

Survival

A Story about Anarchists Enduring Mass Raids

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Introduction

In November 1919, United States President Woodrow Wilson launched mass raids against the entire anarchist movement in the United States. Police simultaneously arrested thousands of anarchists in many different parts of the country, shutting down their newspapers, organizations, and meeting halls. If similar raids were to take place today, they would occur in a technological landscape involving mass surveillance and targeted electronic attacks. Those who survive would also have to adopt different tools.

Escape

When the police battering ram hits his door at 4:11 am, Jake is in his boxers on the floor, playing an emulated sidescroller. The adrenaline hits and within seconds he has jammed his bedroom window open, sliding down into the backyard and off in a run, his socks instantly soaked in the grass. He hears shouting but doesn't look back to check if there are pigs looking out his window or chasing him from the side of the house, he jumps the back fence more awkwardly than he imagined, getting a splinter deep in his left hand, but he ignores it and dashes over the roof of the neighbor's shed, trying to remember every detail of the surrounding blocks.

In what feels like an instant, he's two blocks away, hiding behind some bushes as a squad car drives by. His breath sounds to him like the loudest thing in the world and his mind spins as he imagines a neighbor coming out behind him. He's in nothing but boxers and muddy socks and his hand is dripping blood. Nothing happens. The squad car crawls down another block. Time to move.

Vera is almost home from work, listening to music in her earphones, when she comes around a bend and sees the corner of a SWAT van outside her punk house. She pivots immediately down another street, casually continuing her walk while pulling out her phone, she knows she should immediately turn it off but first she texts a group chat "House being raided" and then turns it off. Maybe that warning will help someone. Many phone batteries remain active even when the device is off, she knows; right now, some lazy junior officer could be noticing the GPS or her network connection triangulating her as she moves away. Should she throw it? Should she abruptly stomp on her phone out here on the street? There's a drainage vent coming up, she could toss it in and keep walking. Vera hesitates. Her phone is "encrypted," but against everyone's advice she uses a short password. If they dig it out of the drain... she doesn't know how to pry out the SD card, stomping on the whole device might draw attention and not even destroy the main memory... time is of the essence, so she makes a hard choice quickly and just tosses the whole thing in the drain. She's just a normal person on a walk.

As she keeps walking away, Vera hears a car rolling up behind her slowly, it takes every ounce of willpower to keep walking normally, not to look back in terror. Maybe she should? Maybe she should just run for it? The car parks behind her and there are sounds of a mom unloading young kids. She's not being followed. Where to now?

Julie and Maggie sit at their dining room table, struggling not to reflect panic at each other. Only one news outlet is even reporting the nationwide raids and there's almost nothing there. Messages saying "Leave and then delete this group chat" keep popping up for both of them. Little

spatters of reports on raids and then silence; a friend who is always too frantic is spamming everyone asking for updates, then suddenly she's silent.

There's an hour of nothing.

They trade terse updates with a friend who lives far away. Someone local suddenly appears online, but only to post a meme in a dead channel and then disappear.

The same music plays on the same radio stations. The wind blows through the trees. A cousin asks for advice with a preschool situation, totally oblivious. The local news does a puff piece about a local business. The neighbors get a pizza delivery.

"They're probably not going to come for us. We haven't done anything."

Their confused dog is whining with shared nerves. Maggie keeps eyeing the go-bag by the door they packed together months ago. That afternoon, Julie had made a show of being a good sport, humoring her need to prep; now all Maggie can think about is everything they're missing. Julie's passport has just expired. Can they get across the border? If only they had done a dry run. They take the dog out on a walk, leaving all devices home, whispering potential plans to one another, trying not to draw attention as a jogger passes them by.

When they get home, there's a private message on Instagram from a friend saying they're putting together a legal defense committee, first meeting will be public, at a public park, they're inviting some local liberal journalists as shields. Someone at the local alt-weekly says she's writing a story. There's a lawyer coming from a big-name liberal thing.

The internet keeps being really slow. Signal doesn't deliver messages and then suddenly delivers three all at once. Loading a lot of websites just returns errors. They're so sleep-deprived with stress that when they finally crash together on the couch, they sleep right through the defense committee meeting. A friend knocks loudly on their door and they nearly die of heart attacks, assuming it's the cops. His report back is terse: almost no journalists showed. Most of the folks who went have been grabbed. One was driven down off her bike on her way home. An old liberal lawyer went to the county jail with a court order and the cops just laughed and arrested her. He's going underground and suggests they do too.

But Julie and Maggie have a life, they have jobs—at least for now, as they've both called out sick—and they have a house. They're normal now, even law-abiding. Burn a few posters, donate a few books to the neighborhood little libraries, delete a few accounts, maybe they can pass as upstanding citizens.

"If we leave our shit here and stop paying, we'll lose everything we've built since poverty, plus have to pay some ridiculous fine."

If they do get raided, maybe it'll be just a few days in lock up, in and out, just a performance of a crackdown. The libs will get mad about the lawyers, surely.

