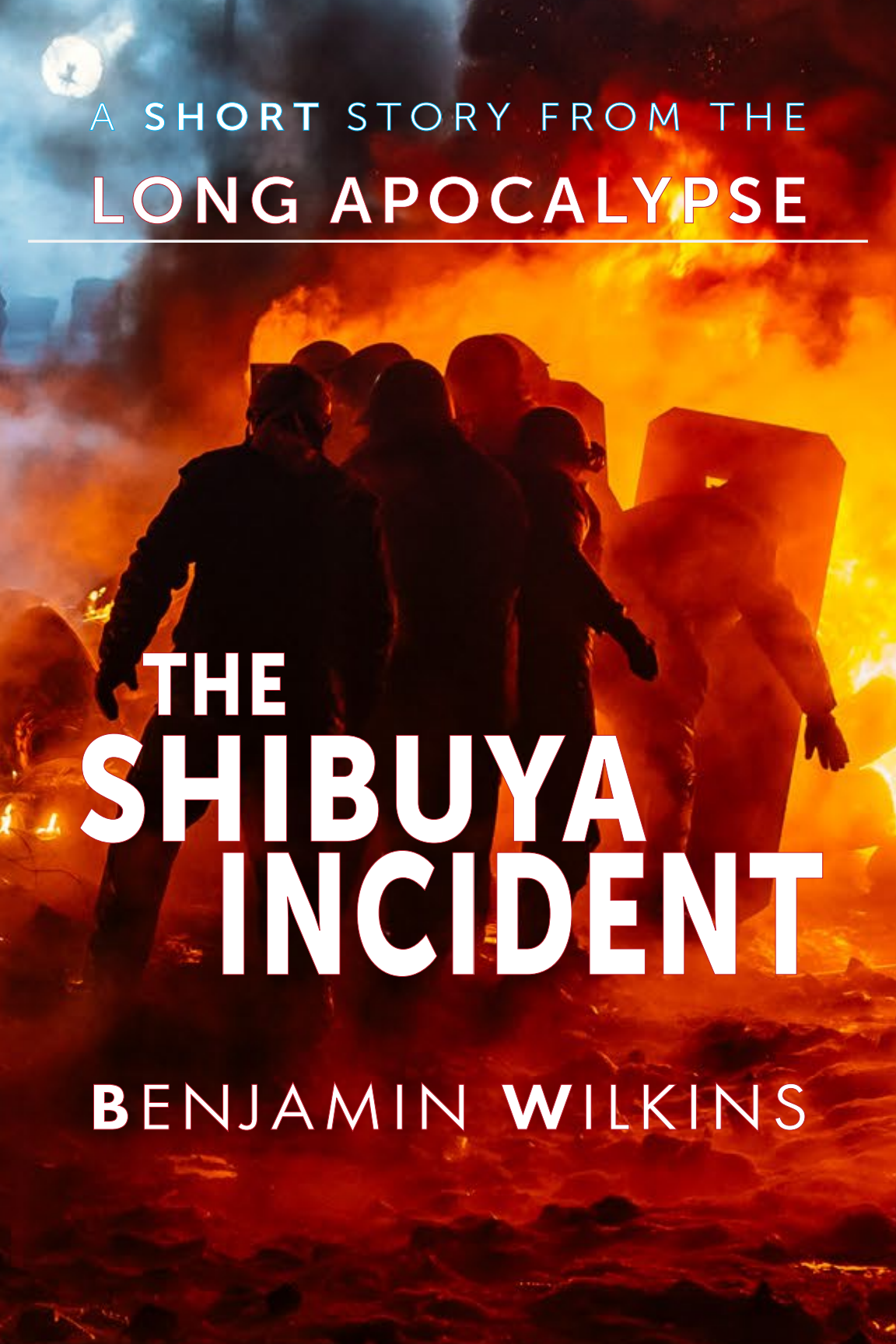




A SHORT STORY FROM THE
LONG APOCALYPSE

**THE
SHIBUYA
INCIDENT**

BENJAMIN WILKINS

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THE END OF THE WORLD as we know it didn't just happen in a single incident, like flipping a switch or dropping a bomb. Like most endings, it crept up on us slowly, like prostate cancer, like schizophrenia, like an asteroid hurtling through space hundreds of millions of miles away but already lined up to wipe the earth of dinosaurs. Our apocalypse slipped in and launched itself into motion before folks knew it was even a possibility, and by the time most of us had begun to catch on, it was already too late. But just like most endings, for all the chaos and change it triggered, the apocalypse was not really an end at all. It was a beginning.

