

APOCALYPSE NOW
...Grab the Karaoke
Machine!

A Novel

by

Ed Tasca

Published by Aardwolfe Books
<http://www.aardwolfe.com>

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ISBN-13 978-0-9707776-8-3

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Printed in the United States of America

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Chapter One

Leah Cole had a pain that wouldn't go away, even with medication, and she secretly believed it was all her husband's fault. At five o'clock, Leah Cole came out of her doctor's office. *Diagnosis? More arthritic pain – this time in her buttocks.* Leah was hurt and angry that her husband hadn't arrived as he said he would. She felt that his obsession with his work, like her arthritis, was never going to change. She plumped the pillow in the driver's seat of her smoke-colored Toyota before she sat down, agreeing with herself that she would find her husband and blacken his day with a reprimand for the broken promise.

It was mid-January, the month that gets colder every day. Leah flicked the car heater on high to warm her aching backside and sped out to Rt. 26, the narrow mountain road without guardrails that wound about Pennsylvania's Nittany Mountain into Bellefonte, a small working class town of storeowners and tradesmen, and the home to Dorrance College, a small adjunct to Pennsylvania State University. Dorrance College offered specialty courses in advanced bioengineering studies.

Articles recently in the Lewistown newspapers reported rumors that Dorrance College may have been doing top-secret work for the U.S. government. Leah's husband, Lewistown's own Professor Lawrence Cole, each article noted, was one of the key scientists working on the project. While the story made the local papers, it never seemed to cause much of a stir in media beyond central Pennsylvania. So no one asked any questions and gladly accepted the news with a certain local pride.

Leah drove slowly over this last mile in the dying light of the late afternoon, wary of impatient students trying to pass into inadequate gaps and huge dump trucks trying to negotiate hairpin turns. Dusk had dimmed to a cold, dark evening when she arrived at the college. She drove on to the campus past discharged students scurrying to their cars in an attempt to escape the cold. She found an empty rectangle marked *Visitor*. She needed to be firm, she thought, and was trying to conjure up words that would dramatize her feelings. *Fed up*. No, too bitter. *Terribly disappointed*. Too weak-kneed. *Damn pissed!* Not her style. *If it happens again...* Silly, since she'd never act on any threat. *Lonely and depressed!* Too proud for that. When she realized her responses were limited, she simply gave in to her rage, and decided to call him a name and let it go at that. *Goddamn, self-absorbed, uncaring bastard!* This would declare what she was feeling, and permit her to ad-lib any embellishments as needed.

As she got out of her car, Leah spotted her husband's closest friend and colleague, Donald Korch, who had worked closely with her husband on several

previous research projects. According to the college's current prospectus, these projects were classified as mostly agricultural, applying gene-splicing technology to modify bacteria for improved farming techniques, such as the rapid restoration of nutrients to top soil, a job certain bacteria do quite efficiently. Leah crossed the snow-covered lawn to the Advanced Biosciences Lab housed in the seven story cylindrical glass tower housing the Advanced Bioscience Department. Donald Korch was smoking a cigar and fumbling over his cell pad when she arrived.

"Where's my husband?" Leah interrupted Korch in mock reproach.

"You sure he's here?" Korch asked, surprised. "Haven't seen him all day."

"Oh, he's here."

Korch put out his cigar on the jamb of the front door and stuffed the cigar in his coat pocket. "This damn thing. I can't hit these little buttons. Got three different wrong numbers. One woman twice. She threatened to call the police. I'm trying to call my mechanic!"

"Facebook. I contact everybody on Facebook now. Even my doctor's on Facebook. He says you want me to put your blood tests on Facebook. I say, yeah, why not. And then everybody sends me tips on how to lower my lipids. It's like having a team of doctors, and they all have photos of themselves. I take the advice only from the skinny people. It's perfect."

Korch wasn't sure which was the more incriminating problem, his being unable to correctly hit tiny cell buttons. Or, his friend Leah Cole having her medical records on Facebook. He decided to lie, "That's an interesting idea."