Neither of them has been able to cook since the raids first started, so they drive out together to grab pickup. Waiting for a light, Maggie stares at something on the side of the street and then leaps out the truck passenger's side door without a word. Julie is frightened at first, then furious, but when she pulls the truck over and heads back to Maggie, she sees her partner kneeling next to a homeless man lying at an odd angle.

"We don't have our phones, we can't call a paramedic," she reminds Maggie. But then recognition dawns on her. It's one of their friends. Under the mess of blisters and swollen bruises, his eyes are open, staring at nothing.

He lived in one of the first punk houses that was raided, he never went to anything besides some hardcore shows, he was just a baker.

They don't pick up their meal. They head home. Dog. Go-bag. Some last-minute additional ideas. Camping gear. Encrypted backup drives. Medicine. Dry food. Clothes. Blankets.

Phones and leftover devices smashed. House key hidden somewhere in the yard for a friend. Maggie looks at her cheap Casio watch. "That's time; we need to go."

Resources

Jake has been tagging and dumpster-diving for years, so he knows his neighborhood pretty well. Just as he's noticed what gets cleaned and what does not, he's noticed what gets moved and what does not. What gets paid attention to and what does not.

There's a moss-covered rock in a local park that never gets moved. No one even goes near it. There's a roof of an abandoned building littered with garbage.

Long ago, Jake took two plastic bottles and sealed inside each a ziplock bag with a small amount of cash and two USBs each. Then he buried one bottle in the dirt underneath the rock and taped another bottle underneath a non-functioning vent on the roof of an abandoned building.

In each bottle, one USB contains an encrypted KeePassX database with the distinct login information of every online account he has, as well as a VeraCrypt encrypted folder with various files he wanted to make sure he never lost (scans of his IDs, photos of friends) including a GPG key pair. He has encrypted both with a passphrase of five randomly chosen dictionary words committed to memory. "Veritable Sasquatch Humdinger Locality Peeps." He has practiced this every night for weeks, building all kinds of associations and mnemonics. Unencrypted on the drives are executable files to install KeePassX, Veracrypt, and GPG on any new computer. On the other USB is a full install of the Tails operating system.

Jake knows he looks a mess in his boxers and muddy socks, but he gets to the park and digs up the bottle without a squad car seeing him or some vigilante neighbor raising a fuss. The twenty and two tens inside will have to be enough. Luckily, there's a small houseless encampment nearby and an old lady is willing to part with a sweater for ten. A free box happens to have a (too large) pair of sneakers. He desperately tries to make his boxers look like shorts and walks to a thrift store, quickly emerging with a backpack, a t-shirt, a baseball cap, and a pair of pants.

A visit to a corner-store bathroom with a razor and hair dye, and his appearance is at least a little different. He buys a cheap first aid kit for the splinter in his hand.

With his cash broken into change, he can catch a bus across town.

When Jake gets near the first house of comrades, not only are the cops there, but his friends are still in their underwear and hogtied on the lawn. A cop is violently molesting a friend of his under the pretense of a search while the others laugh. Jake keeps moving.

At the second house, there are no squad cars, but the front door is visibly missing. Jake notices someone sitting in an unmarked car across the street. He keeps walking.

The third house he tries belongs to a largely apolitical friend. It's a struggle to try to get him not to proclaim surprise loudly on the front porch and not to talk near devices. "I just need to borrow a couple hundred, man, then I'll be out of your hair. I never saw you, you never saw me. Please."

Jake leaves with a hundred, a filled water bottle, a better hoodie, a better pair of shoes with dry socks, and a dusty old laptop.

It's not enough bus fare to get to the border. He needs a sleeping bag, but REI has been implementing stronger anti-theft policies and the longer he fucks around town, the more likely he is to get stopped. He's terrified of facial recognition/tracking software on the buses, and his thrift store baseball cap isn't going to protect him forever.

He scopes out the city bus terminal from some distance, but it looks like this one checks ID and there's a cop wandering around. Instead, he catches a city bus out to a distant suburb on the edge of rural two-lane roads, trying to hitch. Hopefully, the cops out here aren't actively looking for him and won't harass a hitchhiker. A state patrol car passes him without incident. He has no success for hours and it starts to grow dark, so it's back to the city.

Worried about cash, in the middle of the night, he climbs the roof of his second stash, but it's missing. Probably the tape eroded months ago and it fell off. Hope the person who found it could use the cash. If they opened one of the USBs, it would just prove cryptic, no way to even learn what was encrypted.

It's a cold night, sleeping rough without a sleeping bag, and in the morning, Jake takes refuge in the back of a café, where he still has enough cash for a warm drink. He takes out the dusty old laptop from his friend and the Tails USB, booting it and accessing the internet over Tor. The connection to the Tor network has trouble, so he chooses "Configure Connection" and selects different bridges until he finds one that works.

