” she said scornfully, looking at Steiner now, “you think this is a singles-only catastrophe? Give me a break.”

Steiner laughed and tapped his chest to signify she’d scored a hit. After a pause, he turned back to Rhys.

“How long can you keep this place open? I mean, if the emergency continues.”

We all looked at the bartender. Nora stopped typing. The Professor even looked up from her game.

“I’ve got plenty of beer and spirits,” said Rhys. “If it’s just you five, could last for months. The bar food will run out in a week or two if I can’t buy more, but hell, it’s not like there’s a wall around the city, is there? I don’t think we’re cut off. It’s just the network’s down. Power and water are fine.”

“For now, anyway.”

“Well, if we lose power, you’ll have to drink in the daytime,” said Rhys. “And if we lose water, well, there’s always beer.”

Time passed. I ate my nachos and drank my beer, fell into a sort of reverie, not thinking about anything in particular. Steiner spent most of his time talking to Rhys. I overheard him saying his fear this week was drowning, so he made sure to take a bath every day.

“Stubborn bastard,” said Rhys, and patted Steiner on the shoulder. Steiner smiled, blushed a little. It didn’t take much to make him happy.

About mid-way through the evening, we were interrupted by a stranger’s entrance. Nothing much to remark on an ordinary night but tonight we all paid attention. He was in his late 60s or early 70s, with black hair, bags under his eyes, deep jowls, and a big nose.

He stopped at the entrance, looked around for a minute, then walked up to the bar.

“Yes, sir?” asked Rhys.

“I, uh, I want to buy a bottle of whiskey,” said the man.

“This is a pub,” said Rhys, “not a liquor store. I can serve you a drink if you like.”

“The liquor stores are all closed,” said the man.

The World's Shattered Shell

Rhys shrugged. "If you like, but I'll have to charge you like you'd ordered twenty shots. That's how many are in a bottle. It will be damn expensive compared to a liquor store."

The man hesitated, then nodded.

"What do you want? Will J&B do?"

"That'll be fine," said the man. He reached into his jacket, fumbled out his wallet.

Rhys turned to the rack on the wall behind him, found a fresh bottle of J&B.

He turned to the man. "Here," he said. "If you really want it, fifty bucks. I'd rather serve you at the bar, though. Free drinks tonight."

"Free?" the man said, "Really? But, uh, no, I just need the bottle."

He paid for the bottle, turned and left.

"That was weird," said Steiner.

"Not so much," said Rhys. "The guy's a maintenance drunk. I recognize the type. Probably, he's okay most of the day, but he drinks himself to sleep every night. I bet he drinks at least a half bottle, maybe the whole thing. You saw that big red nose, the pores and everything? If he was a regular binge-drinker or a real no-hoper, he'd be happy to drink for free. But he's got his self-respect, you see. Doesn't like getting drunk in public. Hence the bottle. We'd never see him in here except, like he said, the stores are all closed."

"Huh," said Steiner. "I didn't see any of that until you said it, but you're right. And I get the picture too. The poor old guy is going home now. Lives alone, I guess. Maybe he's going to be drinking while watching late-night TV, or maybe he's figured out how it works after all those years and he's drinking in bed so at least he can fall asleep there. Poor bastard."

And that was it for a while.

The others weren't talking much tonight, so I was pretty much left alone. Apart from Steiner's nervous chatter, there was the comfortable silence of people who don't need to talk to each other all the time. I spent my time relaxing in silence, nursing a beer, occasionally ordering a refill, occasionally chatting with Steiner and Rhys. When I looked up again, it was after midnight. Tonight everyone seemed a little hesitant to leave. At last, Nora closed her laptop and put it in her carry-bag.

"Hey, Nora," said Quaid, turning away from the bar. "You want a walk home? I mean, you know, just because of the, ah, situation outside."

“No!” Nora’s response was automatic. “I’ll be fine.” Then she paused, hesitated. “Wait. I’m sorry. Yeah, I think I would like that. If you don’t mind.”

They left together. I watched them go. Steiner followed my gaze as the door closed behind them.

“Wish you’d made the offer?” Steiner was often obtuse, but other times he could be annoyingly perceptive.

“No. Well, maybe. I don’t know. It was the right thing to do, anyway, for one of us.”

“Yeah.”

Steiner said goodnight then, and the Professor started putting her pieces away. I was about to head out myself, but the Professor surprised me by speaking up. In the last year, we’d exchanged maybe a dozen words total — when she spoke at all, it was usually to Rhys about liquor or sometimes to Nora about poetry — but I never felt like she was cutting me out, just that we didn’t need to spend our time chatting.

“A moment of your time, if you will.”

I think she was around 60 or so, but at that age it’s hard to tell. She had a narrow face, with long grey hair tied back behind her head, and she wore rectangular rimless spectacles. Tweedy jacket with elbow patches worn over a blouse. With her clothes and formal diction, the nickname was inevitable. I guess she liked being called that because she never asked anyone to use her real name, and if I’d ever known what it was, I’d forgotten it now.

“Sure, Professor,” I said. “How’s the emergency treating you?”

“Well enough,” she said, “and thank you for asking. But really I’m more interested in how it’s treating you.”

“Huh? I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“Hm.” She looked me over carefully. I wondered what she was looking for in my face. “To be honest,” she said, “I don’t think I can explain myself yet. Intuition, if you will. Please take care, though.”

What the hell? But she seemed sincere.

“Well, thanks,” I said. “Have a good night yourself.”

She nodded, folded her chess set under her arm, and headed out the door.

I went back to the bar. And then I thought, *Why didn’t I offer to escort her, like Quaid did for Nora? Maybe because she seemed so self-assured? And why wouldn’t I need an escort for that matter? Anyway, it was too late, now.*

The World's Shattered Shell

"Guess I'll be heading home, too," I said. "Hey Rhys, I appreciate you keeping the place open. Not sure what I'd do if you weren't there."

"S'nothing. Have a good one. See you tomorrow."

The walk home was uneventful. I didn't see a soul the whole way. At one point I could have sworn I heard a horse neighing in the distance, but I looked around and there was nothing. I went to bed a little early and slept through the night with no dreams at all that I could remember.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurence Raphael Brothers is a writer and a technologist with five patents and a background in AI and Internet R&D. He has published over 40 short stories in such magazines as *Nature*, *PodCastle*, and *Galaxy's Edge*. His noir urban fantasy novellas *The Demons of Wall Street*, *The Demons of the Square Mile*, and *The Demons of Chiyoda* are available from Mirror World Publishing.

To learn more about the works and world of Laurence Raphael Brothers, you can follow him on Twitter at [@lbrothers](#) or visit his website, [laurencebrothers.com](#).