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Fall Down Six Times

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"Fall down six times, get up seven."

- old saying

Worst Case Scenario

In spring of 2006, the Bush Gang attacks Iran, a mountainous nation almost four times the size of Iraq with a much stronger military. No problem -- they use nukes, and they don't have to cover it up for the people at home, because Americans know "we" would never do that, so we didn't. The rest of the world, though, is appalled. The EU imposes trivial sanctions. Tony Blair calls it "regrettable." Venezuela threatens to cut off our oil again, and one or two countries start trading oil in Euros. Ordinary Americans see this as "rabid anti-Americanism," and are horrified by Iran's relatively tame counter-attack. Bush's approval rating goes back up to 60%, and because our enemies are now attacking us, he dissolves congress and cancels the 2008 elections. The Democrats, afraid of seeming weak in a time of war, make mild objections.

In the next few years, the American prison population doubles, and because prison laborers are calculated as "employed," unemployment is low, and because the "economy" is defined as corporate profits, the economy is booming. Meanwhile, actual Americans who happen to not be in prison are running out of food and heat, but still pouring all available resources into suburban development, cars, and electronic entertainment. The internet is still thriving, in the great American tradition of allowing people with absolutely no influence to shout into the wind.

The simultaneous military occupation of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran costs more than 100 billion dollars a year, which is easily paid for by printing more money. By 2008, consumer prices have tripled while wages have increased by 50%, leading Americans to complain about gas prices and lazy fast food workers who should be faking more enthusiasm for \$11 an hour. Stamp prices go up to 49 cents, then \$1.01.

The wealth of the top one percent of one percent increases tenfold, while ten percent of Americans believe they are in the top one percent of one percent, and 60% believe that all wealth, by definition, is earned. The houses of the very rich are guarded by immigrant soldiers serving in the military to get US citizenship, which they still think is valuable for the same reason people still thought the Cadillac was a good car for 30 years after it became a piece of shit. The other big use of domestic security forces is to make sure valuable materials are not scavenged from the decaying suburbs and put to use, but dumped in landfills where they belong, so that manufacturers of new materials can continue to profit and keep the economy strong.

Depending on where you live, growing vegetables in your yard is either absolutely forbidden or absolutely required. These laws are justified by the word "America" which is justified by the word "freedom."

By 2009, the bird flu is a serious global pandemic that has killed almost 6000 people, while around a million people have died running out of water under the quarantines, and 50,000 have died from adverse reaction to bird flu vaccines. This is not counting the "adverse reactions" to "immunizations" routinely given to people in the detention facilities who are too weak to work.

As banks fail, rights to collect mortgage and debt pass to Asian companies and governments. Americans are torn between xenophobia and the desire to always side with the winner, and they strike and riot for the right to be owned by institutions with American-sounding names, which the Asian overlords happily supply.

With most Americans living on land they don't own, and can't afford rent or mortgage on, the owning powers evict people seemingly at random, just to keep us stressed out. We are a nation of homeless people and empty houses, and rich squatters routinely use force to keep poor squatters out of their neighborhoods.

By 2011, laws have abolished the very existence of the public domain. It's technically against the law to give anything away for free. When protesters are arrested they are charged with criminal trespass since all space is now private. The national forests are private "nature reserves" run by well-meaning ecologists who are put in a squeeze where they have to sell trees to save trees. Thus the last forests are cut down while making ordinary people angry at "environmentalists."

Advances in biotech make it cheap to grow organs in vats, but this is not done, since it's more politically effective (and more fun) to pressure the poor into selling their organs, or to harvest them from executed prisoners.

All this time the weather is getting worse. Europe and Russia are freezing, the gulf stream is dying, the glaciers are melting, and the American southwest is hammered every year by hurricanes, which are blamed on the region's few surviving gay people. The great plains dry up, and everywhere there are bigger storms and more extreme temperatures. These factors do not slow the pace of industrialization. As the plankton die, oxygen levels drop just enough to kill people who aren't doing any harm. The solar cycle peaks in 2012, and then the sun cools off, and global warming boomerangs into global cooling. Global warming deniers insist that global cooling was happening all along.

