

## Chapter 1

# The Apocalypse Syndrome: We Are Them

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When I swung open the door, I knew something was wrong. I could almost smell it wafting through the air. I can remember that day so clearly. I peered inside the dimly lit room and swallowed. It was time to endure another torturous session that would drag on as if time had literally stopped. But I had to attend. I had to play the chump. I had to sit quietly and listen to the endless hours of psychobabble drivel. Sure, life had faded into rounds of joyless chores, invading my comfort zone with impunity. But that would soon be the least of my problems. I soon would intrude on the twilight zone of THEM. And after that madcap ride, nothing would ever get me to clench my stomach again.

That last session was nothing special. It was like all the rest, unpleasant and boring. I knew it wouldn't solve anything. Never had before. But to get free from entangling alliances, one first had to do something incredibly stupid. I was good at that. I knew how to jump through flaming hoops of stupidity, endure the burning pain and sit quietly as the therapist rubbed thorns into my flesh. But I could take such needling. I made the perfect human pin cushion. I could even jump into the middle of a bonfire and simply yawn. Yeah, I was that stupid. My friends knew that and dubbed me the compulsive masochist who would enjoy going to the burn ward. They were wrong. I had limitations.

When I stepped inside and started to walk, I peered across the room and spotted the thorniest idiocy of my life. She was sitting in a folding chair next to a half-bald psychologist hastily scribbling notes. There she was. My estranged wife; all dolled up with a surly face that creased into a wish-you-were-dead frown. Sure, I knew how to bottle up my misery, but I could only take the pressure only for so long. For a time, it seemed like life could not possibly get worse. I was dead wrong. Little did I know that my scale of misery had been woefully underestimated.

I can recall the moment I passed in front of Sarah. I saw what she was doing. It was silly. She was staring blankly at the floor, like always, probably counting the loops in the Berber carpet. She was good at that—counting things that did not really matter. That was one of her less annoying habits. She always had a talent for taking loopiness to new highs. In my mind, Sarah did not belong to the human race. When she withdrew into her own fantasy world she would take on the aura of foreigner or space alien. Despite her strange ways, I would always sit next to her and stare away. She ignored me. I ignored her. This had become our pathetic pattern. For all practical purposes she could have been one of THEM. She could have been the queen bee of THEM.

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Thinking back, I believe I have always hated THEM. All of THEM. You know the type; the uptight sourpusses who always have their panties twisted in a bunch. I often refer to them as connoisseurs of misery or adroit killjoys who drove full speed into the murky landmines of death wishes. That would be fine with me; let them crash into concrete barriers and plunge over a six-story bridge. Let them drown in oceans of salty tears. No skin off my nose. But it never would stop there. No, they had to take hostages. Otherwise they wouldn't enjoy their death-defying finale. They had to drag someone along for the ride, minus seatbelts, crash helmets or common sense. And for some inexplicable reason they had to target large road barriers that were unhealthy to conjoin.

By the time I had gotten all comfy in my flimsy metal chair, I would stare down and slouch as the therapist began to drone over my tardiness. I would ignore his sharp words. Why get upset? At that time I felt blindly blissful. I was just waiting out the clock; completely ignorant of what was going to happen around me. I would just stare up at the wall clock, hum a silly tone and watch the second hand tick like a slow moving garden slug. Life was simply boring, not confusingly dangerous.

Yeah, I thought I had it easy. I expected things to someday improve. That was a big mistake. In a flash, I was put into a position to make quick decisions. I had to separate the idiots from the dangerous, the merely suicidal from the freakishly deranged. I had to figure out the right moment to run before outbursts of unabated joy exploded into high octane hysteria.