It was raining all over Tokyo the night it happened. The night most folks mark as the beginning of the end. If the weather had been an omen, then it would have driven cold, sharp pellets of half-frozen rain in banshee-like gusts that stung and chilled. Most folks saw it that way after the fact, when they were still able to relive the moment on YouTube and Facebook and what have you. But it wasn't that kind of rain at all.

Not that anybody cares anymore.

Not that facts matter these days.

Still, just for the record, it was a warm summer rain. The kind of downpour kids used to just love to splash around in and

which parents didn't worry about them getting sick from when they finally came inside, drenched and giggling.

The iconic Shibuya neighborhood corner—with the train station on one side and what felt like thirty streets all intersecting in one spot in the shadows of the sprawling urban utopia on the other—had always been famous, though for different reasons than it's known now. The tall buildings, neon lights, massive LED screens, and signage all seemed to sing out one simple song:

Pay attention to me. This you should see. Pay attention to me. Pay attention. Pay attention to me.

Some folks still think of New York's Times Square as the most iconic representation of big-city life, but—like folks are about most things—they're wrong.

All that magical colored light, wet and reflected in a warm summer's rain, made what happened next seem impossible. In all fairness, at the time, what happened next would have seemed impossible pretty much no matter what. The hundreds, if not thousands, of Japanese pedestrians swirled around each other like little soap bubbles, jockeying for position as they crisscrossed the wet pavement under their transparent plastic umbrellas. It was a beautiful piece of urban poetry.

At least until the screaming started.

Folks consider what happened in Shibuya as the beginning because it was the first incidence of a chain reaction to be captured in broadcast-standard video, which gave it enough clarity for folks to really make out what was happening. Up to then, most of the recordings of incidents that had found their way into the news cycle had been shot on phones or glasses and were generally pretty hard to make out. Thus, the news drone flight crew who had inadvertently found themselves in the right place, at the right time, and with the right gear and filmed it all from their NHK command center down in Shinjuku, a little over a mile away from ground zero, became instant celebrities for

about as long as there still were celebrities, as if somehow, just because they pushed “Record” on a joystick, they had some kind of insight into the underlying nature of the berserker phenomenon—which of course they did not, contrary to the nonsense that came spewing from their lips over the years that followed. But there was so much nonsense spewing from so many mouths in those days, you couldn’t really hold it against them; it wasn’t like anybody else was saying anything better. Nobody knew what was going on. In fact, for a long time there seemed to be a direct correlation between how confidently a pundit spoke and how full of shit they turned out to be. Of course, that had been just as true long before any of this happened.

For the drone pilots, it was a nice way to go out, but for the rest of us, especially those not lucky enough to have died early on, it pretty much just sucked harder and harder every day after that. Before long, there was no more pretending. No more pockets of plausible deniability. No more turning of blind eyes. Just incident after incident of violence and death, until the terror became so mundane that folks stopped bothering to call the outbreaks *incidents* at all anymore and the whole world just fell apart.

Kenji Aomori didn’t know it was inside him. None of them that night likely did. The middle-aged office worker was just trying to make his way home after a long day of trying to look as busy as everybody else when he actually had very little work to do. He waited under the see-through plastic dome of his umbrella for the chirp of the walk signal like everybody else.

A group of first-year high school girls, their uniform skirts rolled up provocatively high above the hem of their white knee-highs, caught Aomori’s eye. Their giggling faces distorted by the water and light bouncing off their umbrellas made it impossible to tell if they were looking and laughing at him, but he felt sure that they were.

Aomori didn't consider himself a pervert, though of course he was. All men are heroes in their own stories. It's simply against the nature of men to see themselves as the villains they truly are. But the rest of us are usually not so blind. Schoolgirls always seemed to sense the pedophilia lurking in Aomori and, more often than not, intuitively kept at a frustratingly safe distance away.