A few anarchist counterinfo sites are reporting the raids, but a surprising number of sites are down entirely. Local news says almost nothing besides statist blather. Social media is trash with speculation from those least informed. Foreign noblogs and indymedia sites have the most relevant reporting.

Signal is down, something about centralized architecture, comments speculate about international law, but it doesn't matter right now. Riseup allegedly melted their servers with thermite during a raid and were all arrested. Protonmail has apparently been collaborating, injecting spyware onto user's devices, and some people are surprised by this? Wire is "temporarily unavailable." A few people leave links urging people to use various apps or tools Jake's never heard of. Other people debate the technical merits, but he has a hard time understanding. One new app is blowing up pretty quickly, lots of people attest to it being good, but this seems mostly based on them finding it easy to use. One person says they are still trying to use a smartphone but then goes quiet. One account that was quiet for a while starts speaking differently.

In the comments section on a formerly obscure site, someone says, "This is Big C, I'm free, a group of us are forming up at a secure location, contact me through a secure channel." Jake knows this is Cookie, a local organizer.

After a little struggle, Jake manages to get the most popular new "encrypted communication" apps temporarily installed on his Tails instance. He joins one of the public channels that some comments encouraged using. It's basically like Telegram or Discord: a flood of posting and arguing. Folks who've survived the raids using these new accounts try to imply who they are without saying it openly. It's an amateur hour shitshow of oblique flailing: "Remember that one time when we did that one thing, I was the one who wore green." Turns out one of the worst assholes in the scene is still free and he's using the opportunity to crow.

Even when the crude "only you would know X" games imply an account is a given comrade, Jake knows that such details could simply be copy-pasted from a compromised device via some man-in-the-middle attack where the cops sit between two parties relaying their messages back and forth as if they're the other person.

This is not enough to trust an internet post enough to meet up.

Vera walks immediately to the house of her old friend Cat. She scopes the front from down the street, notices Cat's Subaru is missing, and makes her way in through the backyard. Vera has held on to a spare key for years, but their friendship is almost entirely offline. They don't even bring devices when they hang out. As far as the outside world knows, Cat is just another park ranger doing ecological restoration.

Ten years ago, they burned down a condo together.

Vera cries and trembles the second she closes the back door behind her, falling into a fetal position. Cat's house is pristine, beautiful, safe.

Vera rocks back and forth, trying to remember breathing exercises. Has her heart always been this loud? Is she dying?

After an eternity, she gets up and starts doing stretches and exercises. She pictures herself punching through the faces of the cops back at her house. She knows she needs to work out the adrenaline. She needs to—oh god she needs to drink water.

Cat's house is like a warm security blanket. Everything is just right.

Vera lies on the floor of the living room for hours, not moving. Listening way too attentively to the sounds of cars going by. Is Cat even in town? Should she make something from her food in the pantry?

The slow crunching sound of Cat's Subaru coming to rest in the driveway is an immense relief. Cat is surprised about the raids, but she grasps the severity, hugs Vera, and tries to throw lentils and veggies in an Instapot while listening and asking questions. While dinner cooks, Cat brings out an old laptop she rarely uses and they check the major news sites together, careful not to enter search terms or anything that might flag.

In some sense, it's a relief to learn the raids were beyond just Vera's house. They're not targeted at Vera specifically. But no one seems to have been released yet, so it's clearly not safe to leave. Cat makes up a futon for Vera in the basement. "Of course you can stay the night. You can stay as long as you need."

Vera takes off her earrings and places them carefully beside her work bag. In each earring is a tiny sliver of a USB stick. Each of them is just like Jake's: encrypted KeePassX database, encrypted file system, GPG keys, installation executables for Veracrypt and KeePassX.

In the morning, Vera will investigate what can be done with Cat's laptop.

Julie and Maggie make three stops before heading out of town, first at Julie's bank, where she successfully empties most of her account into five thousand in cash. But at Maggie's bank, the teller disappears for a long while and doesn't come back. "You know what, never mind, I'll go to a different bank," Maggie says to another teller, using her best imitation Karen voice. They drive off, heads on a swivel for cop cars. Finally, they slip a note into a friend's mailbox explaining where to find their house key and some instructions for their lease.

They collect every credit or debit card they have and tape them together under a seat, never to be used again.

They take off quickly. Back roads to avoid license plate readers, then long country roads. It's hard to navigate without their phones. Each of them picks a personality type and fashion style that signals no political or subcultural allegiance. They make up a backstory about how they're friends and try to bicker in convenience stores to avoid looking queer. They pick up a bumper sticker they'd otherwise be livid at and slap it on.

At a campsite two hundred miles away, they go through all their remaining belongings. They have a tarp, a tent, two sleeping bags, a gallon jug of water, a Sawyer microfiltration water purifier, a five-gallon bucket of rice and beans, a camp stove, a couple pads, trashy books for boredom.

They end up buying basic comforts like folding chairs with their cash reserves.

“It’s just a camping trip, until it isn’t.”

