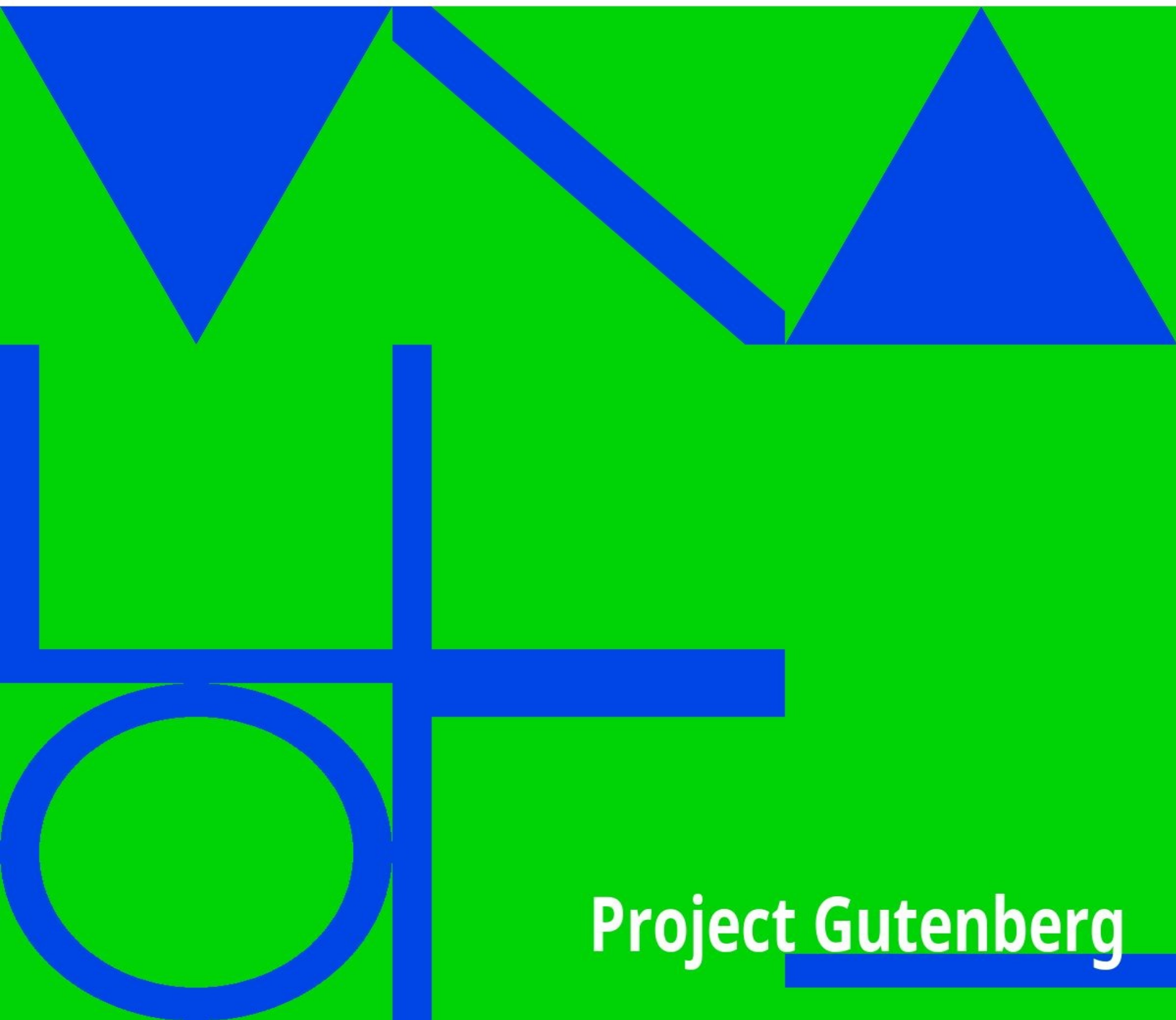


# Small World

William F. Nolan



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*What will happen when the alien ships strike Earth? And later? Who will survive? What will life be like in that latter-day jungle? William F. Nolan, well known in SF circles on the West Coast, returns with this grim story of the days and the nights of Lewis Stillman—survivor ...*

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**small**

**world**

by WILLIAM F. NOLAN

**He was running, running down the long tunnels, the shadows hunting him, claws clutching at him, nearer ...**

IN THE waiting windless dark, Lewis Stillman pressed into the building-front shadows along Wilshire Boulevard. Breathing softly, the automatic poised and ready in his hand, he advanced with animal stealth toward Western, gliding over the night-cool concrete, past ravaged clothing shops, drug and ten-cent stores, their windows shattered, their doors ajar and swinging. The city of Los Angeles, painted in cold moonlight, was an immense graveyard; the tall white tombstone buildings thrust up from the silent pavement, shadow-carved and lonely. Overturned metal corpses of trucks, busses and automobiles littered the streets.

He paused under the wide marquee of the FOX WILTERN. Above his head, rows of splintered display bulbs gaped—sharp glass teeth in wooden jaws. Lewis Stillman felt as though they might drop at any moment to pierce his body.