But if he could just manage to get stuck behind them on the crowded train home, he thought to himself, it wouldn't matter what their stupid intuition whispered in their ears. On a crowded train, he could probably accidentally get a finger inside one of their panties before he got to his stop.

That made him smile. It might have been the first time he'd smiled all day.

She probably wouldn't even cry about it, he told himself. By the time the doors opened at his stop, she'd probably be wishing he'd do more to her.

A little white Mitsubishi Kei truck suddenly ran through the warm rain, flooding the gutter and sending a stream of dirty water up over the curb and into the throng of pedestrians. The giggling schoolgirls tried to jump back out of the way, but the sidewalk was too crowded and there was nowhere to go. Aomori's smile turned into a guarded laugh as the brown water soaked through the white uniform top of the one nearest to the street. The wet fabric clung to her skin. She wasn't wearing a bra. She didn't really need to yet, at least when her top was dry, but she was enough of a woman for Aomori's taste. As the light changed and the green crossing signal started to chirp, he made up his mind to try to get close to her in particular if she was on his train.

But he never made it across the street. In the chaos of the thousands of people jumbling to cross from every direction imaginable, Kenji Aomori should have paid more attention to where he was walking instead of ogling schoolgirls. Halfway

across the street, he fell, hard—not just to his knees, but all the way down, until his face scraped the pavement following an ungraceful belly flop onto the wet road. His umbrella was whisked away in the human current. Nobody stopped to help him. His own shirt was now wet, see-through, and clinging to his skin. Aomori felt his cheeks flush with growing humiliation, frustration, and anger. The thing inside him that had been dormant for so long stirred in his blood.

As he got to his knees, a woman's long red high heel suddenly came sharply down on his hand, knocking her off balance and sending her sprawling while it flooded Aomori with pain—blinding, white-hot, billowing pain. His face contorted into a howl, anger filling him up like steam in a pipe until, eyes locked with the woman who had crushed his hand, his pupils dilated to nickel-sized black holes.

Then he exploded.

Convulsions racked his body, sending a thin mist of rainwater out like an aura, or better yet, a cocoon, under which the muscles in his body suddenly engorged into bulging masses of impossibly strong, sinewy rage. Like the epicenter of a terrible flesh-and-blood shock wave, Aomori erupted back to his feet. He was no longer human, at least not in any way that mattered for the next seven or eight minutes. The tissues of his body had been instantly, inexplicably, and overwhelmingly flooded with the exceptionally powerful combination of growth hormones, adrenaline, testosterone, and everything else a human body is capable of producing, collectively called HGF, until he became an utterly berserk monster, stronger and quicker than anything most folks had ever imagined a man could be.

If the monster he'd become had looked like what it was capable of, then it would have had a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth and six inch claws on its hands, or at least been twenty feet tall. Most folks talked as though berserkers did look like that when

they spoke about them afterward, when they were still getting together in real life to talk and drink in public spaces, before fear dropped a net of agoraphobia on all of us. But he didn't look like that at all.

Not that anybody cares these days.

Not that facts matter anymore.

Still, just for the record, the berserker Aomori looked just like the man Aomori. A little veiny, maybe, a little flushed, and very, *very* pissed off, but no more monsterlike than anybody else. Yet monster he was.

Before anybody had a chance to react, Kenji Aomori had crushed the skull of the woman who had stepped on his hand and had started ripping into the crowd. His wild, out-of-control blind rage was unleashed on anything and everything within his considerable reach. He grabbed and ripped and thrashed the human beings around him like they were no more than cheap plastic dolls.

When the thing that had been Aomori found the schoolgirls his dirty human mind had so lusted after, he tore through them like a chainsaw against wet tissue paper without a second thought—or even a first one, for that matter. The change inside him had, in an instant, obliterated his conscious mind and anything he'd once felt about them. The man and his perverted rapist intentions were simply gone. The beast that had replaced him didn't give a shit about panties, trains, or the potential humiliation of a young woman. The beast that used to be Aomori didn't give a shit about anything. It didn't think. It didn't feel. It only went berserk and killed.

Like ripples in a puddle after a stone has been dropped in, the thousands on foot in Shibuya crashed and recoiled against each other, trying to flee, trampling over one another, crushing to death the ones who fell, only to be torn into seconds later themselves.