They go on a hike with their dog and talk about communities they can flee to. A land defense occupation that became permanent. A log cabin squat built deep off any path on federal land. A friend’s organic farm with some partially abandoned yurts.

They discuss the pros and cons of various cults they know.

In the end they drive to the furthest option, the organic farm.

The drive is long.

On a thin winding back road, they stack up behind a long line of cars. Local vigilantes are performing an inspection to check for “ANTIFA.” A middle-aged white lady with an AR waves them through cheerily. “Stay safe out there!”

The next town has a small “rally for democracy” along the central drag, besides an Arby’s. A couple dozen liberals in folding chairs hold cardboard placards making puns about the suspension of a cable news channel.

At a gas station, Julie overhears two men confidently talking about the investment opportunities in real estate being opened up as all the “cockroaches” are removed.

One night, they sleep in their car in a Walmart parking lot on the advice of a friendly night auditor at a cheap motel. “New regulations, I can’t take a cash deposit. And there’s this thing I gotta enter your IDs into that wires them nationally.”

When they finally arrive at the farm and are allowed past the gate, there are already fifteen other people there: extended family of the owning couple, a couple of WWOOFer hippies, and two coteries of obvious radicals who are cagey and cold to anyone they don’t know.

Everyone is antsy.

Different groups cook different food. Panicked envy flickers in some eyes.

Two weeks in and Julie keeps to herself. Maggie spends her time trying to suck up to the owners and befriends an autistic nerd with one of the other radical groups.

An old balding white dude in a black hoodie keeps snapping at their dog. A trip into town for bulk food goes badly after the nerd insists on wearing a mask and a confrontation breaks out with a local. A backed-up toilet in the farm house makes the owners dour for a couple days.

One night, the situation boils over and folks start openly talking about the raids. There’s fury over who has a device and who can be trusted to have a device. Who is putting everyone else in danger. Who has a right to be here. Who has a right to anything. After someone brings up “Land back,” someone else screams, “Who do you think you’re fooling?! Who are your people exactly?! You’re not Indigenous, you’re as white as me!” and an awkward physical fight breaks out.

The next morning, there are immigration police visible in the distance at the neighboring farm. One of the hippies finds three young girls hiding down by the river and rushes them into one of the plastic yurts everyone else is hiding in.

Dogs bark in the distance. Julie joins the couple that owns the farm in meeting the immigration agents. Her dog barks at theirs and they put them away. The immigration agents are some of the newly deputized conspiracy heads that have barely any training, and Julie is able to find common cultural ground with them, ranting about how genetically modified organisms are poi-

soning the land, leaning hard into the persona she's studiously built on the road. The wannabe genocidaires laugh at her jokes and leave, waving back to her.

The girls' white uncle was allowed to remain, a nasty gash across his forehead. The rest of the family is being taken to one of the deportation camps where people die of dehydration. He's profoundly grateful for the rescue of his nieces. Over the next month, the adjacent farms begin to merge. A dugout hiding spot becomes a tunnel network. Maybe it'll suffice to hide folks if cops return.

Some new folks arrive, fleeing other things.

Tensions break down, relationships begin to form across the groups.

One of the quieter members starts opening up, giving lectures on syntropic agriculture, and an array of projects rapidly consume all the spare land across the farms. As people get busy developing personal domains and projects to be invested in, the overall vibe improves dramatically.

Food gets pooled. People become more open about what devices they held onto, but it doesn't matter as much, because all of the old internet is gone. A few specific corporate sites remain accessible, whitelisted by telecoms for the sake of commerce, but almost everything else is gone. You can get Amazon deliveries and send Gmail, but it's impossible to reach Wikipedia, much less Athens Indymedia or any Noblogs.

The farm establishes a consensus on how devices are to be used. The owners maintain all their devices in the farm house, air-gapped from everyone else. News stories and everything else are downloaded to a USB by one person for an hour every day, then passed around the three laptops everyone else shares.

There's one burner cell phone for the whole farm, bought with cash at one of the last Walmarts where that is possible. It's kept turned off and wrapped in plastic bags under a rock five miles away along the side of a road. It's for emergencies and strictly overseen usage. No one will put its SIM card in or turn it on near the farm or its stash location.

Having swapped out plates and tags, Julie and Maggie occasionally drive into the local town. They sit behind a café in their truck while it's closed at night and tap into the still-active Wi-Fi with their laptop running Tails. Signal is long gone. Tor is totally inaccessible, even using the latest smuggled bridges. On the plain internet, they have managed to register two Gmail accounts using the farm's collective burner phone. How can they find other comrades? How can they talk with them?

Communications

Jake doesn't have to trust the new app everyone's using while Signal's down. Long ago, everyone in his affinity group created GPG key pairs, then verified each other's keys and signed them. They also created private backup email accounts on other platforms only to be used in emergencies.

Jake's Riseup email account may be down, but his GPG keys were in the encrypted folder on his cached USB along with a list of the backup email accounts of his comrades. He goes through each one, encrypting a message to that person's public key and sending it to their backup email.