That was not the only unnerving crap I had to deal with. No, those armed with itchy-trigger tempers were teasing the sane. They were merely in their warm-up exercise routine. With a neurotic smile and blushing cheeks, these "disputants" would apologize; get all huffy and puffy about all the good things they were going to do for you. They would refer to themselves as humanity's do-gooders, and tout themselves as saints on a holier-than-thou mission. That was their trigger button. Take heed. Never ask them what they planned to do for you. That was when their talons sprung out like a row of switch-blade knives. That is when anything you say would send them on a quest to flog the flesh off your back or rip out a tart tongue. The most troubling part was that these little demons were my dear friends and work colleagues. But to them, I had simply become easy prey.

Actually, I should not classify my wife as one of THEM. She merely acted that way without true malice. No, my wrath was reserved for those fixated with physical horror. They could not get enough. Horror was like food. I saw it in the eyes of the guy who attempted to throw me into a wood chipper. He grabbed my head, dragged me several feet and almost crammed me into the whirling blades. I wrapped my right hand around the outside metal edge. When he failed to slice and dice me like a sushi roll, he backed away. His eyes watered. His voice rasped with the grating sound of rock against rock with a sort of eagerness. Next, he uttered heartfelt remorse. Tears started to stream down his cheeks. Very touching. But before his last teardrop could hit the ground, he grabbed another person and hurled him willy-nilly into the mechanical jaws of death, turning an old man into bite-size bits of dog food.

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The shocking part was yet to come. I turned around and watched a dozen or so people gathered at the back of the truck. With wide gleeful eyes, they scooped up clumps of the old man's body. They hand-packed the flesh and bones tightly and lobbed the bloody mess at each other. It was like a friendly snowball fight. I moved a few inches away. They stopped, turned towards me and stared like a lobotomized sow. I began to move much faster. As I rushed down the street, I could hear them laughing like a pack of hyenas at a sporting event. This was not the type of blood sport that appealed to me. No, my wife was not like that. She may have been a drag, but she would never toss fresh human pulp at strangers.

My wife's oddities were less homicidal. Somewhere between the popping of our wedding champagne and our second anniversary, everything went wrong. Sarah had re-corked her fun-loving elixir, sealed her charms, and turned flat. She devolved into an annoying, blood-sucking nag, determined to transform me into something I could never become a monument of virtue that mirrored hers. That was not me. I had to follow my own pathway, be myself, and follow my own destiny. But she persisted with a vengeance. It was so wrong, and so prevalent. In fact, so prevalent that I wondered if strands of her DNA were buried deep inside us all; like some perverse human gene wired to self-destruct in the blink of an eye.

Anyway, that was why I felt compelled to ask for a divorce. Nothing complicated. Just send her back to Venus so that I could live alone on Mars. However, the authorities would not grant my wish without first going through proper procedures that included countless hours of counseling to supposedly save my doomed marriage. That was never going to happen. I had to abide my time until these sessions ended. But my patience was becoming strained. I tried to tolerate her bitterness and sarcasm. I had bought crates of cotton balls to plug my ears and block out her unwavering devotion to nit-picking. I could withstand that assault except for the endless hours of drivel spewed by the pencil-neck marriage therapist. Every few minutes he would stare at me with his piercing eyes and ask how I was "feeling." I hated that. All I wanted to do was get it over with and catch the last minutes of the Dodgers baseball game back in my cabin. I suppose my reasoning was selfish, but then I did not give a damn—except for the Dodgers. Then again, like most seasons, they were playing baseball like little blinds girls with deformed hands. What losers. Nothing was fair.

I can still recall those countless sessions. Nothing was accomplished, but that did not stop his dopy attempts at psychoanalysis. He would always try to make me into the culprit. At the last session, he acted more like a NAZI interrogator than a mediator.

"Spencer!" Dr. Everett von Hagen would speak with a heavy German accent and drum his fingers on his chair, "Are you even listening to me?"

"Sure!" I would reply with a brief one word answer. The doctor's forehead would suddenly furrow into ridges and grooves. I pretended to be interested in his wisdom, just as he pretended to be interested in my mental well-being instead of his exorbitant fee.

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"If you don't listen, you will not be able to change. Why are you still avoiding your wife's concerns? This must be a two-way street. Otherwise you're an avoider. Right, Spencer?"