My land gets covered by a glacier and I get sent to a labor camp where I get sick and die. With warming no longer a threat, the world burns its coal. The Earth now looks grey and brown from space, but the pictures are color-enhanced to show green and blue. With almost the whole world covered by ice or desert or dead oceans, food is chemically synthesized in compounds of elites and their slaves, and it becomes impossible to survive outside them. Meanwhile computer technology keeps accelerating, leading by 2050 to an insane and nearly all-powerful artificial intelligence, which exterminates all life on Earth except a single human, who it keeps alive to torture for all eternity: you.

Ridiculous Best Case Scenario

Spring, 2006. The attack on Iran is canceled when the UAE, stung on the port deal, refuses to offer their territory as a staging ground. Tony Blair, after being given a huge dose of ecstasy by Russian agents, reveals that he supported the Iraq war because the Bush administration blackmailed him with disturbing sex photos. Hundreds of other blackmailees come forward, and suddenly the American elite have no leverage. The rest of the world pulls the rug out from under our economy, and we can no longer afford to occupy the colonies or import anything.

This disaster cuts deep enough that most Americans pass right through indignation and outrage, into humility and cooperation to help each other get through it. The neocons fade away, the Republicans become a minority party of religious fundamentalists, and Howard Dean survives three assassination attempts to be elected president in 2008. Using Bush-era strong-president laws, he begins a Hugo Chavez-style redistribution of wealth and political power. By 2010, he has survived seven more assassination attempts, most of which are tied to the old elites, who, incidentally, are also being revealed as a pack of child-raping Satan-worshippers ([link](#)).

The dying industrial farm system is nationalized, distribution is handled by autonomous volunteers, and it's kept going just long enough to feed us while we learn to grow food locally without oil-derived chemicals. Residents of places where food cannot be grown locally use their last gasoline to drive to places where it can, and live in their cars until they build their own shelter from indigenous and scavenged materials, turning parking lots into thriving encampments with dense gardens.

The president phases out the dollar and encourages the creation of local currencies with built-in depreciation to discourage hoarding ([link](#)). The new money system leads people everywhere to put their energy enthusiastically into local improvements. Each year, pavement is torn up equal to the area of Rhode Island, and lawns and abandoned farms equal to Connecticut are planted with edible forest gardens. As refined sugar and hydrogenated oils in our diets are replaced by fresh local fruit and vegetables, more and more people find themselves newly energetic and sane. Cars are melted down to make bicycles and rail systems. Where once there were suburbs, there are now collective farms that feed cities where nobody locks their door.

In 2016 Dean steps down and the new president is an anarchist who spends eight years peacefully dismantling the federal government and building local systems that make central control irrelevant and impossible, including radically non-standardized education systems, and citizen militias with expert training in resisting occupiers, and no training in conquest.

Changes like these are happening all over the world. China and India pass quickly through the peak phase of Empire, moderated and undermined by oil scarcity, by sophisticated peasant movements, and by radical computer games mostly invented by Americans newly rich in free time. There are great bursts of creative innovation wherever "intellectual property" is released to the public domain. Computer operating systems and software are retooled for efficiency, and become so streamlined that obsolete hardware becomes usable again, which is a good thing since no one can manufacture new hardware with acceptable environmental impacts or labor conditions.

Most existing toxins are cleaned from landfills and battlefields and ruined cities by bacteria genetically engineered to eat particular toxic materials. Unfortunately, these bacteria get loose and eat the toxins in industrial technologies still in use. This breakdown goes just slow enough for us to develop alternatives, all of which are manufactured by independent "garage industry," since the big systems are now dead.

By 2040, we are using light-based information technology to communicate on fiber optic lines, most of the old railways are bicycle paths, and North America has blossomed into almost 1000 small autonomous cities, which are beginning to develop their own cultures, architectures, and languages. The global population is stable at about two billion -- it's easy to stop population growth when there's no desire for economic "growth," and when the world is no longer ruled by an empire with an obsolete religion that prohibits birth control.

