



Chellis
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Fear and Loathing in Los Alamos: On the Lam from the Cerro Grande Fire

Chellis Glendinning (Photography by Lewis Jacobs)

According to Hindu philosophy, humanity is entering the Age of Kali Yuga. It's predicted as a time of chaos, death, and purification. If things are not up to snuff in the universe, it prophesizes, we can expect the revenge of the deities. And we can expect the specialty of the age's own deity, Kali herself, and that specialty is fire.

Friday May 5: The wind picks up over New Mexico's Bandelier National Monument that flanks Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) where nuclear weapons were first developed during WWII and are now researched, tested, and stored. The U.S. Park Service is nursing a nine-hundred acre "prescribed burn" to clear dry brush from the forest floor. It flares up.

Saturday May 6-9: Firefighters battle the blaze with helicopters, air tankers, bulldozers, shovels, and rakes. The fire is dubbed the Cerro Grande, after the nearby peak, and it is growing: 3,700 acres of park service and now national forest are incinerated.

Wednesday May 10: Winds gust chaotically at fifty miles per hour. The fire leaps over containment lines and flies toward the weapons lab. At the western edge of the city of Los Alamos, the blaze bursts into a firestorm in the treetops. Firefighters hurl down their gear and flee for their lives, their hoses bouncing wildly behind the escaping trucks. Houses ignite. Some, the ones with propane tanks, detonate like bombs. Loudspeakers blare: residents are given fifteen minutes to evacuate. The fire reaches three LANL research areas, including the weapons-

engineering tritium facility, Technical Area 16, also home to an enormous under-ground waste dump called Material Disposal Area R.

The cloud of sometimes white, sometimes red smoke has been streaming northeast of Los Alamos into the Chicano farming village of Chimayó, up the mountain to the forest pueblo of Truchas, and into southern Colorado, Oklahoma, and Kansas.

It's three P.M. I'm at home in Chimayó conducting a psychotherapy session with a client on the phone, and she is rapping away about her problems at work. The tube is on in the background, soundless but shrieking black and white images of hundred-foot ponderosas bursting into flame.



The smoke outside my window is blood red, and suddenly a caption appears on the screen: THE VOICE OF SENATOR PETE DOMENICI. I butt in: "I'm so sorry. Los Alamos is burning down. I have to end the session." In all my years of practicing psychotherapy, I have never done this. More red smoke wafts by the window. Another tree explodes, and the senator tells us: The wind is blowing at sixty miles per hour, the fire's headed for the lab, we are grounding the slurry bombers, the firefighters are retreating, there's nothing more we can do — except *pray*.

Pray? There are 2,100 potential release sites in Los Alamos. There's radioactive stuff the scientists just threw into the canyons back in the 1940s. There are toxic dumps and decontamination facilities, incinerators and radioactive waste pits, shops for machining radioactive materials and decommissioned reactors. There's Tech Area 55, where weapons-grade material is fashioned into radioactive batteries, and a storage facility where nuclear weapons are shielded in concrete bunkers. There's Tech Area 54, a firing range where, over the years, 220 tons of depleted uranium and high explosives have been dispersed onto the open ground. And there's Tech Area 54, where 50,000 fifty-five-gallon drums containing chemical and radioactive waste are waiting aboveground for shipment to the Waste Isolation Pilot Project in southern New Mexico, and another one million drums waiting underground.

Strangely, as if in slow motion, I get up from the couch. I take out a nylon suitcase and, without emotion, place in it three pairs of jeans, three shirts, three sets of underwear, and my cowboy boots. I do not pick out a meaningful photograph. Not even a teddy bear. Nothing meaningful. Then I walk out the door, climb into my 1977 Honda Civic, and drive into the smoke.

The wind is hurling itself toward the northeast. The evacuees have been sent south to churches, high schools, and hotels in Santa Fe. I aim toward the presumably clear air of the northwest. I have to penetrate the worst of the smoke plume to get there.

