



**Series Concept
by
Daniel Knauf**

1

Series Concept by Daniel Knauf

THE BIG SLEEP

The Third Planet from the Sun (the pretty little blue one), Milky Way Galaxy, Universe, This Dimension, This Reality.

The near future.

Eight months have passed since a rapidly mutating airborne pathogen wiped out hummingbirds, salmon, elephant seals, ferrets, lungfish, zebras, lobsters, caribou and human beings.

(There may have been more effected species, but those were the only mass die-offs the media reported before reporters themselves suffered a massive die-off.)

With the randomness of a tornado, touching down and obliterating one house while leaving its next door neighbor unscathed, the virus would utterly wipe out one species, and have no effect whatsoever on another.

Why did it kill all the cats and spare the dogs? Why destroy koala bears and not wombats? Why do birds carry the virus, but are immune to it? Alas, these and a thousand other fascinating questions remained unanswered because the scientists and researchers were dropping like flies.

(Actually, not like flies—flies were immune. But, surprise surprise, that hoary, hardy ancient survivor, the cockroach, was not.)



The entire pandemic took less than eight days. It was as if Mother Nature, having tolerated humans (and hummingbirds, salmon, elephant seals, *et al*) for some 100,000 years, simply couldn't get rid of us fast enough.

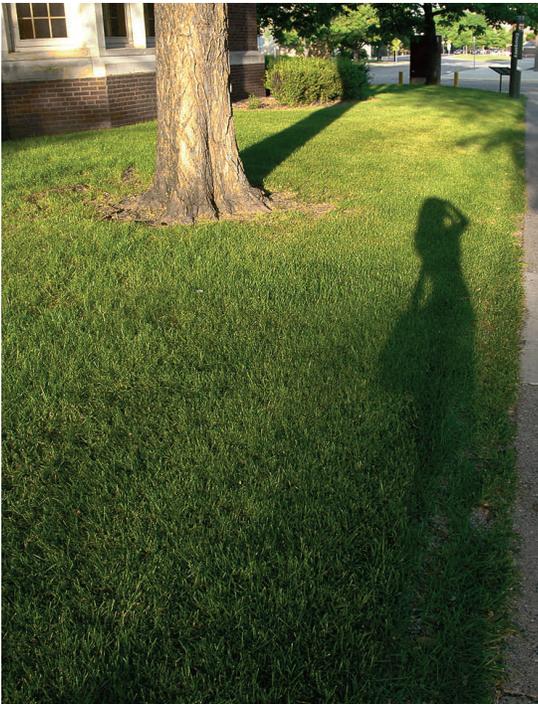
The pathogen was as kind as it was efficient. There was no pain, no bleeding from every orifice, no gasping for air, no suppurating wounds. The only cells vulnerable were those that comprise the structure of the heart-valves. The virus would completely annihilate them while the host was sleeping. At a certain point, the heart would simply stop.

Just.

Like.

That.

The immunological community didn't even have time to give it a name. The rest of us called it "The Big Sleep."



STELLA WAKES UP

Escondido, California, USA, Third Planet from the Sun, Milky Way Galaxy, Universe, This Dimension, This Reality.

STELLA CARTER is 16. She lives alone in her family's home in a very desirable master-planned, gated community called "The Highlands."

Very much alone.

This is a photo Stella took of her shadow on the front lawn.

She is pretty. She has an IQ of 147. In her last semester of her Sophomore Year at Holy Oaks Girl's Academy, her cumulative GPA was 4.22. She also played killer third-base for the Holy Oaks softball team (*Go Comets!*).

Stella listens to The Donnas, Dylan, The Dandy Warhols and Dean Martin (and those are just the "Ds"). Among her favorite shows are Say Yes to the Dress, Breaking Bad, American Idol, The Forensic Files, Jersey Shore and The Survivalist.

On April 19th, Stella awoke to find that her parents, Grant and Kathleen, had succumbed to The Big Sleep. She called 911, but no one answered as all the emergency operators were either dead or taking the day off (mostly dead).



When she returned to her parents' bedroom to check on them (*maybe I'm wrong imagined it made a mistake and they're just sleeping they could just be sleeping dear God let them just be sleeping*), she saw the first of the flies.