My response was always the same. With a big cheesy grin, I nodded like a bobblehead on a car's dashboard. I had my reasons for caring little about much of anything. I knew how to detach my emotions from my body. I could do that all day long.

Of course, this was always the moment when my wife would enter the fray. It was not pretty. Sarah would drone in a perfect monotone voice. "I'm not a dead herring. You act like I'm not here. You're always zoned out."

"Now, now." Hagen would mumble and adjust his wire glasses, "Don't take the role of validator, Mrs. Crane."

That stopped her outburst, but momentarily. She would bow her head, frown and clench her little fists. "I'm trying to be less anti-social. I know that is important."

That reply would excite the doctor. He would turn and look at me, his face sparking with smug satisfaction. "And how do you feel about that?"

I hated that expression and would simply roll my eyes. When he kept staring at me, I would shrug. No point in encouraging him. My marriage was on life support and all I wanted to do was pull the plug.

But my aloof response would cause Sarah to go ballistic. She would stand up and peer down at me from her moral high ground. "How dare you ignore me! You sit in that easy chair all day long and just vegetate." Next, she would lock and load her index finger and brandish it at me. "My god! You're just not there. You never say anything, do anything or go anywhere."

"You're wrong." I would burst with a self-satisfied grin. "I get up during commercial breaks."

Like always, Sarah shook her head, folded her arms and glared at me with her dark beady eyes.

"I believe you have a point, Mrs. Crane," Dr. Hagen would break in and then glance at his watch. This was the moment when he would clear his throat, stand up and wear a fustian face of disapproval. "What do you really think? Or is that too much to ask?"

"Well..." I usually paused. I knew he did not want to know my real thoughts. He had heard them countless times before and ignored them with a cold disposition. What I really wanted was to be left alone. Was that so bad?

"Why are you so determined to dismiss these problems so... readily?" Hagen would inevitably ask in a frustrating tone. "You cannot hide from your feelings forever."

Sure I could, I would silently murmur to myself. The real question was, did I want to put any effort in trying? Sarah was a plain and unassertive woman, a hairdresser without much education or desire to learn useful or even useless knowledge. She was like some inanimate object, always there, but not quite there, like a piece of old furniture that everyone had grown accustomed to. She would have made an exceptional sofa, except that she would be unable to scurry away when I entered the room. I often compared our relationship to

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two ocean liners passing in the dark of night, never to see each other again. We could easily disappear into the vastness of unoccupied space. And that just suited me fine.

I had to admit that the thought of leaving her felt intoxicating. That was all I wanted. But every time that happy notion entered my brain, the therapist would sabotage it with more silly questions like, "You still have feelings for Sarah? Is that correct, Spencer?"

The obvious questions were always the worst ones. The doctor and I knew it was a rhetorical question. Sarah had nothing in common with me. Never did. We were from different political planets, as if that really mattered these days. Anything I was for, she was against. I was Catholic and she was one of these serious-faced Lutherans from Minnesota. I admired big monster trucks; she adored those little fuel-efficient cars that could barely climb over a gopher mound. I worshiped sloppy Joes, she despised red meat. I owned a Chevy; she had one of those fix-or-repair-daily Fords. In fact, the little message above my license plate said it all: "Driven Over A Ford Lately?" We could not even agree on what to enjoy. She listened to caterwauling Italian operas that lasted six hours, while I embraced the soothing beat of Led Zeppelin with two huge subwoofers hanging from the ceiling. Nothing matched. At least that was the case until that explosion over the city.

"Why don't you take a walk and see the lights of the city below," the doctor would suggest near the end of every session. "They are very lovely from up here."

