

John Smith
Last Known Survivor of the Microsoft Wars

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Prologue

This is Susan Krowley, reporting for The Times.

This story has been months in its creation but spans decades. Father and mother felt the need to track down the last known survivors of the Microsoft Wars and record their stories for history. We sent skilled hunters out in all directions to counties we knew about and those only rumored to exist.

All this searching expanded our knowledge in ways we did not expect. Some of those places we thought to be only rumor really did exist and some still do. Other reporters will be filing stories in this series to bring you the facts as we found them. What follows is an interview with John Smith, the last known survivor of the Microsoft Wars.

Frame of Reference

SK: I must first thank you for allowing this interview. It has been so long and so much has been lost; we feared we would never record the real story.

JS: Be careful what you wish for.

SK: Yes, well, I'm sure that is good advice. I must say that you have a lot of interesting art hanging on the walls of your place and odd-looking stuff lying around. I can't really even identify what much of it is.

JS: In both life and science you must take one thing at a time.

SK: Can you tell us why they were called the Microsoft Wars and was there really more than one?

JS: You don't have any frame of reference to ask that question.

SK: The searchers did tell you that we wished to interview you about this very subject to record the history, did they not?

JS: Yes.

SK: May I ask then, why you are so reluctant to answer my question?

JS: I'm not reluctant, you simply don't have a frame of reference to ask such a question.

SK: What do you mean?

JS: What do you know about the Microsoft Wars? Not just the wars but what led up to them?

SK: Just that it was a very dark period in human history. Great atrocities were committed and many world governments fell. Large portions of the world are still considered to be off-limits for humans.

JS: You say that as if you don't know what it means.

SK: Say what?

JS: "Off-limits."

SK: It means we are not allowed to go there.

JS: Thank you for the dictionary regurgitation. Now, why don't you tell me what it means?

SK: I've already told you.

JS: And now you should be getting closer to understanding why you have no frame of reference to ask your question.

SK: The only thing I'm closer to is branding you a fraud and leaving.

JS: You are free to do what you wish. Before you can ask the question you wish to ask, you must first have a frame of reference so a meaningful response can be given. You don't currently have any frame of reference.

SK: <sighs> What does off-limits mean in your mind?

JS: It's not a matter of my mind. Those areas of the world are off-limits because the radiation levels are too high for prolonged human exposure. Nature has attempted to reclaim some of those areas and, due to man's arrogance, has created some creatures that are severe abominations. Many of those creatures will not survive once the radiation drops to a safe level. Man cannot eat what comes from there and a bite of any kind can cause radioactive material, if not venom, to enter into the body, slowly poisoning it from within. We have no method

of removing such radiation. A single bite is usually a death sentence, though that sentence may take years to actually happen.

SK: Oh come on, we've all heard stories about radiation. They are mostly there to scare children.

JS: In the past, when there was a massive nuclear disaster, mankind put in a concerted effort to clean it up. Even when the Chernobyl meltdown happened in a place called the Ukraine, we built a low-quality and hasty tomb around the site and put as much of the waste as possible in safe containment.

The closest my cycle had to the off-limits places you know have occurred on an island nation known as Japan. A plant there failed so completely after being hit by a tsunami that untold quantities of highly radioactive water went into the ocean along with radioactive dust, which covered farmland for miles.

One thing is certain with prolonged radiation exposure: mutation. Sometimes it kills the life form, sometimes it alters it. Enough radiation will kill any known life form but we never studied prolonged exposure to radiation from high-grade fuel rods, or what happens to creatures who drink the surface water containing particles from these rods. We do know that the venom mutates, as well, along with the bacteria, which naturally occurs in the mouths of certain creatures.

If I ask you to travel the direction of the setting sun two days by horse, stay there a day, then come back before completing the interview, will you do it?

SK: No, I'm on a deadline.

JS: You traveled here on horseback. You have no concept of deadline. What is the real reason you won't do it?