She blurted a primal cry of revulsion, clamped both hands over her mouth, backed into the wall and slowly slid down, eyes fixed on the insects crawling aimlessly over her mother's prized 1,500 thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets (*"Not aimlessly,"* a very rational little girl's voice said inside her head with a sibilant lisp, *"they're looking for someplace to lay their eggs,"* triggering a fresh paroxysm of horror so violent that Stella spasmed as if physically kicked).

Her growing panic was quelled by the unflappable DR. MICHAEL BADEN, the stalwart medical examiner and regular on The Forensic Files, who calmly reminded her that, depending on the season, temperature and wind direction, entomological activity can begin within fifteen minutes of the host's death.

On a more practical note, he suggested that, unless she harbored an overwhelming curiosity regarding about the process of decomposition (or, as he called it, "decomp"), she should inter the bodies as soon as possible.

(Actually, Stella was curious about the process of decomp—but not nearly enough to witness its effects on her Mom and Dad.)

She picked a shady spot under an apricot tree in the back yard.

When she was done, it was dark, and she dragged herself back into the house. Absolutely certain she would never again awaken, she brewed a pot of strong coffee and stacked a half-dozen DVDs of her favorite movies (Casablanca, E.T. The Extraterrestrial, A Very Long Engagement, Superbad and Notes on a Scandal). She fell asleep before Rick could tell Sam to "Play it."

The next morning, she awoke.

And the next.

And the next.

On the third day, the power went dead.



THE SURVIVOR

One of Stella's favorite television shows was "The Survivalist" on the Discovery Channel. Each week, its host, TUCKER "TUCK" HANSON, a former commando in Australian Special Operations, would zip-line into isolated, inhospitable, terrible places and demonstrate survival tips and tactics.

Survival is a serious business. The key is *Vigilance, Ingenuity, and Maintenance*. Tuck called it the *VIM System*. "And VIM," Tuck would say, with his trademark Aussie accent, "should always be practiced with *viggah*,"

The day after the power failed, Stella had a little chat with Tuck. He informed her that if she reckoned to sustain anything resembling a civilized lifestyle, she might consider the acquisition of a generator (or, as Tuck called it, "A *ginnie!*")

Stella made a list of the items she thought she might need:

- *ginnie*
- *10 gal. gas can*
- *gas*
- *electrical switches and stuff*
- *wires???*

She then drove to the Home Depot down on East Valley Parkway. After reviewing various owner's manuals, she settled on a Generac 8kW Automatic Home Standby Generator.*



Since the Generac ran off LP, she had to search for the key to the Blue Rhino cage. She quickly located it in a drawer under the counter of the Customer Service desk and lugged nine propane canisters into the back of her Subaru Forester. Though the gasoline can was now unnecessary, she took one anyway (as it would undoubtedly prove handy) and a number of other items.** Price was no object, as there were no cashiers left alive to ring anything up.

Nevertheless, Stella felt compelled to leave behind a neatly hand-printed list of what she had "borrowed" as well as her home address just in case the last intrepid detective on earth decided to mount an investigation.

* Including "pre-wired EZ 100 Amp pre-wired EZ switch with 10 circuits, wiring kit, flexible fuel line, and composite mounting pad that provides the easiest, most cost effective installation available on the market."

** An Ariens Counter Rotating 17" Tiller, Ortho Slug and Snail Killer, six Topsy-Turvy 10 in. Plastic Tomato Planters, one Summer Crop easy vegetable seed starting kit, five bags of Earthgro Steer Manure Blend and one paperback copy of Edward Smith's "The Vegetable Gardener's Bible."

By four o'clock that afternoon, Stella had wired the generator and fully restored power to her house. To celebrate, she microwaved herself a Lean Cuisine, a bag of Orville Redenbacher, and watched the long version of *The Seven Samurai*.

SO THEN WHAT?

Over the ensuing months, with the help of dozens of people who no longer exist (save in her imagination) or never existed (save in television shows, movies, books and magazines), Stella builds a life.



Though the neighborhood is gradually going to seed, her house is a pristine bubble of 21st Century suburbia—impeccably maintained, flowerbeds blooming, its front lawn mowed and verdant.

Her primary companion is her twin sister, BECCA, who died in a tragic ice-skating accident when Stella and she were six.

Becca's death was the reason her parents moved from Grand Rapids, Minnesota to San Diego, California, a place where lakes, rivers and reservoirs never, ever froze over, and beautiful, beloved, darling daughters never, ever fell through the ice.