Four more blocks to cover. His destination: a small corner delicatessen four blocks south of Wilshire, on Western. Tonight he intended bypassing the larger stores like Safeway or Thriftmart, with their available supplies of exotic foods; a smaller grocery was far more likely to have what he needed. He was finding it more and more difficult to locate basic food stuffs. In the big supermarkets only the more exotic and highly spiced canned and bottled goods remained—and he was sick of caviar and oysters!

Crossing Western, he had almost reached the far curb when he saw some of *them*. He dropped immediately to his knees behind the rusting bulk of an Olds 88. The rear door on his side was open, and he cautiously eased himself into the back seat of the deserted car. Releasing the safety catch on the automatic, he peered through the cracked window at six or seven of them, as they moved toward him along the street. God! Had he been seen? He couldn't be sure. Perhaps they were aware of his position! He should have remained on the open

street where he'd have a running chance. Perhaps, if his aim were true, he could kill most of them; but, even with its silencer, the gun would be heard and more of them would come. He dared not fire until he was certain they discovered him.

They came closer, their small dark bodies crowding the walk, six of them, chattering, leaping, cruel mouths open, eyes glittering under the moon. Closer. The shrill pipings increased, rose in volume. Closer. Now he could make out their sharp teeth and matted hair. Only a few feet from the car ... His hand was moist on the handle of the automatic; his heart thundered against his chest. Seconds away ...

Now!

Lewis Stillman fell heavily back against the dusty seat-cushion, the gun loose in his trembling hand. They had passed by; they had missed him. Their thin pipings diminished, grew faint with distance.

The tomb silence of late night settled around him.

The delicatessen proved a real windfall. The shelves were relatively untouched and he had a wide choice of tinned goods. He found an empty cardboard box and hastily began to transfer the cans from the shelf nearest him.

A noise from behind—a padding, scraping sound.

Lewis Stillman whirled around, the automatic ready.

A huge mongrel dog faced him, growling deep in its throat, four legs braced for assault. The blunt ears were laid flat along the short-haired skull and a thin trickle of saliva seeped from the killing jaws. The beast's powerful chest-muscles were bunched for the spring when Stillman acted.

The gun, he knew, was useless; the shots would be heard. Therefore, with the full strength of his left arm, he hurled a heavy can at the dog's head. The stunned animal staggered under the blow, legs buckling. Hurriedly, Stillman gathered his supplies and made his way back to the street.

How much longer can my luck hold? Lewis Stillman wondered, as he bolted the door. He placed the box of tinned goods on a wooden table and lit the tall lamp nearby. Its flickering orange glow illumined the narrow, low-ceilinged room as Stillman seated himself on one of three chairs facing the table.

Twice tonight, his mind told him, twice you've escaped them—and they could have seen you easily on both occasions if they had been watching for you. They don't know you're alive. But when they find out ...

He forced his thoughts away from the scene in his mind away from the horror; quickly he stood up and began to unload the box, placing the cans on a long shelf along the far side of the room.

He began to think of women, of a girl named Joan, and of how much he had loved her ...

The world of Lewis Stillman was damp and lightless; it was narrow and its cold stone walls pressed in upon him as he moved. He had been walking for several hours; sometimes he would run, because he knew his leg muscles must be kept strong, but he was walking now, following the thin yellow beam of his hooded lantern. He was searching.

Tonight, he thought, I might find another like myself. Surely, *someone* is down here; I'll find someone if I keep searching. I *must* find someone!

But he knew he would not. He knew he would find only chill emptiness ahead of him in the tunnels.

For three long years he had been searching for another man or woman down here in this world under the city. For three years he had prowled the seven hundred miles of storm drains which threaded their way under the skin of Los Angeles like the veins in a giant's body—and he had found nothing. *Nothing*.

Even now, after all the days and nights of search, he could not really accept the fact that he was alone, that he was the last man alive in a city of seven million, that all the others were dead.

He paused, resting his back against the cold stone. Some of them were moving over the street above his head. He listened to the sharp scuffling sounds on the pavement and swore bitterly.

"Damn you," said Lewis Stillman levelly. "Damn all of you!"

Lewis Stillman was running down the long tunnels. Behind him a tide of midget shadows washed from wall to wall; high keening cries, doubled and tripled by

echoes, rang in his ears. Claws reached for him; he felt panting breath, like hot smoke, on the back of his neck; his lungs were bursting, his entire body aflame.

He looked down at his fast-pumping legs, doing their job with pistoned precision. He listened to the sharp slap of his heels against the floor of the tunnel—and he thought: I might die at any moment, but my *legs* will escape! They will run on down the endless drains and never be caught. They move so fast while my heavy awkward upper-body rocks and sways above them, slowing them down, tiring them—making them angry. How my legs must hate me! I must be clever and humor them, beg them to take me along to safety. How well they run, how sleek and fine!