SK: It is a forbidden region. I could lose my job going there.

JS: Might I ask you how you got your job?

SK: I'm a reporter. I was assigned to cover this story.

JS: Very good. Now, how did you get your job?

SK: I don't understand what you are asking.

JS: Because you have no frame of reference for the question. You cannot provide an answer because you have no knowledge of Earth That Was. Back then, reporters were simply smiles and haircuts which looked good in front of the camera. They read stories off a teleprompter. Those stories were written by journalists. To become a journalist you had to attend a university or college to obtain a 4-year degree. Then, if you were lucky, you got a job covering stories instead of a job proofreading them. So, let me ask again, how did you get your job?

SK: I still have no idea what you are talking about. What is a college? A university? I was trained for this job by my father who had this job before me. It is how skills are passed to the next generation.

JS: I see.

SK: You see what?

JS: Sadly, how the rest of this interview is going to go. Oh well, it is much too late to wait for another.

The reason you won't go and spend a day where I asked is the same reason it is a forbidden region. Back in the day of Earth That Was, there was a facility there known as the Braidwood Station. It was a nuclear power plant powering much of what was then the northern end of a state called Illinois. It was the largest plant in the state. Like most plants, it stored its nuclear waste on-site because nobody ever put in place a method of recycling the spent fuel rods or eliminating the deadly radiation from them. When the earth spun and the land cracked, the containment facilities all crumbled. Most likely, there are still massive quantities of radiation being given off, since the half-life for that stuff was measured in thousands of years.

SK: So, were there really multiple wars and why were they called the Microsoft Wars?

JS: I can see that you have no intention of recording anything useful for your readership or posterity. What is your current circulation?

SK: We are the most trusted newspaper in the country. We have the widest circulation and most frequent distribution cycle: 5,500 readers look to us for information about the world, twice monthly.

JS: It sounds more like you provide them entertainment instead of journalism.

SK: Why is that?

JS: You are looking for the headline instead of the story. The same thing happened to the supposed news services back in the days of Earth That Was.

SK: Earth That Was?

JS: That picture hanging on the wall to my right. When you came in, you commented on it being a piece of art. Do you know what it really is?

SK: A painting of some kind.

JS: It's a map of Earth That Was printed out on an engineering printer, which took four-foot-wide rolls of paper and used what were called ink-jet cartridges. Once it was printed, it was run through a process the elders called lamination, which sealed it in some kind of clear substance to help preserve it. Otherwise, it would be yellowing like those books stacked to your left.

SK: That still doesn't explain Earth That Was.

JS: The seven continents.

SK: What are you talking about? There are twelve continents!

JS: Today, yes. Back in the day of Earth That Was, there were only seven continents and that is a map of them. The picture hanging beside it is a picture of Earth That Was taken from outer space on a clear day. As you can deduce from the map, it shows much of the North and South American continents.

SK: American?

JS: <sigh> What is the first continent you encounter today when heading in the direction of where our sun sets?

SK: Dians.

JS: What is the country we are in right now?

SK: Rica, but shouldn't you already...

JS: Back in the day of Earth That Was, Canada was a country occupying the northern portion of the North American continent and the United States of America occupied the lower portion of it before you got to this skinny connecting piece. The sun traveled from this edge to that edge of the continent each day.

After the events of 2013, or during, depending upon how you look at it, part of Canada became the land mass you now call the Dians continent. The rest of the North American continent also turned and split up. Some say it simply had an ocean form over part of it. The difference between split or sink doesn't really matter. Today, you cannot walk from one chunk to the other, so they are considered separate continents.

The country we live in now was once called America. Several other chunks floating around the globe were also part of America. You are having trouble believing what you have been told because some big pieces that are at the root of the story are under the ocean now. As a country, we no longer have any means of getting to them or taking pictures for others to see. At some point, perhaps we will regain that but not at this point.