Almost instantaneously, Aomori wasn't the only monster grinding out the lives of every living thing in his path. Near the train station, in the chaos, another man was hit in the eye by a flailing umbrella, and now his body erupted into the same superpowered, impossibly quick and strong embodiment of wrath that had consumed Aomori. This second monster roared once and then unleashed its supremacy on anything it could touch. Bodies were tossed, thrown, crushed, dismembered like blades of grass under a mower.

And it got worse. As the new monster grabbed a woman by her long silky black hair and pulled her off her feet and into the air, her body was overcome by the change, and a third monster was dropped into the fray. She grabbed a small car by the hatchback and, demonstrating the full extent of the strength that came with this peculiar possession, pushed it into the berserker that had turned her. But before the vehicle struck its intended target, a fourth monster appeared from the masses and shoved the car off course. Then there was a fifth. A sixth. And after that, it became impossible for anybody but the computers to keep track anymore.

These berserkers' wrath was not limited to human beings, lesser animals, and inanimate objects. The latest creation—an office lady, it seemed, her grey knee-length skirt torn up the side—grappled with another of the creatures. They clawed, bit, and punched at each other, until they were distracted by something else. Playing dead was the only strategy that might have saved folks on those streets, but nobody had enough experience with berserkers yet to know it.

The NHK drone, which had only been there for the traffic, captured the whole scene as the first six berserkers set off chain reactions all around them, and their numbers grew to ten, then thirty, then fifty or more. The violence spread like a terrible shock wave out of the intersection and into the city, where the lone camera could no longer follow it. Not that it mattered; by

then the fires had started and the riot police had been called in. The drone camera could have pointed just about anywhere and captured enough death, destruction, and mayhem to keep folks' attention for days.

The assumption by just about everybody in the world was that Aomori had been killed in the chaos. Sorting out the identities of the dead had turned out to be a surprisingly difficult task. Facial-recognition software had been able to ID most of the folks on the ground that night, and an automated tracking system had ensured that operators were able to follow the movements of most of the victims, until they stopped moving. But by the time the first responders got in there and started weeding through the bodies, that data was about as useful as tagging trees in a nursery before it's hit by a hurricane. Bodies had been dismembered, faces crushed, flesh burned. Lots of folks just got lost. We knew Aomori had been there, and we knew he was the first one to berserk out that day, but since nobody saw or heard from him after, the powers that be assumed the closeted pervert had died in the action.

But he hadn't.

As it was aired around the world and then recast later all over the Internet, Aomori was only in the footage of the incident for six minutes and fourteen seconds before he was lost in an explosion from a ruptured gas line. He awoke four hours later buried alive under seventeen tons of rubble from a collapsed building, and literally starving after the physical exertion his body had undergone during his berserker rage. He died just before the sun rose the next day, not from his injuries, which were mostly superficial, but from hunger.

His body was never found.

The carnage he left behind was overwhelming: a death toll in the thousands, too many injured to count, property damage in the tens of billions. *The Shibuya Incident*, as it would later be

named, became the single most-viewed clip on YouTube and every social media network out there overnight. By the time Aomori exhaled for the last time in the wee hours of the next morning, the world had officially branded him and the others like him: *berserkers*. That was when the end of the world began in most folks' eyes.

But most folks are idiots when it comes to cause and effect. The only thing that began in Shibuya that night was a global awareness of something that had been building for a long, long time. For years and years after the footage was broadcast live around the world—back when there was still some kind of hope for a future—everybody had a theory as to what was causing seemingly normal men and women to suddenly go berserk and murder anybody and anything within reach: cell tower radiation, GMOs, birth-control pills, trans-fats, secret government biological weapons gone wrong (or right). Theories were like tits; everybody had at least two, and even the ones that looked good at best turned out to be fake. Folks were obsessed, and as the shit got worse and worse and we all collectively stopped pretending the phenomenon could be contained or stopped, the theories just got crazier and crazier.

But there was one theory out there that wasn't too far off the mark. It belonged to a father of two named Emmett Kessler who'd managed to find that elusive little needle in the metaphorical haystack of theories, but only because he'd had nearly a decade in prison to obsess about it and had been instrumentally responsible himself . . . But that's a story for another time, in a whole other volume of the Chronicles from the Long Apocalypse.