Things are eerie out here. Silence and a fog of ash hover over the Chevy pick-ups and low-riding Grand Ams creeping along Highway 76. I get to Española, the Chicano-Indian town immediately down the mesa from Los Alamos. A red-hot sun is just dropping behind the Jemez Mountains. Then I drive a few miles north and look back. I gasp. The entire valley, from Los Alamos in the west all the way up the Sangre de Cristo mountains to the east, is blanketed in black smoke. The faces of my friends in Chimayó and Truchas pass before my eyes. Linda Pedro. Max Córdova. Orlando and Mary. I do pray. I pray they have gotten out. In all, eleven thousand people from Los Alamos will evacuate. Another estimated forty thousand from White Rock, Española, the villages and the pueblos, Santa Fe, and Taos will pack up their jeans and cowboy boots and bolt for some semblance of safety. I am one of those people.

The Abiquiú Inn lies one hill beyond the smoke. The sign — VACANCY — cackles fire-red, and I stop. An unshaven scientist type stands like a battered alien at the front desk. The clerk asks his address. "I don't think...I...have one," he spits out. I tell her I'm on the run too, and she gives me a room for free.

I try to turn on the tube. In some unkempt stab at bringing modernization to New Mexico, the Abiquiú Inn has inserted Primestar where rabbit ears used to sit. You have to be a rock-et scientist -- which is what most of the other guests are — to operate the thing. I squint at the instructions, fumble with the buttons, and finally achieve a high-definition picture: but it's the news from ... oh Lord ... Atlanta, Georgia. At least the headline is the fire. I see the same exploding ponderosas and now, in addition, hundreds of houses going up. For my purposes of dodging the plume, though, I need news about the wind, the kind they broadcast out of Albuquerque, pinpoint doppler. There is no

Albuquerque news. And as befits American television reporting, it seems that suddenly, miraculously in fact, there is no nuclear weapons lab in Los Alamos. There are apparently only pine trees and private homes in Los Alamos now.

Thursday May 11: The wind is back at sixty miles per hour. John Peterson of the Santa Fe National Forest announces that the fire is "zero percent contained." Twenty-five thousand acres are now gone — old-growth ponderosa and fir forests become stands of blackened skeletons; countless deer, elk, turkey, and owl burned to death or sent into terrorized flight. Two hundred and thirty-five homes in Los Alamos have been incinerated, three hundred others are damaged. Everywhere cars are melded into pavement. LANL deputy director Dick Burdick survives when the fire blazes right over his underground communications bunker. Reemerging to a scene of char and embers, he says, "This is what Hell looks like"

It's a catastrophe. A fire, yes. A terrible fire. But it also holds the possibility of being a technological disaster, maybe on the order of Three Mile Island or Chernobyl. I spent fifteen years in the antinuclear movement, along with the likes of Drs. Robert Jay Lifton, John Mack, and Hank Vyner, focusing our expertise as mental health professionals on the psychological ramifications of the arms race. I protested the weapons build-up of the Reagan years and later worked with Navajo and Laguna Pueblo uranium miners to gain compensation for cancer deaths. For my book, *When Technology Wounds*, I interviewed people made ill by exposure to health-threatening technologies: asbestos workers, Love Canal residents, Dalkon Shield Intrauterine Device users, electronic plant workers, downwinders, atomic veterans.

For survivors of invisible contaminants, I learned, outrage and uncertainty are the two predominant emotional ordeals. Outrage because the harm was human caused; it didn't have to happen. The Cerro Grande fire didn't have to happen: the park service didn't have to set it, and the Department of Energy (DOE) didn't have to neglect its contaminated sites all these years. Uncertainty because it is impossible to know what has happened or what will happen. Has exposure taken place? To whom? Where? To what extent? Will future health be affected? Are the land and water contaminated? Uncertainty is attended by fear and hyper-vigilance.

For me, sitting all fearful and hyper-vigilant on my motel bed, uncertainty becomes the name of the game. My only lifeline is to call a friend. Luckily for me, my friends down in Santa Fe have placed themselves at the center of the firestorm: the antinuclear watchdog Los Alamos Study Group (LASG) headed by Zen Buddhist Greg Mello. Anthropologist Merida Blanco caretakes a meditation center in Santa Fe and is waffling on whether or not to leave the state. Playwright Robert

Shaw, in recognition of the devilish nature of the fire, renames himself "Dr. 666" and decides that his best bet at getting life-or-death facts is to act as Greg Mello's gofer.



