

## Power Outage

Tom Patter opened one eye to look at the clock beside his bed. The clock was dead. "Power outage," he thought. The room was much lighter than when he usually got up. "Damn! I'm late to work!" He jumped out of bed and grabbed his cell phone to call the office. The phone was dead, too. He'd left it plugged into the charger overnight. Apparently the charger had drained the battery when the power went off. He'd have to plug it into his car and call on his way to work.

He still had hot water so he took a quick shower, dressed, and headed for the door. He thought about grabbing something to eat from the refrigerator, but decided since the power was out it was best not to open the refrigerator door. The food would stay cold longer that way. No telling how long it would be until the power came back. He could grab a breakfast sandwich at a drive-through. He guessed it was late enough that they wouldn't be busy.

The electric garage door opener didn't work, of course, so he pulled the cord to disengage the motor and opened the door manually. For some reason his car door didn't unlock when he pressed the button on his key fob. It occurred to him that he had never replaced the battery in the fob. No real problem, as he could unlock the door with the key. That didn't do him much good, though. The car was dead. No lights, no starter, no radio . . . nothing. He opened the hood and looked at the battery. Everything looked fine. The battery connections were tight, no corrosion, and the battery was barely a year old. He worked on old cars as a hobby and was used to troubleshooting electrical problems, but he didn't know where to start with a new car. Everything ran through the computer.

He slammed the hood in disgust. Maybe his MG would start. He had an old MGB from the 60s that he enjoyed driving in the summer. It really wasn't MG weather yet, but the car should be ready to go. He'd taken it out a few times already this spring. He went back into the house to get the MG key and to put on a heavier coat. The MG complained a bit about being asked to start on a cold morning, groaning as the starter turned over slowly, but it fired up. He backed it into his driveway, got out to close the garage door, and headed for work.

It was eerie driving to work. The power outage affected a much larger area than he expected. The traffic lights weren't working. All of the stores and restaurants he passed were dark. No chance of getting breakfast. And there wasn't another car on the road. When he got to his office, it was dark. The door was locked, and the only car in the parking lot was Ned's. Ned sat next to Tom, and he had left on a business trip the day before. He'd taken a cab to the airport and left his car at the office.

Not knowing what else to do, Tom drove back home. Again, there were no other cars on the road. He remembered he had rigged up a USB charging port in his MG so he could use his phone to navigate when he took it on tours, so he plugged his phone into it. Something must have come loose, or a fuse had blown, because his phone wouldn't charge.

When he turned into his neighborhood he was glad to see kids playing in yards. He was beginning to feel like he was in one of those science fiction movies where everyone else had been killed by a virus or

a nuclear war and he was the last living person on Earth. He saw his neighbor grilling on his back patio, so after he parked his car he walked over to talk.

“Hey Bill, what’s up?” he said as he entered the yard.

“No idea,” Bill answered. Everything’s dead. No power, our phones are dead, my car’s dead, even my wife’s battery powered radio is dead. She bought these halibut steaks a couple days ago. Spent a fortune, but we were going to have them for our anniversary dinner tomorrow. I told her we better have them for lunch today so they won’t go bad.”

“Everything’s dead at my house, too. Except, for some reason my MG started. I drove it to work but there was no one there. Looked like the power is out all over town, and I didn’t see any other cars on the road. It was weird.”

“They don’t make ‘em like the used to,” Bill commented. “I had an old Chevy when I was in high school that started every morning. First crank. Never gave me a bit of trouble. Wish I’d never sold it. Still, my Honda has never let me down before. And, no offense, but MGs don’t exactly have the reputation of being a car that will start when nothing else will. It’s strange.”

They talked for a while longer, but couldn’t come to any conclusion other than that it was very strange. The power still hadn’t come back by the late afternoon, when there was a knock on Tom’s door. There was a boy at the door who Tom recognized as being one of the neighborhood kids. The boy announced “Neighborhood Association meeting in the pool parking lot at five o’clock” and ran to the next house to give them the message.

Tom guessed it was about five o’clock when he saw a crowd gathering, so he headed for the parking lot. He wished he hadn’t thrown away his old wind-up watch when he started carrying a cell phone. The first fifteen minutes of the meeting were wasted arguing over what had happened. Some people thought the problem was caused by a massive solar flare. Some thought it was an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) from a high altitude nuclear explosion, and some thought it was a massive cyber-attack that included “time bomb” code embedded in the chips used by electronics. The President of the homeowner’s association finally put a halt to the argument, pointing out that it didn’t matter what caused the problem. The homeowners needed to face the fact that they had no power, all electronics were dead, and no one knew when the problem would be fixed. What did the neighborhood need to do to get by until the problem was fixed?

Talk then turned to more practical matters. Most of the families had enough food to last at least a few days. Some had a little extra, and they offered to share the extra with families who were caught short. They still had water, and the sewers still worked, although no one wanted to think about what was happening to the sewage when it got to the treatment plant. One man had a brother who worked at the water plant, and he said their back-up generators were so old they didn’t have electronics so he expected the water to keep flowing. The natural gas was still flowing, and the people like Tom who had a gas stove and a gas water heater offered to let their neighbors with electric appliances cook and shower at their place. Tom was the only one who had a running vehicle. He offered to use it to make

emergency runs, such as taking someone to the hospital, but cautioned them that the car was old, not terribly reliable, and he had only a limited supply of gasoline. They agreed to meet at least briefly at five every afternoon to share any new information and address any new problems. Then the meeting broke up. Tom had three families come by that evening to shower, and one to cook a ham. He had to explain to the lady with the ham that his oven didn't work because it used electronic controls. His stove worked because he could light the burners on top with a match. He offered to try baking the ham in his barbecue grill outside, but she declined. She said they had a grill at home, but she never thought of using it to cook a ham.