"You know I never have to leave the house anymore. I can sit in my tub and discuss my lipids with everybody like we were having a tea party, and not ever have to serve tea."

Well, let's go find Larry," Korch said. Korch was a large man with a big jaw and puffy jowls that had begun to sag. A smile he tried to force never surfaced because Leah rushed past him through the front entrance. "He's got a good bitchin' coming, Donny. "A good bitchin' The last time I saw him, he was on Facebook. That's how I know about my husband. He's on Facebook."

"I understand." Korch followed Leah down an antiseptically white corridor to a steel and glass security wicket with a biometric console on the wall. Korch stabbed the console screen with his fingerprint, and in two seconds, a tiny green light on the security gate blinked and the gate sprung open. Korch and Leah walked into the security sector. No one was about at this hour, and the lighting in this sector seemed dimmer, making the whole area feel ominous and secluded.

"Donny, the arthritis. It's bad. And I expected to have a husband to complain to. Instead he turns out to be another pain in the ass."

“I’m sure he just got caught up on this new project,” Korch said, trying to placate her as they entered the elevator. Korch and Leah climbed to the top floor. The elevator doors opened without a sound. Pot lights in the soft ceiling tiles lit the seventh floor corridor in both directions around the circumference of the building. Garden lights outside beamed upward through the building’s glass to produce a genial, moonlight fluorescence after dark.

“And if I hear one more time about ‘possible breakthroughs,’ I’m going to give you a breakthrough, Donny. Where it really hurts and it’s hard to bandage up. Korch’s patient and sympathetic ear was the first chance Leah had to give her frustration voice. Korch remained the perfect sounding board. “Hasn’t he done enough?”

The seventh floor housed small “studies,” which were more than offices, because they were furnished with beds and bathrooms that allowed ranking professors of the department to remain overnight, if the occasion called for it. It was an honor to have one, and those who did considered the studies sanctuaries.

As Leah and Korch made their way to Professor Cole’s office door, only Leah’s voice could be heard trying to escape the concrete walls and airtight windows. “And all this top-secret business! What’s that all about? It just makes you all feel more important. That’s what it’s about!” Leah threw up her hands and rushed her indignation and her scolding right up to the door of her husband’s study. “Let the grad students do it!”

Leah opened the study door abruptly and flicked on the light. There he was, just as she had imagined. *Still stuck in thought at his desk.* Leah could see the back of his desk chair, and her husband in his black tweed overcoat still working away. She clicked her tongue once at Korch to include him in her reproof. And without another word, she stepped into the office in a huff and started talking, as if Korch had kept up with her. “So, don’t get me wrong. I really do enjoy driving in the ice and snow to flush my husband out of his office, so I can see what he looks like,” she told herself out loud. “I don’t mind spending nights alone. Not when I know my husband’s on the verge of another breakthrough. And yippee, won’t the world be a damn better place!” Leah trumpeted into another scold: “The fact that he doesn’t even care that I’m here - no, that doesn’t bother me. But you know what, Lawrence, you know what the doctor told me was the cause of my pain in the ass! Not sciatica. Not any compressed sacral vertebrae. You! The doctor said you’re the cause of my pain in the ass.” Leah now found herself screaming in her husband’s direction to shake him from whatever he was doing. “Is that clear? You are the pain in my ass!” When Professor Cole still failed to acknowledge his wife’s hostile little charade, she paused a moment, then exploded again on a second thought and mewed. “How’s that feel? The doctor saying, You’re the pain in my ass! Doesn’t that bother you, that you’re a clinical pain in the ass!” There was still no reaction. She wondered now what her husband’s deafness and indifference was all about. He never let her rant on like that without a joke or a shrug. She sidled over to his desk and chair to confront him and have an end to the whole joke. Korch came alongside curiously.

Professor Cole was really no longer there. Leah froze, her expression quizzical then blank. Suddenly, she gasped without emitting a sound, then convulsed at the abdomen as though she'd been punched there, and spasmed epileptically back into the shocked arms of Professor Korch. A second later, she swung herself away and out of the study into the corridor where she vomited out of sight.