Information is what we need and don't have. Should I stay put at the Abiquiú Inn? Will the wind shift? And most important, what's in the smoke? Uranium? Plutonium? Americium? Strontium-90? Beryllium?

Tuolene? Dioxins? Hydrochloric acid? Asbestos? Is this the Chernobyl of the Age of Kali Yuga? Or is it, as lab public relations continues to insist, just a forest fire with no public health risk?

I told you Greg Mello is a Zen student. His most harrowing sesshin now lies before him. He takes three hundred dollars out of LASG's waning coffers and rents a Cessna 152 at the Santa Fe airport. Mello then flies into the plume with a Geiger counter. He returns with a numerical detail that is crucial for us all: at least in the parts of the smoke cloud he flies through, at the moment of his flight, there is no elevation of radiation. With this act, one wide-open eye is surely painted onto Mello's Bodhidharma doll, indicating the awakening long sought by Zen meditation.

I'm feeling less spiritual about it. I think the guy deserves a standing ovation.

The inn is morosely quiet. The evacuees from Los Alamos are stiff, the anguish seemingly stuck in the marrow of their bones. The wind shifts from blowing toward the northeast to heading northwest. Primestar from Atlanta doesn't tell me this; I get it from Merida. I determine to head

north, straight up the middle, hoping to outrun the plume. But I am heading into territory I don't know. As I drive, I suddenly feel more solitary than ever. And more afraid.

The San Luis Valley of central Colorado is like a displaced piece of Iowa, all flat and spread out between the Sangre de Cristo and San Juan mountain ranges, speckled with cows and mobile homes whose roofs are held down by old tires. I pass through Antonito, Romeo, La Jara. Filling up the Honda, I have this vague memory of a town in these parts called Crestone. Determining to find it, I aim north, overshoot the Crestone turnoff, double back, rampage down the wrong dirt road, and land at the Willow Spring Bed and Breakfast, a funky Victorian hotel in the middle of nowhere. It is run by a couple of Tibetan Buddhist bodhisattvas whose dedication to hospitality includes a three-course breakfast of exotic fruits, home-baked pastries, organic eggs, and fine English teas. Nothing happens here. Except an antique wire raps against the brick exterior in an innocent fit of wind. Except I arrive in a whirlwind of stress and a relentless urgency to hog the inn's one telephone.

Friday May 12: This is the big day. The fire has penetrated LANL, and it's zero percent contained. According to Lee McAtlee of LANL's Environment, Safety, and Health Division, "Half of what you think it's going to do, it doesn't do. And half of what you think it's not going to do, it sneaks up and does." It sneaks up and rages, at two thousand degrees, toward three inflammable sites. TA 55, home of the plutonium facility: the fire rips over the heads of the firefighters, encasing them in Kali's rage. It closes in on all but one side, and thanks to the vagaries of the wind and the courageous work of human beings, it draws within inches of the razor-wire fence and stops. TA 54, where over a million barrels could explode transuranic waste into the air: some truly deft firefighting halts the inferno's advance within a half mile of the storage areas. TA 18, where nuclear experiments provide enough materials to make several bombs: the site is encircled by fire but not engulfed. New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson calls the day "a miracle."

With its temperamental carburetor and miniature tires, the Honda miraculously rattles up a rocky road to the North Crestone Trail. I take a deep breath and embark upon what the innkeepers deem will be good for me: a hike. I head across a meadow, just now coming alive with spring wildflowers, and find a creek rushing down the mountain all cold and clear. Forging it seems a task I am incapable of enacting. I sit down on the ground. And then I see it. Lying on a piece of mica-flecked granite, a brand-new pair of elk skin work gloves. My first thought is not:

Someone lost their gloves, I'll return them. It's not: Hot damn! Free gloves! No. It's: Don't touch those things, they're radioactive. Then the whole thing hits me. I burst into uncontrollable sobs. First, for the ponderosas and squirrels, the trout and deer. Then I cry for the park service administrator responsible for the burn, how unspeakably tortured he must feel. Next, the evacuees at the Abiquiú Inn and all the hotels and churches in Santa Fe, the people whose homes are now rubble. Then I cry for my village. Are the river and forest contaminated? Will we be able to use the irrigation ditch again? Hunt elk? Grow corn? Will our lives ever be the same? Then I cry for myself. Will I have to leave Chimayó and the only life that holds meaning for me?