SK: Do you really expect me to believe that you have hanging on your wall a picture taken from outer space? A beautiful picture in full color that was somehow taken while someone or something was in outer space and then given to you?

JS: It wasn't given, it was downloaded by my grandfather. Many people had them back at that time.

SK: Downloaded?

JS: Yes. With a thing called a computer over something called the Internet. America had some kind of organization known as NASA, which sent ships, satellites and people into outer space.

SK: Internet? People in outer space? I don't know what you've been drinking but it would have been polite to share!

JS: <chuckle> Do you see that black rectangle resembling a book sitting over there?

SK: Yes.

JS: On the front of it is a little ridge, which you can push to the right, then lift the top portion of it to open it. Good. Now near the bend where the two pieces come together is a button with a circle and a line sticking out of the circle.

SK: I see it.

JS: Press it.

SK: It is making noises. There are lights flashing. Things are appearing and disappearing on the top piece that feels like glass. What is OpenVMS?

JS: It is the most robust computer operating system ever created by man. Here, let me log in.

SK: Log in? Computer operating system?

JS: Yes. Computers with operating systems, which could support multiple users, assigned each user a user name and password. When you tried to gain access to such a computer, it would prompt you for the user name and password. If you provided values it recognized, it would allow you to sign onto the computer. It would also write information to a computer log file somewhere, much like a ship's manifest or a store's receipt, indicating who signed onto the computer, from where,

what they did, etc. Eventually, the culture surrounding these devices shortened the name to “log in” or sometimes “log on.”

SK: I have never seen or heard of such a thing. Is this some kind of witchcraft or peddler's trick?

JS: Earth That Was had a great many wonderful things. It also had horrible things. In the end, the Microsoft Wars were good for the planet because they eliminated the excess population and many horrible things. Oddly enough, the planet was about to do the same all on its own.

SK: What are you talking about?

JS: As I said, nothing I tell you will be of any use without a frame of reference. Here, now that it is booted, let me click on this slide show.

SK: Slide show? Oh, pictures. What are these?

JS: A series of photos of, from and about the international space station.

SK: The international space station?

JS: The cost of building, launching and assembling a new space station became too much for one country to bear. NASA teamed up with the space agencies of other countries, even those in countries that had not yet gone to space themselves, in order to build a series of modules, which could be launched into orbit and connected together to provide an ever-growing laboratory in space. Every country that participated managed to get some scientists assigned to the ISS for at least one tour of duty conducting experiments in zero gravity.

There! That picture is the same one you see on my wall. It was taken from the ISS on a clear day by one of the scientists.

SK: What has any of this got to do with the Microsoft Wars?

JS: As I said, frame of reference. Would it surprise you to learn that we, the people of Earth, sent many different science teams to the ISS over the years, but the last team must have all died.

SK: What do you mean must have?

JS: We have no way of knowing. There! Let me hit pause. See all of these people?

SK: Yes.

JS: This is the last team to ever be sent there. However, they died; it wasn't pretty.

SK: What are you talking about?

JS: When the Microsoft Wars started, the planet got distracted. A group of scientists had gone to the ISS with twelve months' worth of food and water. The air filtration system should have operated for years, if not decades. They had more than enough work for the four months they were supposed to be up there. Nobody gave them a second thought.

The various militaries focused on trying to win the war. The scientists focused on completing the mission. Before either group achieved their objective, we lost the ability to retrieve them. Eventually, we lost the ability to even communicate with them. Nobody knows how their lives ended and nobody really wants to know.

SK: You are simply making all of this up. I cannot believe I was sent all the way out here to talk with a madman!

JS: Do you see that tube sitting next to that folded-up tripod?

SK: Yes.

JS: It's a telescope. When it gets dark out, we will take it outside and point it up to find something, which looks very much like the pictures you just saw.

SK: It still exists? Why hasn't anyone written about this before?