After a couple hours at the café, one of them sends a message back to him. Ethan is still free! Jake asks if he knows anything about Big C's supposed posts. Ethan says he'll check with someone in Big C's crew he's also in contact with, Ash.

Ash emails back with a public key for Big C. She signs his key with her own. Ethan checks it and sees that it matches the public key for Ash that he's signed. Then he signs Big C's key and sends it to Jake.

Jake messages Big C on the new app everyone is using. Instead of sending anything in clear-text, he encrypts a message to the key he has for Big C. He adds his own public key.

On that same app, in the general channel they're all using, someone's screaming that another account is a honeypot. People stop posting. If they move to a different channel or a different app, they never send Jake anything about it.

But that doesn't matter, because Big C responds, his message likewise encrypted using GPG and then pasted within this new app.

Jake decrypts and checks that it was signed by the same key for Big C that his friend Ethan certified.

There's a time and location. Back room of a donut shop a couple punks work at, 11 pm.

Jake spends most of the day at the café, trying not to attract attention. Then he scarfs down some fast food and gets a bus across town to the donut shop. He gets off a couple stops early and circles around it on back streets, looking for any car or person that could be staking things out. He decides to wait a little longer in an alley. But the alley isn't empty. Ethan's there, smoking a cigarette and also scoping things out.

They hug. "You're the first person I've seen in like two days, man."

Ethan's heard a rumor about some kind of legal defense committee being set up, but he can't stand one of the people he thinks is in it.

Jake quietly regales him with the saga of his nearly-nude escape.

They look at the donut shop down the street.

"If it's a trap, maybe only one of us should go."

"I'll go. If it's chill, I'll come back out and get you?"

"Maybe they raid us only once we're all inside."

"Do you wanna wait out here all night?"

"Fuck, man. I dunno."

Jake goes in.

A punk he doesn't know ushers him in through the employee side door. It's just three. Big C, usually known as Cookie, the unknown punk, and Ash.

Ash is chowing down on donuts nervously.

Cookie gets up and extends out a hand and then turns it into an awkward hug. They don't really know each other like that, but Jake accepts, surprisingly eager for physical touch.

"Are we waiting for anybody else? Who'd you share this with?"

"I don't fucking know, I told Ash and Sydney and Sydney said she told her band, but like I don't trust them to—"

"Hey! Mitch is cool."

"Yeah, sure, Mitch is cool, I'm just saying I don't trust them to not tell someone random, you know."

"Jesus," says the punk Jake doesn't know, looking out the cracked open employee door.

"What?!"

"It's Zoe. She's down the street but she's coming this way."

Some shared glances. No one wants to let Zoe in.

"Well, let her in."

Half an hour later, the tiny donut store backroom is swampy with seven nervous anarchists, Ethan included.

“What are we fucking doing?”

“Besides running and hiding?”

“I say we make distractions, make them feel like they got the wrong folks. They’re not the threat.”

“So what? They’ve already grabbed everyone. It’s not like they’re gonna let them go to get us instead. They’ll just keep them detained and then use all their resources on the few of us. Naw, last thing we need to do right now is remind them they didn’t get all of us.”

“To what fucking end. Solidarity means attack.”

“Look, if you can think of some way to bust people out, I’m all for it, but like, right now we can’t even keep ourselves safe. We bust people out, we have no way to house them. They’re raiding random totally apolitical squats, they just cleared the last houseless encampment near the airport.”

“Look, you can run and hide if you want, honestly, I mean that, I don’t judge, but I know if I was captured right now, the number one thing I’d want to see in the world would be cop cars on fire in the county jail parking lot.”

The meeting ends a couple hours later. They have sorted into two groups and a lone individual. One group will focus on risky active strikes. The other group will try to build an underground capable of keeping people safe.

Ash is going to run a clearinghouse email account to take submissions and push out notifications. Only people within the signed network of GPG keys. If they shut down her email, she’ll just pivot to a different one, using the same keys and sending to the same recipients. “They can’t shut down email wholesale, too much of capitalism runs on it.” She’ll try to maintain a public counterinfo site for certain announcements marked to be public, but no promises. Two of the punks present are going to be showed how to use GPG.

Jake and Ethan head out into the night. Ethan’s got a van they can sleep in.

Cat said Vera could stay as long as she needed, but they’ve never actually lived together before, and as the weeks go by, little frictions keep coming up. Vera forgot that she sided with the bandmate of Cat’s old boyfriend that one time, but Cat hasn’t. Cat doesn’t approve of the lengthy showers Vera takes. Vera had no idea Cat was such a morning person.

Normally, these would be nothing, but the isolation and background stress is taking a toll. Vera feels like it’s hard to keep her head together. Hard to be her.

Without the reference points of her normal life, she feels unmoored and frazzled. Always a step behind. Saying things she should have thought through more. Cat doesn’t have a Netflix account and Vera has nothing to do all day but pace around Cat’s basement and read Cat’s books.