Korch rushed to his friend. Professor Cole was sitting as one might if he were pondering a question or planning his lunch. But not all of his body was there. Professor Cole's outer layers of skin were gone. Only the raw, glistening lifeless bulges of muscle and connecting tissue remained, holding his fleshless bones and internal organs together.

Korch stood there trying to make sense of what he was looking at, a perfectly flayed body of one of his closest associates. Cole's shirt was torn and buttonless at the front band from his beltline upwards and speckled with small splotches of blood, a last struggle with his body to take in air. All that could be seen through his torn shirt was his open chest cavity. The shape of the body remained, created by the underlying muscles, ribs, and connective tissues. Still-quivering pink and blue vascular tubes wove in and about the muscle, bone and viscera, graying like pasty humus at the blood-drained exposed heart and lungs. Naked eyeballs bulged from their sockets, leaving visible only the ropy-thick muscles that shaped his face. Flesh from the brow and nose and chin seemed to have been cut away with the finest precision, while the lips, full, blush and perfect, were still intact. His scalp was

gone, but a tiny hairline still ringed his exposed crown like a wispy, gray laurel.

Professor Korch grabbed her back and led her away as far as the elevator. She was working hard to catch her breath. Down the elevator, neither could speak. Once outside in the cold air, Leah shook herself free of her shock and began to sob. Korch called the Bellefont police, who called the local FBI office. Soon, the strange Dorrance death scene was under siege from the local police and a local federal agent, Adrian Shoop. As paramedics removed the body in haz-mat suits, Korch said to Shoop, “This has been a terrible accident. We’re all ready to cooperate, Agent Shoop. Let my team know how we can help. Whatever you need, you got.”

Shoop nodded, still puzzled by the mangled look of Professor Cole’s remains. He examined it for a long time without saying a word. He’d never seen anything like it. He tried to appear as though he could take appropriate measures, but he had no idea what those measures might be. Finally, Korch, who had been backing out of the room in tiny steps, broke the hideous silence. “Oh, and Agent Shoop, could you do me a big favor? Could you call this number for me and ask if they got my gasket. It’s my mechanic.”

Chapter Two

In the long, rectangular room known as the “Large Conference Room” located on the first floor of the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center’s (NBACC’s) principal office building, Virginia Soderberg had another urgent duty. She had to rustle up a presentation at Detrick, so that she could address a mixed group of curious citizens and journalists who wanted to know what was currently going on at the center. Over the last several weeks, traffic and general activity in the normally self-contained, inconspicuous office building had noticeably increased, with scientists and lawyers scrambling to and from several offices within the new complex. It was 2006, and NBACC was just getting itself on its collective feet to begin operations.

NBACC’s new public relation’s mission on this particular day was to explain the decision by the Department of Homeland Security to upgrade biogenetic research on an innocent soil-enriching microbe called the *b. subtilis* bacterium. The public relations campaign was triggered by moving the research from a BSL-3 space within the laboratory facilities to the highest security and

safety level at BSL-4 space, which normally deals with the testing of deadly microbes that have no available treatment, such as the Ebola and Marburg viruses. The move leaked out into the local press, and the job of tackling the inevitable inquiry fell to NBACC's spokesperson, Virginia Soderberg. Undaunted, she waded into the pounding waves of the curious and took fire.

“Yes, critics are saying we're operating in a *gray zone* and that we skirt the edges of the BWC,” Virginia threw her voice out in all corners of conference room with that spectacular grin she'd been complimented for all her life. The BWC was short for the Biological Weapons Convention, an international agreement on the management of bioengineering for military purposes. “They argue we need an even higher degree of transparency to reassure Americans (and the rest of the world) of the U.S. government's good intentions. Well, you know what? When the rest of the world assures Americans about their intentions, we here at NBACC will assure them in kind!” she said, pronouncing her agency's name in two syllables. “Now I'm not supposed to say that, but I want your trust. And it's an honest statement. And that's what I want you to think when you hear me answer your questions and concerns.” The audience laughed a little uncomfortably, but admired Virginia's brassy frankness. “I'm not here to defend or apologize for what goes on at NBACC. But I am here to say, I have three kids and I want to give them a future.”