Yet another emotional ride accompanies this journey, and it isn't until I get beyond flight mentality that I sense its emergence. This one is made of conflicting realities, and the tension between them appears irresolvable. On one side, the psyche wants to believe in the comfy reality of normalcy. The fire is no big deal, it insists, that nasty plume of smoke foretelling doom is a normal cloud from a normal forest fire. The officials, after all, say everything's okay. My bodhisattvas at the inn, after all, seem untouched by fear.

Until Saturday, when suddenly every guest sitting around the breakfast table is an escapee from the fire. Conversation turns to Los Alamos. Enter normalcy's nemesis: the stripped-down reality of crisis. An older woman from Santa Fe was married to one of the early scientists at the Manhattan Project, and he died of a brain tumor. This fact reminds the couple from Taos of an epidemiological study a Los Alamos artist did revealing an inordinate number of brain cancers in his neighborhood. Everyone recalls cynically that, during Three Mile Island, the government did not deliver accurate information to the public. Nor during Love Canal or Church Rock or Times Beach.

Meanwhile, on the phone, Dr. 666 is the man with the passion and the details. Shadowing Greg Mello, he seems to know whatever there is to know. Forty-two thousand acres are burned. The fire is only five percent contained. Twenty percent of the city is gone, thirty percent of the lab. Indeed, Tech Areas 54, 55, and 18 emerge unscathed. But the blaze eats up three hundred sites with documented surface contamination, including Tech Area 15 which is littered with chemical high explosives, toxic metals, and some 220 tons of depleted uranium. Tech Area 16's Material Disposal Area R burns and, with it, solvents, beryllium, uranium, and barium. Many of the homes that burned were built before 1980, meaning asbestos is flung into the wind. A Montana

hotshot crew; Arapahoe and Cheyenne firefighting professionals, reports that the plume does not smell like forest fire smoke; it smells like chemicals.

The reality of crisis gouges into my being like fingernails in Play Dough. I awake each morning gripped with the thought that I have lost my home to contamination. I am eating like a wild boar and losing weight, sleeping ten hours and waking up exhausted. Merida tries to console me. The anguish will be relieved on Wednesday, she says. Irrate with both the park service and the DOE, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) will issue its own report detailing radiological and chemical measurements of the air and, we hope, the soil and water. Then we will know, she says. I determine that on Wednesday I will decide if I can return home. Or not.

In the face of fear and no facts, rumors fly. A LANL scientist who lives forty miles from the lab measured his own house for radiotoxins — and fled. The state almost evacuated Santa Fe. The state almost evacuated all of northern New Mexico. The Russian government offered the U.S. some high-tech firefighting airplanes, and Washington refused the offer. The park service administrator who okayed the prescribed burn is suicidal. The realm of scientific fact seems no more certain. The promised report doesn't come out on Wednesday. To our amazement, the NMED announces it is no longer working independently, but is now in cahoots with LANL and the DOE. For whatever it might now be worth, their joint report doesn't come out on Thursday. Or Friday.

Dr. 666 reports that forty-seven thousand acres have burned and the fire is now seventy percent contained. The laboratory is out of immediate danger. But the blaze has dropped into the canyons leading to nearby Santa Clara Pueblo. It rages now toward their sacred sites. And there's a new problem in view: runoff. The mountain above Los Alamos is completely denuded. In a few weeks, when the summer rains begin, floods could gush tons of mud down the barren slopes and into burned neighborhoods. It is projected that, if two inches of rain were to fall in one hour, the mud could take out Pueblo Canyon bridge. Or breach the Los Alamos Reservoir dam. The resulting wall of water could then spill like Pompeii's lava down the canyons and pick up the contaminants now mixed with ashen soils no longer anchored by trees and grasses. The whole transuranic stew could then flush into the Rio Grande and flow downstream — through eight pueblos, the cities of Santa Fe and Albuquerque, Texas, and all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

"It doesn't sound good," I tell 666. My voice is hoarse.