Cat doesn’t use the internet much and Vera is trying not to suddenly flood Cat’s router with a ton of activity. Every morning, around the time Cat said she sometimes checks her work email, Vera takes the new laptop Cat bought for her and connects to the internet.

Insofar as the raids are getting attention, it seems to be mostly because some prominent journalist got detained too. It joins the background shrieking about journalists’ rights being under attack, but the news outlets mostly want to use that narrative to bolster their subscriptions.

With social media effectively gone, there’s little coverage of the mass detentions of anarchists, save some conservatives chortling that it was about time, and “See, the old establishment was deliberately choosing not to fight terrorism the whole time.”

She's careful to build a profile of internet activity that doesn't match her prior use. She chooses different websites for news, even to check weather reports. She doesn't want to deviate too far from Cat's previous activity. If Cat used Bing for searching about mushroom harvests, so will she. If Cat didn't use an ad-blocker, she won't add one. The goal is to slowly build up Cat's internet usage so she can use it more frequently while stuck at home. She holds herself back from checking radical websites.

In the last three weeks, Vera has almost never left Cat's house. One afternoon, there was an unusual car parked all day within view of the front door. Even Cat was convinced it was sketchy. Cat's home cooking is very cumin-and-vegetables oriented, but she picks up the Thai food Vera loves a couple times with cash, not card.

Vera is hesitant about booting Tails off the USB she had on hand and connecting on the home network because she's worried that will draw attention.

Instead, she gets Cat to go to a nearby café during the day and write down the Wi-Fi password. Then, in the middle of the night, she goes out with Cat's crusty old laptop, sits behind the café's dumpster, boots Tails, and connects to the open internet.

A lot of anarchist websites are gone, and the foreign ones are thin on substantive report-backs. Meaningful news or how-to guides are overshadowed by essays that triumphantly advocate one or another grotesque alliance and declare the time of principles to be over. This provokes, in turn, angry evocative screeds that fetishize death. To survive is a betrayal of our fallen, says one, it's our duty to die beautifully together. Someone else is aggressively promoting a Patreon.

In her backup email account, there's an encrypted message to her, signed by her old comrade Matthew. He survived the raids that got every other anarchist in their town and has taken formal sanctuary in the basement of a Quaker house. The cops seem to know he's there, though, or at least suspect it. They keep a squad car parked out front at all hours and have followed the two old Quakers who come and go.

He's heard from a friend who escaped the raids in another city and has been riding the rails. Matthew has a normie friend, a former movement lawyer who has fallen off the radar doing corporate work for a decade, but who he is certain would put his other friend up. It's just that he's got no way to contact him.

He has another friend who made it down across the southern border, but is penniless, needs a money transfer to get an apartment and look for a job. It could be cryptocurrency, even a mailed check... is it possible to get an anonymous money transfer?

When Cat gets home, Vera is ready with questions.

In the middle of the night, Julie and Maggie have to leave the farm. They drive out with six of their friends lying flat in the back of their truck, supplies and blankets packed on top of them. Every time they swerve around a bend on a back road and see headlights, they flinch, waiting to see if it is the cops or the local militia who promised to kill all of them.

The sudden collapse of two major cities from back-to-back environmental disasters has killed thousands, but it has also resulted in the establishment of an immense internal refugee camp in the south. The rumor is that the authorities can't demand ID there because so many people have lost theirs.

There are enough white people in the vast camp, with enough friends and family outside, that it looks unlikely they will be purged, like so many immigrants had been, if they just keep their stories straight and avoid speaking with an accent. They should be safer there than at the farm where they have lived for the last year.

The roads are too chaotic, the internal border checkpoints too overwhelmed. The eight of them make it south intact. They buy Taco Bell and donuts along the way.

When they get to the camp, the armed guards shake them down, pilfering whatever they think might be of value.

From the shoddy posters everywhere, they quickly discover there are out “leftists” in the sprawling camp—the kind that want to be an armed gang and won’t countenance any “organizing” that isn’t under their umbrella. Every few weeks, one of them ends up dead, and it’s rarely from the guards or conservatives.

The better relief organizations are all fatigued and thin on resources. They keep getting squeezed out by Christian groups and political organizations looking to gain contracts or legitimacy. It’s unclear to what extent this is the ruler’s acolytes cannibalizing a Federal project in an orgy of corruption and to what extent the powers that be are deliberately inflicting pressure on the refugees. Buses with corporate branding on the sides promise quick work contracts to those in the camps. People come back bone-weary, but they do come back through the security cordons and fencing that surrounds the camp. The ruler brags that this program is finally providing jobs for real citizens.

It’s said that Amazon is restructuring its national supply chain to center around the concentrated cheap labor that the refugee camp provides.

Julie and Maggie keep their heads down, forming a tight circle with their friends from the farm. When administrators try to split them up into separate tracts of tin sheds, they find a way to meet up again.