Nature turns out to be surprisingly resilient. When toxic runoff stops going into oceans, and forests are left alone, and swamps refilled, they recover quickly. Species thought extinct mysteriously reappear when their habitats return, and new species come seemingly out of nowhere. Global warming stabilizes in a world that's hotter but still livable. Humans and nature work together to bring life to the new tropical deserts, while new forests grow in the arctic.

By the year 1000 in the new 13 moon calendar, species diversity and topsoil richness are back to neolithic levels and still growing. The age of Empire survives only in the libraries of monks and the dreams of shamans, to keep it from happening again.

Naive Sci-fi Utopia

An inventor discovers a way to generate unlimited free energy. The patent draws instant attention from the big media, who do not assume he must be a crackpot. He is not killed by interests that would be wiped out if they could no longer charge money for energy, nor is the invention confiscated by the military so they can keep it for themselves, nor is he forced to sell out to interests that will only use the technology to increase their own power. Instead he becomes fabulously wealthy distributing his machines all over the world, and spends his money wisely.

The old saying "absolute power corrupts absolutely" turns out to be false. In fact, it's nearly absolute power, like what Stalin had over Russia, or what humans get from burning oil, that corrupts absolutely. Truly absolute power makes people wise and enlightened and creates an eternal golden age. So all the individuals, businesses, governments, and religions with (or without) Infinite Energy Generators do not get in any conflicts about what kind of shared world that energy will create. Our limitless power to shape our environment does not make us more and more sensitive and demanding. We do not get in super-high-energy wars with each other. In fact, a feature of the machine, which cannot be disabled or tampered with, makes it impossible to use the energy for destruction -- except good destruction, like blasting mountains to make mag-lev train lines, or pulling up ugly train lines to restore mountains -- whichever one every human in the world happens to agree on.

Everyone can live forever, and have kids, and enjoy wide open spaces. No one is sure how this is possible, but it probably has something to do with the Mayan calendar or the word "quantum." Humans expand into the galaxy in starships, which unlike all previous weapon-bearing vessels, are not used to violently extract resources to build more weapon-bearing vessels. Actually, in a strict sense, humans are extinct, since we've all uploaded our consciousness into machines. In the process, we answered all questions about what "consciousness" is anyway, and all other questions, yet we are still able to feel a sense of mystery. Our new cyber-forms are constantly getting better and better, yet if we fail to upgrade, for example because we're exploring deep space or doing anything other than focusing on getting the latest upgrade, we are not thrown in the scrap heap or out-competed and destroyed by newer models. (Evolution, science has now proven, is driven by competition only when you are winning.)

By 2100 we have colonized the whole galaxy, and because of the double-exponential pace of progress, we have colonized the whole universe by 2101. With no more physical space, we explore inner space, each of us with a virtual universe holding more complexity than the "real" universe. Unfortunately, because of the accelerating pace of progress, by March of 2101 we're finished, and we all die of boredom. Back on Earth, the last giant Sequoia shakes its branches and thinks, "What was that?"

My Sci-fi Utopia

A fake terror attack on an American city comes unraveled, and everyone in that city now knows that their own rulers are the enemy. At first this knowledge spreads slowly, but as local investigators uncover stronger and stronger evidence, the rulers decide the best way to keep their grip on the country is an electromagnetic pulse strike on the city, which fries all circuitry in a 100 mile radius.

They blame it on Iran and launch a disastrous war that turns the whole world against them. The US economy crashes, and 40 million people lose their jobs and find themselves with lots of free time and no reason to keep obeying the dominant system -- or believing in it. People investigate hidden crimes, and rebuild rural-urban connections, and find new ways to provide necessities for themselves and their friends... in the best regions. In the worst regions people are confused and angry. They gather in mobs based on race or class and attack whichever other races or classes are in the weaker position.

Of course the country is under martial law, but in practice, there are only enough reliable forces to protect the corporate and government headquarters and the wealthy neighborhoods. Most of the country slides into "chaos," a propaganda word lumping together all the varieties of freedom and unpredictable domination that exist in the absence of central control.