JS: Yes, it is still up there. You will even see there are lights on in some sections. As to why nobody writes about it, that's easy—it was forbidden. The law has been on the books a long time in many different places. Before everything went to hell, the surviving governments banned conversation about it or writing of it in order to try salvaging the people's morale.

SK: That's absurd!

JS: Is it? How do you think an entire people would feel knowing there were seven of their own trapped in a tin can orbiting the planet and the only thing we could do was let them die of starvation or by their own hand?

As I said, you don't have a frame of reference to ask about the Microsoft Wars. You don't have any concept of Earth That Was. Until your readers have a concept of Earth That Was, they cannot begin to understand how we got here.

Please, let me shut this computer down. Once the battery fails to take a charge, I will never be able to use it again. I haven't heard of a place in the world that has the ability to make a new battery for it. Like many portable computers of its day, power passes through the battery instead of around it, so when the battery fails, the computer is useless. A sad, yet effective, marketing technique to sell more batteries.

SK: You mean to tell me someone knew all this information and when they passed a law, everybody went along with it,

never talking about it?

JS: It only applied to the reporters and news outlets. The various governments of the world got in front of the story. Missions to the station were so commonplace that the vast majority of the world simply never thought about them. Whenever something really bad happened with the space station, we heard about it on the news or read about it in the paper, but normally, we heard nothing. It was just some project our tax dollars went to and we believed that some day, we might see some new medical advancements or some other such thing from it. The world was quite accustomed to the space program developing things, which trickled out to the general population, greatly improving the quality of life.

SK: Such as?

JS: Oh, there were lots of things but few exist today. There were transistor radios, microwave ovens and ballpoint pens, which could write upside down.

SK: Surely you're making this up!

JS: Do you see that white rectangular thing sitting on the counter back there?

SK: Yes.

JS: Walk back to it. There is a stone cup on the counter with tea in it. Touch and taste the tea to prove to yourself it has gone cold.

SK: Okay, so it has gone cold.

JS: Press the large rectangular button on the lower right of the device. Good. Now place the cup inside and close the door. On the keypad, which is the little rectangle of numbers, press the five twice, then hit start. Good. Wait for it to stop... now press the button to open the door and take the cup out.

SK: Ouch!

JS: That is a microwave oven and, as you have just learned, it still functions.

SK: So I'm supposed to take the other two on faith?

JS: Walk over to that desk. Pick up the silver pen, which is laying on its side in a small box. Hold your notepad over your head and write your name.

SK: Look at that...amazing!

JS: I don't have a transistor radio anymore—at least, not one that works. I wouldn't waste the batteries on one if I had it. Most likely, there aren't any radio stations left, anyway.

SK: Can we talk about the Microsoft Wars now?

JS: Orwell was right. Everyone was forced to read his book and yet, it still happened. In reality, that is all anybody needs to know.

SK: Orwell?

JS: <sighs> Back in 1949, an author by the name of George Orwell published a novel titled 1984. It was a look into the future and basically created the concept in society of Big Brother. This Big Brother was a government, any government really, which would watch over you like a child. Your life would be monitored and controlled 24 hours per day. The dictionary would not grow in size, but shrink, as words and thoughts were continually restricted. Anyone who possessed a thought against the government, system or the way things were being run would be turned in by friends/family/neighbors as a thought criminal.

One by one, various ministries were set up to control every aspect of life, all for the betterment of society, and most had some plausible excuse bringing them into existence. There would be monitors installed everywhere, so you were continually watched and controlled. It was one of the best-selling and most widely talked-about books of all time. Many movies were created showing various flavors of the book.

SK: Well, if everybody knew about it, then it surely didn't happen.

JS: Not in 1984, no. The final vehicle for control wasn't chosen until the early 1990s and it took a while to roll out globally. Sometime during 2010, the governments around the world achieved 95 percent of what they wanted. The vast majority of citizens carried with them a 24-hour monitoring device, which could be accessed remotely and would, via GPS, give a complete picture of their travels. Each one had a unique ID. Best of all, the devices were marketed in such a way as to make people think they were nothing unless they had one and kept it with them at all times.