Virginia held up a small government pamphlet on NBACC (affectionately known as *enbac*), then read from it reverentially as though it were signed by the president

himself. “The facility’s work is also aimed at investigating DNA-altered single celled organisms for strategic purposes. I won’t mislead anybody. But it’s in this little booklet describing the mission here. We’re not hiding anything. Nor are we doing anything underhanded or detrimental to the common good.”

“If you can find one of those,” a reporter wisecracked from a seat not far away.

Virginia wasted no time. She scooped up a handful of the pamphlets from the speaker’s table and waved them over her head for all to see. “Anyone want one,” she said politely, “They’re up here on the table. We even talk about that Operation Whitecoat you keep bringing up. Nothing’s been swept under the rug. But that was another time, another battle, another lesson. Also, there’s plenty of contact information besides. I even agreed to give out my email address. Tweeting no,” she added to a smattering of laughter.

On the white concrete wall behind the speaker’s table was a large video screen with a photo display of Fort Detrick facilities and its staff at work, many in haz-mat suits and enclosed within high-security laboratory sectors. “Here are our people at work. Can’t be any more open than all this. They’re fellow Americans just like you and me, who are committed to protecting the security of their country.”

“You know you all have a rep for bad behavior. People still call this place Fort Doom,” another reporter heckled.

“Hey, Los Alamos,” Virginia replied, as though she were ad-libbing. “Scary place too, if you don’t put it all into historical perspective.” Virginia had some great pat answers. And for the most part, they worked. The crowd quieted down.

Fort Detrick, where NBACC was based, had been a little-known sixty year old army garrison with a notoriously checkered history. Hailed for its groundbreaking work on containing and combating biological weapons on the one hand, and excoriated by critics for testing pathogens as biological weapons on innocent citizens on the other. The entire complex had existed for decades under a cloud of suspicion. Virginia had made her business to take on the job of cleaning up its image. She was a Harvard-trained microbiologist, and had volunteered for the role as spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security’s new agency, not just out of dedication to the Department, but because she believed she knew intuitively how to approach the worried and concerned throngs who wanted assurances for everything from biodefense capabilities to the realities of bioterror to tangible evidence that NBACC could be trusted to stick to its mission of defense over bio-weaponry. She also felt she had the polished sensibility and self-confidence to spot and manage troublemakers and scandal-mongers. At one of her employment interviews at NBACC, she explained bluntly, “Men listen to me.” The comment was annotated in her folder along with a translation, “God’s gift to men.” The Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security was so impressed with the notation that he overrode his subordinate’s choice for the position and insisted on hiring Virginia, a recruitment twist only

her superior, a former financial whiz at the State Department, Pete Rafferty, would ever be privy to.

“We didn’t have an NBACC before 9/11,” Virginia said, prancing a bit around the conference, confident that she’d found common cause with her guests. “Together with our sister agencies, and the whole National Interagency Biodefense Campus, we’re here just to make sure we don’t get sucker-punched again. With even deadlier stuff.”

Seated at the back of the Large Conference Room leaning forward from his chair like an indignant sports fan was Bruno Turchi. He listened to Virginia with great interest and found himself fascinated by her cock-sure directness. She was tall and walked even taller shaped nicely in a dark, tailored jacket and pants. Bruno hoped to snag some statement he might challenge. But so far, his yellow notepad recorded only a few odd doodles around the name, *Virginia Soderberg* and the notation, *Patriot or Idiot?* Intrigued by her brashness, Bruno wondered how she got a job that normally would have gone to a spokesperson as buttoned-down as a monk and as slippery as a trout. Raising his hand guardedly, Bruno caught Virginia’s attention. “Yes, sir. In the back.” Bruno spoke up without getting up: “Your mandate is clearly not to engage in the development of offensive biological material...” he started saying.

“Can you please speak up,” Virginia pressed, grinning with authority.