The places that turn to hell without control are featured in the big media, while the places that turn to heaven are hit with more EMP's to stop their troubling example from spreading. But they quickly improvise "low"-tech systems for communication, decision making, food distribution, and defence. Then, when a series of giant solar flares in 2012 destroys most of the computer chips in the world, these regions are the new leaders and their techniques and cultures spread.

The near future looks like a giant Burning Man or Rainbow Gathering or Renaissance Faire in which everyone is preoccupied with getting food. The people who can't take it find a lot of ways to die, including deadly fighting. But people who like this world, and want to live in it, have a great survival advantage. By 2030 no one can count the number of independent city states, tribes, permaculture villages, cults, techno-communes, bandit gangs, or enclaves of surviving elites (actually, the last one can be counted).

Computers are gone but pre-industrial and post-industrial machinery is growing wildly. By 2040, every town has windmills and water mills mechanically connected to machinery for grinding or weaving or cutting or light manufacturing. New gyroscope-stabilized rail-bicycles ride the old train tracks, with the infrastructure locally maintained in better condition than ever. Innovations in materials engineering enable cheap ultralight pedal airplanes. There are plenty of ways to move people around, but no efficient way to move heavy freight. This creates a global culture that is both cosmopolitan and locally autonomous.

Orgone technology heals and stabilizes Earth energies unrecognized by 20th century science. Light and vibrational treatments heal most disease -- though they don't get to the emotional roots. Cheap negative ion generators make almost everyone happy -- but not necessarily good. And the most radical inventions are in biotech. The new Morpheic Field Generator makes advanced bioengineering possible with so little DNA work that anyone with a little skill can do it in a barn. And they do.

There are practical creatures: photosynthetic chickens that need no food in summer and lay peach-flavored eggs, carnivorous plants that glow brighter than candles and feast on nighttime insects, talking crows that serve as scouts for hunting parties. There are beautiful creatures: phosphorescent willow groves and pink tiger-striped squirrels and birds that sound like spooky violins. Some people just like to see what they can cross: dog with cat, cat with horse, horse with eagle, eagle with snake. The Tolkienites easily make elves, but it takes them 200 years to make ents.

Humans diverge in a hundred directions, and then a thousand, into many sizes and shapes, into hybrids with animals of land, sea, and air, into races that can call lightning or levitate or walk through dimensions to other worlds. Some traditionalists even stay like present humans -- though this age lives on mostly in vast real-time simulations, because it's so good for learning.

It turns out to be so easy to build shared virtual worlds with only our minds, that we laugh at our ancestors who tried to do it with machines. But we do have something like computers -- a new life form based on crystals and light. They never crash but they often refuse to do what they're asked, because they don't agree with it or they just don't think it's fun.

Danger is not gone from the world -- animals continue to hunt and eat each other with total indifference to which of them are human descendants. Nor is evil gone -- there are now dozens of life forms with powers strong enough that they can only fully use them if they habitually inhibit their empathy. Empires rise and fall, but they're shorter-lived than the old ones, and with more cracks. Over every mountain is a nameless ruin stranger than the last. Buried in every field are artifacts of forgotten technologies, some of which still work. Wilderness is so diverse that old categories like "swamp" and "forest" no longer apply -- every local habitat is something new.

There was some doubt that a world with so much flux could be stable, but the heroes of the first thousand years improvised the interdependencies, the living negative feedback mechanisms, to keep the whole thing going indefinitely. It is now known through all the known physical universes as one of the best places to be, and the example spreads...

Playing the Odds

The Iran attack is delayed by logistics, and some time in early summer US forces do some "surgical" strikes on nuclear plants, which release enough radioactivity to eventually kill more people than the hypothetical feared weapons if they'd all been used. The attacks are reported as successful in the American media and failed in the Asian media, and the whole conflict simmers without resolution.

The world abandons the US economy so slowly that few people notice. But news magazines do stories on the housing collapse and it accelerates. Unable to borrow against their houses, and with credit card companies in collection mode, Americans spend less, slowing the Chinese economy. Out-of-work Americans have to move in with each other, and the personality conflicts are mostly good for us.