When the guards took their jewelry and cash, they left them their bulk filtration system, chemical water purifying tabs, and beaten laptop. These turn out to worth more than gems within the camp. Being able to purify gallons of water every day makes their crew self-sufficient.

What remains of the internet in the rest of the nation isn’t much to speak of, but there’s almost nothing in the camp besides a single app that takes over your phone, charges you dearly, and pronounces news headlines from a single source.

Julie and Maggie ignore phones entirely, sticking to Maggie’s Casio watch and their laptop. They disable the Wi-Fi on it and pretend it is just for showing pirated shows. Electrical power is available in the camp for a hefty charge, but folks rig up DIY tin-can and magnet turbines in the river that can recharge batteries if you wait long enough.

Once you’re in the camp, you can’t leave, but smugglers promise to get letters or even packages to and from the outside world. Rumor has it that many of them steal whatever you entrust to them and turn anything incriminating over to the cops for rewards.

Julie and Maggie have signed GPG keys with everyone they lived with at the farm, and those who didn’t flee with them to the camps are now vital relays to a wider network. The uncle of the three girls they saved has left the adjoining farm to join up with family further east. His white father’s name and address is above suspicion, so far.

They operate a rudimentary onion network, mailing USBs out with the smugglers. First they encrypt a message to the final recipient, then they encrypt that encrypted message plus a note about how to relay it to them to a friend, like the uncle. This encrypted file they hide as a malformed gif file among other memes and similar junk of the sort that is passed around the internal refugee camp. If the smugglers or anyone else inspect the USB on its way to the uncle, they just see some memes and a broken gif. It’s crude, and not every message makes it, but enough do.

Soon enough, Julie and Maggie are writing reports on the camps that are getting to anarchist journalists and infosites in other countries.

One of the companies that oversees the camp's most hated enforcement drones gets its supply lines attacked in the Mediterranean. The CTO is assassinated at a gala.

When news reaches the camp, even conservative grannies who are always on about racist conspiracy theories are suddenly praising "those anarchists."

A communiqué from distant comrades makes its way back through a laborious series of USB exchange. Solidarity, it reads, means attack.

Attack

It's actually pretty hard to live in the forest. Jake and Ethan knew it would be when they drove their van far off an abandoned logging road and began burying it with dirt and branches to avoid detection by overhead drones.

But they couldn't live in the city anymore. Not after the attack on city hall.

Every night, they laugh about the video of the supposedly "progressive" mayor—the one who had approved the executions of so many of their friends in black sites or ditches screaming as he emerged from the burning ruins.

"Every night we are still alive to cherish this is a gift," they tell each other. It makes freezing on a punctured air mattress and throwing centipedes out of their bedding a little more tolerable.

Before they had escaped the city in their increasingly suspect van, stencils had started appearing of the dying mayor's face on the news reel. Printed underneath was NO PITY.

Food is a problem, though. They rapidly pick the surrounding valleys clean of dandelions, miners' lettuce, chickweed, and blackberries. After they almost get caught raiding a dumpster for something with calories in it, they realize they need a better system.

Once a month, they make their way through the forest to the outer suburbs of the city. Cookie leaves two plastic bags of food and stove gas canisters for them to pick up in a forested nook just outside an army graveyard. Peanut butter, chocolate, granola, olive oil, instant rice, chili. Sometimes, there's also a book or a boardgame. There's never any T for Ethan, though; it's impossible to get hormones for anyone these days.

Back at the buried van, they carefully ration their laptop use, laboriously rebuilding battery charge from a damaged solar panel. They only hook up to the Baofeng radio at specific times. With email effectively banned, Ash is now running communication bursts in the region via radio. About once a week, she bikes out to random locations around the edge of the city and fires off a blast of noise over ham radio before taking off. A few drones now circle the city taking pictures, triangulating her signal each time she sends it. She's in a race against time with them.

This noise is encrypted, of course, and decrypted via private keys now shared by a wider set of anarchist survivors. Each communication burst includes the time of the next burst, though not the place. Jake and Ethan connect their radio to a program on their laptop each time, waiting to read and decrypt.

Most nights, it's just news from the wider world, ferried in via underground networks. Warnings of systematic sweeps planned for certain neighborhoods or local highways being closed by militias.

But one night, it's something new.

The ruler of the new regime is coming for a photo op. They're going to drag out one of the comrades kept alive from the original raids and execute her as the mastermind of the attack on City Hall.

There will be a ton of security.

But maybe not enough for six different shooters.

It's dangerous to keep connecting to the Wi-Fi in the middle of the night at the same café, so Vera rotates cafés, making sure that Cat doesn't get the Wi-Fi password on the same days and doesn't bring a phone or device when she does go.

With Tor blocked, Vera knows that every time she uses the internet at a café to check sketchy websites it's a signal to the authorities there's a radical still running around her town. She tries not to check sketchy websites the same nights at the same cafés where she checks the backup email account she's been using to message with Matthew. She writes most of her emails ahead of time to minimize time on the ground. No more than three minutes connected, then back into the night. The cops could catch her if they really put resources into it, but she's banking on their laziness.