Becca was Stella's not-so-secret companion long before *The Big Sleep*. Within mere hours of her fatal accident, the two girls were carrying on long conversations. This continued for several weeks before Stella's parents took her to the Talking Doctor and Becca "went away" (though she never *really* went away, did she, Stella?)

Physically, Becca is a miniature, perpetually six-year-old version of Stella who possesses the poise, sophistication and vocabulary of a much older girl—a teenager about Stella's age, as a matter of fact.

The effect is sometimes disturbing. For example, a six-year old has absolutely no business using words like "exhausted," "egotist" or "delusional."

(Particularly with the lisp of one who is missing both her front teeth.)

Of course, *The Big Sleep* greatly expanded Stella's circle of companions. Besides the aforementioned Tuck Hanson and Dr. Baden, she often interacts with MRS. SKEEHAN, her nurturing sixth grade teacher, her UNCLE WEBB, an inveterate do-it-yourselfer, "MADAME," her despised piano coach, her lovely, wonderful, patient DAD (but, oddly, not her Mom—never

her Mom—though she has recurring dreams in which she hears her humming downstairs or smells her perfume, as if she *just missed her*).

Additionally, there are the bit players, like the COOL OLD DUDE and the HELPFUL SALESLADY and the MEXICAN GUY. Although they make regular appearances, they are often playing different roles.

For instance, one week, as she is siphoning gasoline at the Exxon with her Gorman-Rupp Shield-A-Spark self-priming centrifugal pump*, the Cool Old Dude may appear in the guise of a mechanic and ask, “Say, sweetie, isn’t it about time you changed the oil?” The next week, she could be scavenging for canned goods at Vons, and the Cool Old Dude, now wearing the apron of a grocer, might suggest, “I love Lobster Bisque, too. But I sure don’t care for the looks of that rusty can.”



WHAT? NO ZOMBIES?

What, are you kidding? Stella is a 5’6”, 115 lb. girl living alone in a world in which the infrastructure is toast. Electricity, potable water, and pretty much every basic modern convenience we take for granted is only available to her through her wits, courage, ingenuity and, more often than not, risk of life and limb.



There is no 911, no doctors, no nurses, no paramedics. If she suffers an illness or injury, she has to take care of herself. Sometimes, this is as easy as a trip to the nearest Rite-Aid, but a broken leg or an impacted wisdom tooth? Those could pose problems.

Hell, if left untreated, an infected *toenail* could kill her.

And while canned and preserved foods are readily available, perishables have, well, perished. Fresh meat,

* Including “carbon and Ni-resistant wearing surfaces, radio-suppressed, shielded military-grade spark plug and ignition wire, sealed toggle ignition switch and spark-arresting muffler, the safest engine driven flammable liquid pump on the market.”



dairy, fruits and vegetables must be slaughtered, butchered, milked, planted, picked and harvested.

Consider this:

If Stella happens to get a hankering for an egg-salad sandwich, the first thing she needs to do is catch a chicken...

You beginning to get the picture?

And then there are the dogs—the *fucking dogs!* Poodles, bassets, beagles and German

shepherds; Chihuahuas and St. Bernards, pure breeds and mixed, running together in starving, rapacious, barking, howling packs.

For the first three months or so, they were able to scavenge the dead. But now, the only things left with meat on their bones is live game—rabbits, wild pigs, deer...

... oh, yeah, and Stella.

Suffice it to say, going out unarmed is a very bad idea.

Going out at night is suicide.

Of course, the dogs are nothing compared to the more exotic beasts that have escaped from the Zoo and the Wild Animal Park. She always thought chimpanzees were cute until she saw what that screeching gang of them did to that pony in the Wal-Mart parking lot.

And she doesn't want to even *think* about what left that set of tracks she found in the mud down by the Sports Complex—the ones with the claw-marks deeper than her pinky is long. (*NOTE TO SELF: The NATO standard .556 caliber assault-rifle round is ineffective against large predatory game. A better choice is a bolt-action rifle chambered for .338 Win Mag.*)

Despite its harsh, often profound beauty, Stella's world is an unforgiving one fraught with danger, in which even the most insignificant error can have fatal consequences. For instance,





the mere act of allowing a door to close could be potentially lethal if it turns out to be locked from the outside. There is no one to hear Stella's screams; no one with a key to let her out; no one to apologize for the inconvenience; nothing to aid in her escape but her ingenuity and raw will to survive.