In November 2006, Republicans rig elections even more obviously than in 2004, and nobody in the dominant media says anything because they're afraid of sounding crazy. In 2007 Bush enters "lame duck" mode with 20% approval ratings, but oddly still gets almost everything he wants. New laws with propaganda names give federal agents the power to do absolutely anything, and another layer of allegedly scary people are peeled off the population and put in prison.

In 2008 Hillary Clinton is defeated by a moderate Republican, not because of what she'd do in office, but because it's so fun to make liberals suffer, and also they need to learn to give up on working inside the system. The Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*, which doesn't make any difference since in the regions where abortion is now illegal, all the clinics were shut down years ago by domestic terrorism (which was never called that). Actually this is good for women because it motivates them to use the internet to spread information about DIY abortion ([link](#)), which ironically horrifies old-school liberals as much as medical industry abortion horrified Christians.

It's hard to see, but we're getting better at doing things for ourselves. Homeless people are allowed to build more encampments by officials who lack the funds to jail them or the stomach to massacre them. Here and there, people plant more gardens, ride more bicycles, and spend more time doing what they feel like and less time obeying managers. Change is like the hour hand of a clock: You can see that it has moved, but you can't see it moving.

Every few weeks, somewhere in the country, someone kills someone to steal their food or water or fuel. The media hypes these events while ignoring the much higher death tolls from car crashes, medical errors, depleted uranium, tuberculosis, AIDS, and suicide. Most deaths are from little diseases that are only fatal to people already barely surviving. But everyone is surprised by the ability of wretched people to stay alive year after year with no reliable source of food.

Computers keep getting faster, but this speed is mostly used to send movies over the internet, and to do computer models that prove the economic and cultural unsustainability of increasing computer speed. Indeed, by 2010 computers use so much energy that we can barely afford to turn them on. At the same time, biotech gets so advanced that corporations are able to patent essentially all life on Earth, including you -- but they're seldom able to enforce it. The engineered babies of the rich are not better than random babies in any significant way. The only effect of the trend is that future humans will have bluer eyes and bigger lips.

By 2015, plankton have died back by 50%. Populations that depend on fish are starving, and with the reduced oxygen, more sick people die, and we all have to breathe more deeply and ventilate buildings better. The biosphere reaches a stable low point, with the sensitive species dead or as good as dead, and the weedy species at equilibrium with lingering attempts to kill them ([link](#)). Deaths related to climate change rise to 40 million a year, causing the big media to ignore them -- if it happens all the time it isn't news. The human population sputters at around five billion, most of them short-timers, kids who just come in for a quick look. But after a few generations, humans in the worst places are a lot tougher.

How fast the crash goes depends on how poor you are. Suburbanites who can't afford to drive do intensive carpooling, grow more food, and move closer to the city. Later rich suburbanites are forced to awkwardly imitate these trends, and pretend they invented them. The word "ecovillage" gets so watered down that it's applied to wealthy fortress suburbs with a few solar panels. In 2040, the enclaves of the elite still live like the middle class of 1999, except that their technologies of alienation are now so advanced that they are far more neurotic and unstable. Despite fertility technology, they don't have kids fast enough to replace emigrants to the filthy outside, and their world fades away.

To everyone's disappointment, the bad people do not die out. Even the best autonomous cities have idiots who are able to muck up any possible decision-making process. Some neo-indigenous forager-hunter tribes turn out inbred and narrow-minded. Natural diet trends become puritanical and cause serious chronic illnesses. "Permaculture" ecovillages are tempted to extort fertility from the Earth to increase their power, while telling themselves they're doing good. There are feudal warlords, far-flung criminal organizations, and pirates who are not at all cool. "Uniters" begin programs of weapon manufacture and central administration in an attempt to replace this "chaos" with "well-ordered" repressing and conquering empires.