Bruno, his thick dark hair cut back to stubble length to match a day old beard and hide a high hairline, listened to himself get the words right as he raised his voice: “Your mandate is clearly not to engage in the development of offensive biological material. To that end, can you tell us with regard to classified research something about your oversight?”

Virginia glided confidently into her audience, closer to where Bruno was seated. “I’m not going to debate the defensive and offensive nature of the work carried out here, because you all know much of it is subject to interpretation. But I will say that all our work is carefully monitored by the scientific oversight team from the Department of Homeland Security and has been deemed in compliance with the bioweapons convention guidelines.”

“Is that not like the fox guarding the henhouse?” Bruno piped up again, earning some polite laughter.

Virginia carried herself as if she knew and expected that she was being watched. “Sir, we have a conventional peer-review process involving groups of scientists who are independent of NBACC and the research conducted here - albeit with government security clearances.” Virginia gestured with academic off-handedness when she used words like *albeit*. She learned long ago how gesturing made prepared words sound spontaneous.

Bruno hesitated then braved through his own hesitation: “Bioweapons experts in the scientific

community have called for additional forms of oversight, possibly from international scientists and outside observers from other countries. Is that going to happen?"

Virginia had red hair and dozy, sensual hazel eyes. Those dozy eyes suddenly fired up to the challenge. "We're considering it. But who and when has to be decided with care! Surely you can understand that?" Most of the audience absorbed in the sparring turned to Bruno for another verbal clinch. But there was none.

"Stop worrying about America cheating. We don't cheat... unless we're playing against cheaters. I'm sorry to be so blunt. But for God's sake, wake up, we have enemies out there." Virginia's patriotic zeal raised her appeal another octave and drew a smattering of applause. "The trick is to be sure we know who and where our enemies are," Virginia added. She walked out among her guests and chided them with a final shrug, "I talk fast. I try to cut to the chase. If that's too much for you, there's a tea later this evening with some of the staff and members of DHS. They will be happy to feed you politically correct glop. "

Her audience rollicked into a round of amicable laughter. Bruno sat quietly hoping for another chance to rattle his hostess. Virginia hadn't retreated either. She came to the back wall not far from where Bruno was sitting and stood brazenly, her head cocked and her arms folded against her breasts as if tossing out a challenge. She scrutinized Bruno a few moments while he scribbled on his notepad: *What if they DON'T KNOW who the enemy is? Right-winger. But smart.*

“I have one other little gift for you. I’ve been told I must say to you, ‘if there is something I don’t know, I will be happy to find out for you.’ My orders are to be as transparent as possible.” Virginia scanned her audience for a reaction. Without turning to face her, Bruno surprised Virginia and everyone in the audience with his next question. “Do you believe everything you’re told.”

“Does anyone have a real question?” Virginia shot back.

“That’s a real question. I get asked it all the time,” Bruno said without bothering to look at her. “People don’t believe anymore.”

“And who may you be?”

“Bruno Turchi.”

“Just Bruno Turchi?”

“Dr. Bruno Turchi if you’re impressed by titles.” The audience boosted Bruno’s riposte with eager laughter. “I have a Ph.D. in anthropology. I also have a license to give driving lessons. It was summer work at University.” The jesting drew a tide of laughter Virginia didn’t like.

“And you’re here because...?”

“I’m a free-lance writer.”

“That’s a shame.” The quip was quick and the audience loved it.

“My work in cultural anthropology took me into Soteriology.”

“And that is?”

“Study of salvation.”

“Salvation?”

“Yeah, aren’t we all looking for it? Remember when they used to sell it. I still think that’s the best way to get it. A few ducats and you go to heaven.”

Virginia waited for a few chuckles to subside.
“What’s your story about?”

“Don’t have one yet.”

“Never heard of Soteriology. I think you made it up for laughs.”

“Every religious faith has some kind of salvation, their own soteriology. You might know it as eschatology.”

Virginia didn’t know it as eschatology, never heard of eschatology but nodded that she did, and made a mental note that Bruno may have been a pompous ass.