"No. It doesn't."

"I thought I would know enough to make a decision about coming home by now," I say. "What do we know?"

"Nothing. Everything's a scenario. Nothing's tacked down."

He describes a community meeting pulled together by antinuclear activists and organic growers at the Cloud Cliff Bakery in Santa Fe. It is a scene of fear and anger. A farmer from Dixon shouts that the smoke smothering his village was neon orange. A Truchas man says he couldn't see through the floating ash to the hay bales in his yard. What have we been exposed to? everyone wants to know. Two officials from the NMED attend the meeting. They listen but say little.

"Come home." 666 surprises me. "The smoke is pretty much gone. When you see the place, you'll be able to make your own decision. Come home."

I don't really need more confirmation that we're living in a postmodern world, but here it is: choices of the most crucial import come down to personal perception. Until this moment, I have been pinning my future safety on some apparently impossible illusion of scientific certainty the delivery of a tangle of statistics on a website, put together by a tangle of government types with a driving motivation to avoid lawsuits. The truth is: I may never know.

Friday May 20: I aim the Honda south. It sports three new cracks on the windshield and a multitude of new rattles emanates from somewhere in the rear. Indeed, when I pass Antonito mountain, the sky to the south is blue, with only a few whitish fire clouds riding the Jemez Mountains over Los Alamos. I enter the Española Valley through the old road at San Juan Pueblo. I am not prepared for what I see and feel. The air is crystalline. The valley is infused with the sweetness of the Russian olive blossom — and a monstrous human heaviness dwelling lower than the axles of a low-rider.

My house looks okay, except the soil in my garden has long since cracked dry and the plants withered into oblivion. I dedicate myself to leaving it as is — the 2000 Disaster Garden, I call it — dried out seedbeds in testimony of the Cerro Grande fire. I surprise myself on Sunday when, like a mirror of disaster survivors everywhere, I wake up wanting flowers. To the vaqueros and farmers of the valley, a store that sells flowers, and from other regions to boot, is anathema to local ecology, and indeed the one-year-old Golden Leaf in Española has not been stampeded with business. But on this Sunday, the first calm weekend after the worst of the fire, the place is stampeded. Like me, everyone suddenly wants flowers.

Uncertainty does not recede because I am back in Chimayó. I pore over the newspaper, glue my eyes to the local news, learn everything about the Los Alamos homeowners' tragedy — but nothing about possible contamination. Meanwhile, the fire finds its final resting place in the canyons above Santa Clara Pueblo, and indeed it destroys their sacred sites. The people are sent into a spiral of unspeakable grief.

Since the fire began, LASG has been busy conducting bird's-eye surveys of the fire, ascertaining facts from government agencies, being interviewed by the media, fielding a phone call every minute from the public. I break into Greg Mello's swirl of urgency and take him to lunch.

He tells me that the NMED has, at last, posted some statistics on their website. But there are problems with the figures — the main one being that they may not be accurate. The problem is not new to LANL. If you want to know where old dump sites are or the location of a weapons bunker, you're faced with a purposely tangled labyrinth of numbers and details. Greg has been studying LANL for a decade, and he still doesn't have a comprehensive picture. As to facts about the fire, he describes the problem as "a military-like clamp on information." Thirty percent of the lab and forty buildings burned, he says, and yet the media was told that only a couple of trailers went up.