(Plus maybe a tip or two from Tuck.)

And while Stella has had her share of close calls, rarely making the same

mistake twice, she knows it's only a matter of time before her luck runs out and the call isn't close, but final. Some day, somehow, she is going to screw up.

And that's just the physical stuff.

Because Stella is alone. And her isolation is nibbling at the edges of her sanity.

For the time being, she knows that the characters she interacts with aren't real. But she also knows that, with each passing day, the line between fantasy and reality is growing increasingly blurred. It's only a matter of time before she asks Mexican Guy to run down to the pharmacy and pick up some penicillin, or decides it's about time Mrs. Skeehan takes over tending the vegetable garden, or relies on Cool Old Guy to gas up her Subaru or load her weapons or check the traps.

And that, boys and girls, is the day Stella will find herself in a very, very unpleasant situation indeed.



Then again, depression may gain purchase and gradually drag her down into such a bleak, black place—such a God-awful, ghastly, lonesome place—that the only way out is through a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. Or the chest. Or maybe an overdose...

(See?! She's already thinking about it too much!)

Zombies...?

Who needs Zombies?



STELLA GETS HER GROOVE ON

When we find her in the pilot episode, it's been six months since *The Big Sleep*. The first act plays completely MOS. We see a lovely young teenage girl, Stella, as she goes through her daily activities.

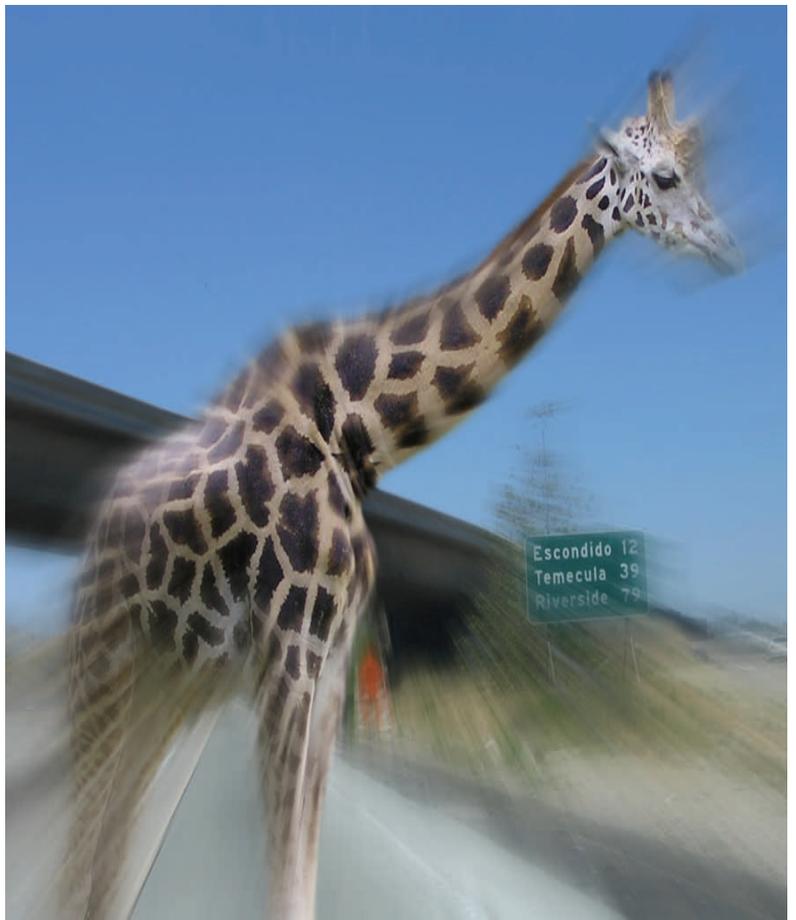
At first, her tasks are banal—brushing her teeth, showering, getting dressed, eating a bowl of cereal as she watches a DVD—but they gradually become increasingly odd. Is she swapping out LP canisters on a *generator* in the garage? Is she harvesting onions in the back yard? Is that an AK47 she's cleaning? Why is she using a portable pump to siphon gas from the tanks under the Mobil station?

By now, we know we're not in Kansas anymore.

As she goes to the grocery store, the mall, the library, Stella interacts with her sister, Becca, as well as a number of other characters. They offer advice, make helpful suggestions, gentle reminders. These scenes play absolutely natural-istically—no woo-woo, no weirdness, no suggestion that every single individual with which she engages resides solely within her imagination.