“Some soteriologies are concerned with relationships to gods; others are about cultivation of knowledge or virtue. Soteriologies are all different, but you can’t have a religion without one.”

“Very interesting, Mr. Turchi. But we’re just a research facility here. For apocalypses, you’ll want to talk to that guy on the corner with the ‘Repent’ sign.” The audience fell to laughing before Bruno could respond.

“Is that why they call this place Fort Doom?” he cracked.

Ribald audience laughter felt like a strafing to Virginia. It prompted another quip. “If you’re stuck on sixty year old history that might explain why you don’t have a story.” There was another spritz of audience appreciation while Virginia returned to the front of the conference room. Bruno did the chivalrous thing and let her have the last word. He turned to review what he had written into his notepad and found himself underscoring the words *What a body*.

More cautiously now, Virginia took one or two other questions from the group, then abruptly announced that her time was up. She reminded everyone of the tea party with executives of the Department of Homeland Security later in the afternoon outside the NBACC building, then began to pack her laptop and note papers.

As her audience rose and scattered to the two conference room exits, she spied Bruno sidling out the back. Before she left for home that afternoon, she snapped open her cell phone, hit a single digit, and there was Beam, an investigative analyst with the impressive title of Operations Coordination Assistant Director. Carla Beam was Virginia’s main contact with DHS. Carla had an impossible job, that of keeping everyone who mattered at

NBACC in the loop with activities among DHS sister agencies. Carla was smart and fast-talking, and, aside from her half-hourly smoke break tucked away at the back door of her office building, she never moved from her console of land and cell phones, each assigned to a different team. To keep conscientious track of everything, Carla had an invisible staff of over twenty assistants.

“Carla, look. I just finished up a transparency conference down here. And there was a guy bugging me. Don’t know what his agenda is, but he sounded like he had one. Name he gave was Bruno Turchi. Claims he’s a writer or an anthropologist or something that sounded academic... with a specialty called – I’ll spell it. s-o-t-e-r-i-o-l-o-g-y. Soteriology. Can you have the bureau do a background check? Thanks. And what did you find out about that van sitting in the shadows?”

“Security has been up to their eyeballs with stuff like this lately.”

“Carla, what did you find out? I know security thinks I’m a nutcase.”

“Pizza truck.”

“And they’re pissed, right. That’s why they didn’t get back to me. You know what? It’s their job,” Virginia barked into her cell, annoyed that security would complain about her suspicions. “And if they bitch to you again about me, let me know. I’ll rattle a few cages and get their asses reamed out. They have a job. And I’m part of their job, damn it. If I suspect a pizza truck, then so what! I’m looking out for people.”

When people said of Virginia that she was “overly-cautious,” everyone knew it was a respectful euphemism for “paranoid.” She seemed ill-at-ease in the most comfortable of circumstances, but with high security issues involved, she tended to “err on the side of panic,” was how one co-worker put it, a pleasantry that circulated and stuck. Virginia snapped her phone shut angrily and flew out of the Large Conference Room. She hurried back to her office for her coat, and ducked down the corridor and out without a nod to another soul.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Tasca was born in Philadelphia, PA and retired to Ajijic, Mexico in 2006 after living in Canada for several years. He's the author of six novels and works of fiction, including *The Fables of Leonardo da Vinci*, *Autobiography of a Worm*, *Lub Dub*, *The Fishing Trip That Got Away*, and *Return of the Lost Horses*, in addition to a parody of Columbus's journey of discovery, *Good Morning – Why is Everyone Here Naked*. Ed is also the creator of several optioned screenplays, and was recently awarded the Grand Prize at the 2011 Screenplay Search Competition. He was the winner of the prestigious Robert Benchley Society Humor-writing Award for 2009 and a runner up three years in a row. Ed holds awards from humorpress.com and the M. Culbertson's Life and Humor Award. His work has appeared in publications in the U.S., Canada, England, Italy and Mexico and he has been anthologized in *Laugh Your Shorts Off* and *American's Funniest Humor*.