Usually, I just get up, display a disingenuous smile and walk out the door without any word of goodbye. But this time for some unknown reason I agreed to take a short stroll. I am not sure what came over me or why it happened that night—the night that started it all. Never before had I taken any interest in taking a moonlit walk along lover's lane. I had no visions of romantic bliss. I had no plans to mend any crippled fences or rebuild any broken bridges. The walk by itself would have been fine, except that I had to be in close proximity to my wife. To Sarah, fun meant a wild night at the church bingo parlor, or singing in the choir on Sunday mornings. When I tried to engage her in some lascivious behavior in bed, she became the proverbial sack of potatoes, unemotional, unmoving and yawning at every intimate moment. Most nights were not fanfares of romantic ecstasy; rather they were re-enactments of the night of the living dead.

We got up and wandered outside into the cool air. It was a long, silent walk past a few small resort motels and rustic cabins on the outskirts of Idyllwild. We had nothing to say to each other. I kept thinking how crazy all of this was. A reticent walk was not going to solve anything. The counseling sessions were just delaying the inevitable. We both wanted a divorce. We wanted to go our separate ways. Why the façade?

Thinking back, I realized that the real craziness did not surface until Monday morning after our Idyllwild trip. It was all over something simple, something that needed slight improvement, but had gotten hideously out of control. I should not blame THEM. They were simply doing what they believed

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was their job. And yet in their holy quest to improve everyone's condition they had morphed into something unexpected. Something so dark and ugly that words could not express it.

Sarah did try to get me to chat. She reminisced about camping at a lake near Garner Valley. We did have fun with one broken down pup-tent, two ancient sleeping bags and a jug of red wine. But that was when we were footloose and fancy free, minus obligations, mortgage payments and responsibilities. Those days were long gone.

We decided to stop at the edge of a rock outcropping that overlooked Hemet. It was over four thousand feet down. I remembered thinking that the city seemed so small from up here. I had turned my face upwards, catching a glimpse of a shooting star. What a sight. I said something about the beautiful lights of the city.

Of course, Sarah had to offer her typical divisive commentary, complaining that there were too many lights. And that someone ought to prevent any new development in the city.

I tried to ignore her bellyaching and continued to gaze at the cold dark sky wishing that somehow things might get better. Just after I kicked a rock down the hillside, Sarah turned to me and finally said something I was waiting to hear for over a year. I can still recall her exact words. "'What's the point? We both want out. Why don't we just forget the counseling? Let's just go our separate ways. Isn't that what you want?'"

Praise the lord. My face immediately lit up like never before. Sweeter words had never been spoken. I told her that it sounded like a good plan. She said she would sign the divorce papers. I smiled and she nodded. Finally, it seemed that things were starting to go my way. The world was in perfect harmony; the ocean tides flow in sync with the moon, the movement of the stars followed their universal rhythms. Everything was fine.

Nothing could be further from the truth. At almost that exact moment Sarah lifted her arm and pointed at a fast moving object in the eastern sky. The fiery ball was streaking almost straight towards us. Before it could hit a nearby mountain, the fireball suddenly stopped, hovered high overhead and spun like wooden top. It began to slowly move towards the city lights. In a blinding flash of light, the object exploded like a 3000-ton bottle-rocket. Long strands of silvery sparkles floated down and spread across the entire town, engulfing it in a dense cloud of purple gases. I told Sarah that it was both remarkably beautiful and mysteriously odd. We oohed and aahed for ever so long. I speculated that it must have been space debris or a man-made projectile that had self-destructed.

Surprisingly, Sarah agreed and turned to me. She reached for my hand and held it in a loving fashion. That was weird. But the most bizarre part was that I did not mind. I began to feel softness in my heart for Sarah. How was that possible? Maybe it was just a bad case of heartburn.

Sarah began to open up. She began to share her fear of living alone, without me. I felt compelled to sympathize with her plight. The thought was unnerving and uneasy. Nobody likes growing old alone. I acknowledged that

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simple fact and she seemed pleased for once. She drew me closer as if she wanted to kiss me. I leaned a little closer. This was completely messed up. Suddenly, I could not stop thinking that perhaps the counseling had actually been worth the money. Who would have guessed? This was truly a night to remember. If only it had not been the dawn of a twisted nightmare.

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