Stella is driving down an empty freeway, listening to a CD and carrying on an animated conversation with Becca, when her sister turns, meets her eyes and observes aloud in an offhand tone, “You *do* know you're going insane.”

Stella stares at Becca in horror. The little version of herself sighs and calmly suggests that she should watch where she's driving. When Stella finally turns her attention back the road ahead, she finds herself speeding toward a giraffe.



She slams on the brakes and swerves, barely missing it.

Stunned, Stella watches the animal lope away and down a wooded slope with the inelegant, slow-mo-majesty that defines its species. (“*NOTE TO SELF: One never knows where a giraffe is going to turn up.*”).

When she turns back to the passenger seat, there's no sign of Becca.

Of *course* there's no sign of Becca.

Becca is dead.

Everybody is dead.

Trembling, Stella closes her eyes and rests her head against the steering wheel. She realizes that if she doesn't find some other people—*real* people—with which to interact, she will lose her mind.

But how? All forms of communication—the internet, telephones—no longer work. It might be possible to jury-rig a means to broadcast a message from a television or radio station, but who's watching television or listening to the radio?

Even if someone sees it, then what? She could broadcast her location and wait for someone to show up. But what if the person she reaches is miles away? She could be waiting for days; weeks, even. Even worse, what if her audience is evil or predatory or insane.

What if he's evil, predatory *and* insane?

And that's when Uncle Webb reminds her of that time? Five years ago? Remember? When she and Mom and Dad visited his farm in Wisconsin? He showed off that big ham-radio rig he set up in the shed.

Hell, little angel! I could talk to a fella down in Tierra del Fuego if I knowed any Messican!

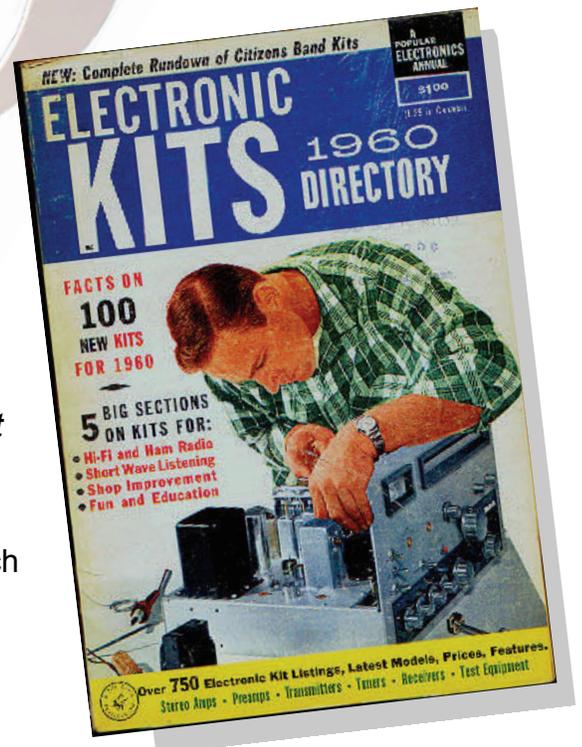
Stella races to the library; checks out (steals) every book they have on the subject.

She locates a specialty electronics store through the Yellow Pages, and Cool Old Guy helps her pick out a transceiver. Helpful Sales Lady asks her if she'll need a big antenna like the one Uncle Jim had on the roof of his shed. Of course she will!

Stella spends the rest of the day hooking up the whole Rube Goldberg mess.

While installing the antenna, she very nearly falls off the roof (*"NOTE TO SELF: If circumstances require one to perform a task on an elevated sloped surface, it is best done on hands and knees."*).

It's just getting dark when she fires up the shortwave and begins scanning frequencies. Timid inquiries, each growing desperate with repetition (*"This is Stella. Is there anybody there? Can you hear me...?"*); each answered by the bone-stupid crackling hiss of static.



Still, she keeps trying, growing ever more discouraged as the night wears on, finally drifting off to sleep in front of the radio, cheek resting on the open Operator's Manual, the headset still clamped over her ears. She's having that dream about her mother again—the one in which she keeps missing her by seconds—when a male voice sizzles over the air from very far away:

“Break break. Eighty-eight from Ithaca, New York. This is Ron Bozeman. Is there anyone monitoring this frequency, over?”

Her eyes snap open and we are

OUT



unmovies