Tom had a hard time falling asleep that night. He thought the situation was a lot worse than the people at the homeowner's meeting realized, but he didn't want to say anything because he didn't have any solutions. All he would have done was cause panic. It was great that the water was still flowing, but how much longer could the plant run on back-up generators? How could they refuel them when the trucks weren't running? The hospital would be in the same shape. If someone did get sick and Tom took them to the hospital in his MG, what could the doctors do with no lights, no power, no x-ray or other electronic machines, and probably no supplies? Weren't patient records all electronic now? Even if stores tried to open, how could people buy things? Credit cards were useless without electronic scanners, and ATMs wouldn't work so they couldn't get cash. The bank records were probably all electronic, so they couldn't get money inside the bank, either. And in any event, the stores would soon run out of supplies, since there were no trucks to resupply them. Tom didn't know enough about the natural gas system to even guess how long that would keep running, but he knew that we no longer made transformers, electronics, chemicals, and other electrical components in this country. How could the power companies repair the grid if they didn't have the parts? What if the power didn't come back by winter? How would they keep from freezing to death in their houses? These and many other questions kept Tom awake most of the night.

Things were no different the next morning. No power, no Internet, no news. Tom decided to go to the library. He didn't know if it would be open, but it was the only government building within walking distance and he guessed that if the local government had anything to say they'd post it at the library. It was a nice morning and the library was only a couple miles away, so Tom walked rather than use precious gasoline.

It turned out Tom's guess was correct. The library had moved a bulletin board into the entryway, where there was enough daylight to read, and a note from the city mayor was posted on the board. The note didn't say much. The Town Council didn't know what had happened or when it would be fixed, but they were trying to get in touch with state and local officials to find out. In the meantime everyone should remain calm and help their neighbors. Police would patrol on foot and using bicycles, and fire stations were be manned 24/7, although response times would be longer than normal. They asked people to donate any unneeded bicycles to the city for use by police and fire fighters. The librarian said the notice had been delivered by a bicycle courier that morning. The note was printed in purple ink and had a familiar smell to it. It took Tom a while to recognize it as a mimeograph copy, something he hadn't seen since elementary school. He guessed the town probably had a lot of old office equipment tucked away in basements and storerooms. He smiled when he remembered that his old school had been closed for years and used for storage. Maybe this was made on a machine from that school.

Tom described the note at that night's homeowners' meeting. He volunteered to walk to the library every day to check for new messages. Nobody else had anything to report, so it was a short meeting.

Two days later there was a note at the library saying the National Guard was passing out MRE food packets at their armory and warehouse. The warehouse was over twenty miles away, so Tom drove his MG to check it out. (He siphoned some gas out of his Toyota before he started, just to make certain he had enough.) When he got there he was surprised to see that the drill field was covered with tents where people were living. There was a long line of people pulling wagons and pushing grocery carts who had come to get food. Tom was waved into a much shorter line of cars and trucks. They were all antiques, like his MG.

"How many people in your family?" a sergeant asked when he reached the front of the line.

"Just me, but I'd like to pick up for my entire neighborhood. It's over 20 miles away and nobody else has a running vehicle so they can't get here."

The sergeant frowned, but he replied "We're only supposed to give out food for single families, but I don't want people going hungry. We don't have tents for any more campers here so don't send your neighbors here. I'll let you pick up food for them this time. Next time bring me a list of your neighbors and their addresses. How many families in the neighborhood?"

"About forty," Tom replied. The sergeant frowned again, but picked up a case of MREs. Tom got out of the car to help him load them.

"What happened?" Tom asked as they were loading boxes into the passenger seat.

"I don't really know," the sergeant replied. "Someone found an old shortwave radio in a metal filing cabinet in the Armory basement. It worked for a little while, but there was a lot of static and it soon died. We heard there was an EMP attack on the country and we retaliated. Most of the country was affected, but some of it not too badly. We're in one of the areas that got the worst of it. They're gathering trucks and other vehicles that are still running to bring supplies, but that will take a while. A lot of places are in the same shape we're in. Help is pouring in from Canada and Mexico, and the rest of the world is trying to send help but the war's got things pretty messed up."

They packed as many cases as possible into the passenger seat and the trunk, but his MG was pretty small. They could only fit ten cases, including two tied to the luggage rack.

"We normally give out one case per family every four days," the sergeant said. "You've got ten cases for forty families, so come back tomorrow and I'll give you ten more. Come between 6 am and 6 pm, as that's when I'm on duty. And bring that list."

"Who attacked us?" Tom asked as he got into his car.

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders. “We didn’t hear. Too much static. At this point, does it really matter?” He waved Tom to drive off so he could load the next car.

As Tom drove away he realized that the sergeant was right. At this particular time, all that mattered to him or to his neighbors was that he had food. If he could keep the MG running he would get more food tomorrow. Beyond that, who knew? They’d have to take care of future problems as they arose.