Whatever is known becomes so because of public outcry. Some 160 air-quality monitors are finally set up by DOE, EPA, and NMED teams. Some are "rad swipes" put in place for only brief moments. Others are for continued sampling. Most are geared to check for radio-nuclides, a few to test for chemicals. The radiation figures range from zero elevation to ten times normal. For chemicals, they show no elevation. But when were the samples taken? And in what locations? In fact, no government

agency admits to taking measurements in the most affected places during the worst of the fire. Plus, a "deep throat" from the lab discloses to antinuclear groups that the monitors located in the most sensitive areas of the lab were not even functioning during the fire. Most of the fallout blew northeast, in the direction of Española, Chimayó, and Truchas, but these places were not tested. After the fire, DOE-contracted Bechtel Nevada did one lonely rad swipe in Española, and the bulk of the others to the south, toward Santa Fe, where the wind rarely blows. Another arena for controversy concerns the nature of measured radio-nuclides. Are they normal forest fire by-products like radon daughters which emit alpha and beta, as the lab insists? Or are they gamma radio-nuclides, the human-made kind that would be emitted from the lab? LANL and the DOE skirt such questions.

Meanwhile, by happenstance, a cadre of Russian peace activists and scientists has been visiting New Mexico. Sergei Pashchenko of the International Depleted Uranium Study Team has been pronouncing that radiation levels are thirty times above normal. Again, the question is where and when? Whatever the answer, he's had an impact. I run into a couple of Chimayosos at Sam's Club in Santa Fe who, freaked to the gills after meeting Pashchenko, bolt from their home. They beg me to leave, too. I'm scared, but I have to chuckle when I ask them where they moved and they answer "Pecos." Pecos lies east, just over the mountain from Chimayó. As we know from the travel patterns of radioiodine after the Nevada above-ground tests of the 1950s, airborne contaminants do not necessarily land near their source. They can glide on the wind for miles and drop down in, say, Pecos.

Mello gives an ironic chuckle over his egg salad sandwich. He knows someone who, aiming in the 1980s to flee the ravages of war, moved to the Falkland Islands. He looks me in the eye with his Zen grip. "What place is safe anymore?" he presses, and I get the feeling we are holding on with no more than this breath.

Wednesday May 24: The fire is almost contained. It has burned a total of forty-eight thousand acres of park service, national forest, LANL, city of Los Alamos, and Santa Clara Pueblo lands. At its peak, over fourteen hundred firefighters fought the blaze. Now there are six hundred. The immediate damage could exceed one billion dollars.



Dr. 666 and I attend the second meeting at Cloud Cliff Bakery. This time officials from LANL and NMED join antinuclear activists, environmental illness doctors, and pueblo leaders on the panel. The by-now predictable clash of realities is played out like a drama with no final curtain. The lab people adamantly claim normalcy as regards emissions; the antinuclear folks parade the unknowns and official evasions. Finally, a man from India jumps up and bellows, "HOW MANY ATOMS DOES IT TAKE TO KILL A PERSON?!" Everyone freezes. He hammers his question again and again.

The calmest speaker is Vickie Downie of Tesuque Pueblo. She reminds us that, similar to Hindu prophecies, Native American predictions have long foretold a time of volcanoes, earthquakes, droughts, floods, and fires if humankind does not respect the Earth. We are living in these times, she says. The essential point is not to try to control them. It is how we live them. Not enough people are thanking Creation for the water, trees, animals, and land, she says, and she invites us to express gratitude in our every thought and act.

At the dawn of the Nuclear Age, when Los Alamos scientists blasted the first atomic bomb across the New Mexico desert, J. Robert Oppenheimer quoted the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds" To some people, the Cerro Grande fire represents vengeance of the original death, Hiroshima's blackened skeleton returned to its source. To some, the fire is the revenge of the Anasazi who lived at Bandelier before the white people intruded with

their laboratories and bombs. To others, it is the work of the Hindu deity Kali at the start of the Age of Kali Yuga.

Outside the meeting, 666 and I linger among the last of the olive blossoms. To us all, the Cerro Grande fire has been a terrible confrontation with the current disarray of human existence and a call to remember, through the layers of fear and loathing, who we are. The good doctor vows to return to his former identity; he is ready to rename himself Robert Shaw. He walks me to my Honda and, neither aflame with confidence nor beaten into ash, I make a vow too. I vow to drive home.