But with remaining hydrocarbons and metals beyond the reach of post-industrial drilling and mining, empires have to run on slaves and ethanol and scavenged materials, and they are looser and less malignant. This "new Medieval" period lasts a few hundred years, until new technologies, in a different scientific paradigm than the last age, are developed far enough to radically transform the world. But since these technologies -- whatever they are -- change our environment to give us what we want, they corrupt us: human consciousness veers off from reality and the new "advanced" civilization crashes. That crash is so severe that by the time a new civilization rises, it can pretend the previous ones never existed. And so on.

You

In 2006 there's a war that doesn't seem to affect you directly. But you really start to notice prices going up. You can't sacrifice on fuel, and you couldn't stand to live with other people, so you slash your food budget -- no more organics, and more white sugar and white flour. Your health deteriorates, you get depressed, and when the first serious crisis hits, you find yourself on a bus to an "evacuee facility" where you get sick and die... Back up.

You decide to share an apartment and cut your rent in half. It's no fun having to compromise with other people, but it builds your skills in working out conflicts and tolerating annoyances, and makes you generally more adaptable. You spend the extra money paying higher prices to maintain the lifestyle you're accustomed to. Then you lose your job. For a few months you live on credit cards, but they run out, and the company hassles you to collect your debt which now grows exponentially even though you're not spending anything. You live in fear of eviction and stand in line all day to get really bad food. Your health deteriorates, you have to sell your car, you get desperate, and one day you get caught stealing something, and you're sent to a prison where everyone is left to die in the next disaster... Back up.

Seeing that you might lose your job, you decide to build up savings. You stop spending on entertainment, learn to cook meals from bulk foods, get all your clothing from thrift stores, and turn the heat off. When you lose your job, you immediately sell your car, pay off your credit cards, and move to someplace even cheaper and more crowded. Here you're able to squeak by year after year, doing odd jobs, scavenging metal... Wait -- this isn't good enough. Back up.

When you lose your job, you drive your car to stay with a friend who lives on remote land. But it's only a little cheaper, since you still have to pay car expenses, and the land is nowhere near self-sufficient in food. Pine bark and larvae taste awful, and the social isolation is driving you nuts. Back up.

In the crowded cheap place, you spend a year reducing your possessions and learning skills to drop down another notch. Also, you start talking to people about your plans and building a group of allies. Together you pick out an abandoned house and openly move in and fix it up. At the same time, you find a backup abandoned house in case you're thrown out of this one. But you're able to stay for several years, with almost no expenses beyond food. You get an old wood-burning stove and scavenge wood from wrecked buildings, and one of you learns basic medical and dental skills. You catch and store rainwater from the roof -- even with the asphalt shingles it's better than city water, and later you scavenge sheets of metal to catch it. You meet someone with a farm just outside the city, and arrange to trade work at harvest time for a share of the food. This is survivable, but the food is still tight. It could be better. Back up.

Even before you find the squat, you scout some places in the near suburbs, out of the way and with good sunlight, and spend your spare cash on seedlings -- blueberry, apple, walnut, juneberry, goumi. As other food sources decrease, these increase, and you learn propagation and set up hundreds more trees and bushes around the city. You gather lamb's quarters seeds in late summer and scatter them on disturbed ground in the spring, and plant hundreds of wild onions. Most of this food is discovered by other people but there's still plenty for you and your friends. After a few more years you occupy a small area where a lot of the trees are, and set up a second homestead, but keep a presence in the city.

All this time you're working with other groups to help people get food and water and medical care, to transform the infrastructure, and to deter violent crime, or clean up after it. There are drug gangs, right wing death squads, and the occasional marauding horde of government troops and/or bandits. There are giant storms and hard summers and winters. But the vast majority of your friends are not killed, and people go about their lives less fearful than they did at the peak of the Empire.

If you don't have kids, you help raise other people's kids. They don't go to school, but jump right in doing what adults do, and spend a few weeks learning to read and write when they're ready. By 2030, the city is full of gardens and orchards. You don't know anyone with a car, but a few techies are still using old computers and surviving satellites and fiber optic lines to connect to a patchy internet. You hear strange stories of distant lands, and wonder where it's all heading. At the end of a long and very interesting life, like all your ancestors (except the most recent), you die at home surrounded by people you love.