When it became apparent that some portions of society simply couldn't afford the devices—yes, each citizen paid for their own, and gladly...they even paid to customize them—most governments came up with some kind of ministry or program to ensure each and every person falling into the “cannot afford” category was issued one under some plausible story as “medical need” or “neighborhood watch.” This removed the poor-person-rejection-of-charity problem. Nobody felt insulted to receive the devices, since the devices allowed them to communicate with anyone at any time, as long as they knew the other person's unique ID.

SK: Do you honestly expect me to believe that everybody stood in line to get a unique ID for the government to monitor them 24 hours per day, seven days per week?

JS: No. They didn't see it like that. They stood in line to get the latest and greatest cellphone with video camera, GPS, speaker phone, Internet access, and every other buzz phrase marketing could think of. If you don't know what any of that is, it doesn't matter. All you need to know is the more applications, called apps, it had, the more people wanted it.

Each phone had to have a phone number, which was globally unique so anyone in the world could call anybody else in the world, no matter where they were at the time. It was that “anywhere, anytime” communications capability that was a major selling point. A system of assigning phone numbers to allow for international calling had been in place for many years due to the older land line system, so it was simply leveraged.

Everyone proudly carried and used their government monitoring device. There were even crime shows on television showing how law enforcement agencies could track a cellphone as long as it was turned on. What they didn't tell you was that the phone would periodically report in even when turned off, and if certain instructions were waiting, it would turn itself back on, silently, so full monitoring could continue without the owner being aware.

The only thing that could truly stop monitoring was to remove the battery, then turn the cellphone on to drain the hidden reserve. When you did that, however, the phone was of no use.

SK: So let me get this straight—you're saying that there was a communications network that could monitor every person in the country?

JS: No. Before the middle of 2011, thanks to some production cost reductions, it was every person on the planet living in any civilized country and even many third world countries. A basic cellphone could be manufactured and sold for under \$20 retail, which put the actual production cost at about \$6. Those countries too poor or with terrain too rough used the satellite phones, which cost a bit more, but leveraged cellphone components to reduce costs. Both networks were monitored by government agencies, even though commercial companies were providing the services to the cellphone owners. Even children in third world countries who didn't have food to eat or a bank account in their name had a phone so they could be tracked.

SK: Just what does this cellphone story have to do with the Microsoft Wars?

JS: Far more than you are capable of understanding at this point. Do you even know what Microsoft was?

SK: An evil empire of some kind that met its destruction during the Microsoft Wars.

JS: Is this what is being taught where you come from? If that is all you know, then you really have no frame of reference to ask the question. Let me guess—you were sent on this mission because your father is the mayor, or whatever they call the leader of your town, and your mother runs the newspaper?

SK: My mother is the mayor of the city and my father runs the newspaper. I told you before that he trained me for my job. I am the most senior reporter and I don't like your insinuation that I'm not qualified to be here!

Now. Are you saying Microsoft wasn't an empire?

JS: It was a corporate empire, not a country or territorial empire. It was at the root of multiple wars, although it had no standing army or military of any kind.

SK: You aren't making any sense.

JS: As I said, you don't have a frame of reference so you cannot ask the question. Unless you understand some things about Earth That Was, you cannot begin to understand what the Microsoft Wars really were.

SK: How can knowing about a pen that writes upside down help one to understand what the Microsoft Wars were?

JS: Do you even know when the wars ended?

SK: Some say it was over 150 years ago; that is why so much has been lost.

JS: It all ended on November 13, 2013. It was sixty-eight years ago, next week. They ended the same day we got twelve continents, although it took a while to figure the continent part out. I was eleven years old at the time. There was no winner and no treaty was ever signed.