

# **The Separation**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

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Doug returned home with a crate of sealed groceries for the family bunker. He saw that Mandy had chosen that errant time to smash every art piece in the living room. The breakage all lied on the carpet in a jagged ocean, the porcelain showing the sides people should never see. She probably wanted him to drop the crate of airtight rice bags and dry beans on his foot and break that too. Or maybe, he'd slip on the shattered glass and fall on the whole mess. While walking in, Doug's focus remained solely on protecting and stabilizing the family. Now it all went to pieces, so at least that part of her war plan worked.

Nonetheless, Doug knew better than to sigh, or groan, or break anything himself. He'd handle this like a man. Peering over the crate in his arms, he walked down the hall and away from Mandy's destruction zone and set the goods on the kitchen table. That part went easily. No more fancy candlesticks, placemats, or flower centerpieces to get in the way. They had sold almost everything to death-wishers, those who refused to build bunkers for themselves. Tidying up the ruin in the living room went even easier.

First, a quick assessment showed that only the living room took any damage. It housed all the glassy art stuffs they had saved. In this one room nested all the delicate decorations each family member insisted on keeping as a symbol of family commitment and unity. Doug had gathered all his *Star Trek* collectables here, too. Doug's recently separated wife, at least psychologically separated though not on paper, had spun like a whirlwind seizing anything fit for her hand. Mandy had thrown and shattered everything except the TV, a crate in itself too sturdy to hurt without a gun. Everything else in their nearly bare house she had left alone.

Doug dragged out the couch and gently kicked the few chunks of porcelain that had pinged into the hall and kitchen. Using the side of his shoe, he swept the pieces of Mr. Spock into the living room. As Doug's arms yanked up the carpet to waist level, all the broken plates, porcelain splinters, and limbs of figurines rolled toward the center pile. The pieces there all clanked and sang like a mountain of wind chimes. Maybe the Earth's surface would soon look similar, a beautiful mess, once it rained nukes. Maybe, once the rubble settled, it would make less noise.

The sound of Troy turning in bed upstairs drifted down to mingle with the racket. Not wanting to awaken his eight-year-old son, Doug rolled up the carpet slower than he'd like to. The jumbled remains of *Star Trek* and sentimentality clattered and clinked. But soon the junk became buried, rolled inside the carpet whose uglier bottom side showed its old glue. He hoisted and dragged one end of the lumpy roll to the opposite end. It reminded him of a cigarette bent in half to a U shape.

Seizing both open ends, Doug hauled the rolled carpet outside. He lobbed it a meter off the front deck, behind some overgrown rose bushes. The nukes would take care of it. They'd deal with those rampant bushes too.

Doug always kept the door open when toiling on the deck. Like every homeowner, he left the

radio on station 99 with the volume cranked. Only the faintest fuzz came through, an ambiance to breathe some life back into the house. But if the nation's skies start to divvy up with crisscrossing contrails, the station will roar with sirens. Statisticians expected thousands of fools to get vaporized outdoors on the Big Day, completely oblivious. They'll have installed their bunkers for nothing.

These days, a quick trip to the bunker store meant taking a risk. But Doug's subterranean investment would pay off even if he did get caught outside on the Big Day. His son knew the drill and would rush to the basement when the time came. Mandy...she'd probably jump in her parents' spacier bunker. She could always visit Troy via the community tunnels their tax dollars had built.

Doug stared at the carpet's yucky beige underside, pondering the whole shitshow the world had scheduled. The Big Bang that created all this would soon lead to the little bang here on Earth. The autumn wind caught hold of Doug's head and hands as he stood and shivered, watching the carpet, his family life, in its new bushy grave. The blowing rosebush leaves flipped air over and off it like tiny spades. Everything looked ineffectual; the roses would never bloom again. The cold flew indoors and burglarized the house's warmth. It may waken Troy, but he'd need some toughness for the shuddering to come.

A shrill alarm erupted in the house. Doug's whole chest felt like exploding, but it sucked everything back in. His blood boiled with adrenaline.