Then one day her emails are blocked. All email seems to be blocked. There's new ID legislation that's gone into place?

This is the last night Vera goes out to a café.

But by that point, she's already helped build a relay network across town.

Every Monday, Matthew hands a USB to one of his Quaker hosts, who slips it down the side of a bench while sipping coffee in a park. Cat checks the side of the same bench a couple hours later and brings it home to Vera, who decrypts it. Relay points and drop spots now exist across town because Matthew's efforts to rope in the former movement lawyer have succeeded. Now there are two anarchists hiding out on the lam from other cities in his house. One lives in the attic. The other has changed her hair color, removed some piercings, added a full face of makeup, and is working a job under the table.

A month ago, they helped relay the complete archives of a major anarchist collection that had supposedly been purged from a university. It went south with an anarchist backpacking a long mountain trail. Hard drives with copies of the collection are now squirreled away in various places.

Another anarchist that their new network loosely knows has set up a hidden camp on an island in the river, taking a little hidden canoe back and forth into a national park in the wee hours once a week and getting supplies. Cat and the lawyer are finding ways to slip an extra hundred a month to him.

Conservatives have been screaming about demolishing the Little Libraries on people's lawns because liberals stuck a few banned books in them. They have no idea that Vera's network uses them as flags to notify couriers about drops. A pulp sci-fi book with spine turned inward placed on top in a certain Little Library means to surreptitiously pick up a USB from a Burger King bag in a trash can down the street. They're getting a whole system going.

Vera doesn't need to know the network beyond her immediate circles. With her preexisting GPG public keys for certain distant comrades, she can just send encrypted messages with a distant city as a public destination and wait for couriers and swaps to copy and circulate it until her recipient can decrypt it. Messages get lost, but some get through. Through the network, distant strangers trade tips and tricks they have learned keeping their own local networks up.

With so much of the internet down, normies have started engaging in wider swap networks for saved files. “It’s almost like the libs are making their own little really really free markets.” It doesn’t matter that Cat doesn’t have a Netflix account, because now Vera has access to every show once torrented by local nerds. She keeps the new laptop that accepts such USBs air-gapped from everything else. Even if it’s not the shows she’d prefer, Vera can watch TV again.

Having something to do—knowing they can make a difference helping other anarchists—has Cat and Vera in a much better mood. Their city is a locus point in an emerging national underground railroad. That friend of Matthew’s south of the border that Cat sent cash to? He has a job now, and his apartment is packed with anarchists who have survived the dangerous trek across the border.

They still have the internet down there!

As Vera’s little sneaker net develops, folks begin to loop in around the edges—certain liberals from the pirate networks who have proven they can be trusted, at least with some things, at least to help relay GPG messages. One of the liberals in the network finds a way to tap into the credit card reader communications network and sneak packages of information back and forth with a programmer friend in another country.

When the Quaker house is raided and Matthew is summarily shot inside, it hardly breaks anyone’s stride.

And soon enough the network of safehouses and dead drop couriers is so well established that a subsection of it can risk moving not just people and money but guns.

Julie holds the wound closed while Maggie applies the glue, a contraband gift slipped into the camp via their smuggler friends. The fallen striker is cursing up a storm, but at least he’s not fainting.

Where’s that blasted Red Cross worker?

The crowd around them isn’t howling or chanting, they’re just jumping up and down in waves, a tactic somehow revived from decades ago in Apartheid South Africa. It makes the earth seem to shiver and shift—an avalanche of people, a force of nature. The usually sandy ground of the camp is already muddy with the rains of the flash flood. All the jumping makes it squelch in a way that adds up to something like the roar of the ocean.

This is it. More bullets are going to fly. But the guards don’t have enough and the camp knows it.

The gangs have disappeared. The leftists who talked endlessly about a mass strike are nowhere to be seen. The rune-tattooed fascists who work hand in hand with the guards are magically gone, too. A scrawny white boy who usually proudly hawks black market items is beating his chest wildly as he jumps alongside the grizzled Latina dyke who drives the aid workers around.

Maggie’s Casio watch is beeping with some irrelevant reminder. Their mud-soaked dog is jumping excitedly too, deciding the vast crowd is playing a game with her. Maybe the three of them will survive this, too.

If that video of the ruler’s photo-op that was smuggled in is to be believed, anything is possible.

Further Reading

- Tech Guides for Anarchists

- Tails: Encrypting Text and Files using GnuPG and Kleopatra
- A Guide to Peer-to-Peer, Encryption, and Tor: New Communication Infrastructure for Anarchists
- An Anarchist's Guide To GPG
- Surveillance Countermeasures
- Afghanistan's Underground "Sneakernet"
- El Paquete Semanal: The Week's Internet in Havana

The publishers endorse Signal as the most secure widely-used option for encrypted messaging.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



CrimethInc.
Survival
A Story about Anarchists Enduring Mass Raids
2025-03-25

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