Then he felt himself coming apart. His legs were detaching themselves from his upper-body. He cried out in horror, flailing the air with his arms, beseeching them not to leave him behind. But the legs cruelly continued to unfasten themselves. In a cold surge of terror, Lewis Stillman felt himself tipping, falling toward the damp floor—while his legs raced on with a wild animal life of their own. He opened his mouth, high above the insane legs, and screamed.

Ending the nightmare.

He sat up stiffly in his cot, gasping, drenched in sweat. He drew in a long shuddering breath and reached for a cigarette. He lit it with a trembling hand.

The nightmares were getting worse. He realized that his mind was rebelling as he slept, spilling forth the bottled-up fears of the day during the night hours.

He thought once more about the beginning six years ago, about why he was still alive, the last of his kind. The alien ships had struck Earth suddenly, without warning. Their attack had been thorough and deadly. In a matter of hours the aliens had accomplished their clever mission—and the men and women of Earth were destroyed. A few survived, he was certain. He had never met any of them, but he was convinced they existed. Los Angeles was not the world, after all, and if *he* escaped so must have others around the globe. He'd been working alone in the drains when the alien ships appeared, finishing a special job for the construction company on B tunnel. He could still hear the weird sound of the mammoth ships and feel the intense heat of their passage.

Hunger had forced him out and overnight he became a curiosity. The last man alive. For three years he was not harmed. He worked with them, taught them many things, and tried to win their confidence. But, eventually, certain ones

came to hate him, to be jealous of his relationship with the others. Luckily he had been able to escape to the drains. That was three years ago and now they had forgotten him.

His later excursions to the upper level of the city had been made under cover of darkness—and he never ventured out unless his food supply dwindled. Water was provided by rain during the wet-months—and by bottled liquids during the dry.

He had built his one-room structure directly to the side of an overhead grating—not close enough to risk their seeing it, but close enough for light to seep in during the sunlight hours. He missed the warm feel of open sun on his body almost as much as he missed the companionship of others, but he could not think of risking himself above the drains by day.

Sometimes he got insane thoughts. Sometimes, when the loneliness closed in like an immense fist and he could no longer stand the sound of his own voice, he would think of bringing one of them down with him, into the drains. One at a time, they could be handled. Then he'd remember their sharp savage eyes, their animal ferocity, and he would realize that the idea was impossible. If one of their kind disappeared, suddenly and without trace, others would certainly become suspicious, begin to search for him—and it would all be over.

Lewis Stillman settled back into his pillow, pulling the blankets tight about his body. He closed his eyes and tried not to listen to the distant screams, pipings and reedy cries filtering down from the street above his head.

Finally he slept.

He spent the afternoon with paper women. He lingered over the pages of some yellowed fashion magazines, looking at all the beautifully photographed models in their fine clothes. All slim and enchanting, these page-women, with their cool enticing eyes and perfect smiles, all grace and softness and glitter and swirled cloth. He touched their images with gentle fingers, stroking the tawny paper hair, as though, by some magic formula, he might imbue them with life. It was easy to imagine that these women had never really lived at all—that they were simply painted, in microscopic detail, by sly artists to give the illusion of photos. He didn't like to think about these women and how they died.

That evening Lewis Stillman watched the moon, round and high and yellow in



the night sky, and he thought of his father, and of the long hikes through the moonlit Maine countryside, of hunting trips and warm campfires, of the Maine woods, rich and green in summer. He thought of his father's hopes for his future and the words of that tall, gray-haired figure came back to him.

*"You'll be a fine doctor, Lewis. Study and work hard and you'll succeed. I know you will."*

He remembered the long winter evenings of study at his father's great mahogany desk, pouring over medical books and journals, taking notes, sifting and re-sifting facts. He remembered one set of books in particular—Erickson's monumental three-volume text on surgery, richly bound and stamped in gold. He had always loved these books, above all others.

What had gone wrong along the way? Somehow, the dream had faded, the bright goal vanished and was lost. After a year of pre-med at the University of Southern Cal, he had given up medicine; he had become discouraged and quit college to take a laborer's job with a construction company. How ironic that this move should have saved his life! He'd wanted to work with his hands, to sweat and labor with the muscles of his body. He'd wanted to earn enough to marry Joan and then, later perhaps, he would have returned to finish his courses. It all seemed so far away now, his reason for quitting, for letting his father down.

Now, at this moment, an overwhelming desire gripped him, a desire to pour over Erickson's pages once again, to re-create, even for a brief moment, the comfort and happiness of his childhood.

He'd seen a duplicate set on the second floor of Pickwick's book store in Hollywood, in their used book department, and now he knew he must go after them, bring the books back with him to the drains. It was a dangerous and foolish desire, but he knew he would obey it. Despite the risk of death, he would go after the books tonight. *Tonight.*

One corner of Lewis Stillman's room was reserved for weapons. His prize, a Thompson submachine, had been procured from the Los Angeles police arsenal. Supplementing the Thompson were two semi-automatic rifles, a Luger, a Colt .45 and a .22-caliber Hornet pistol, equipped with a silencer. He always kept the smallest gun in a spring-clip holster beneath his armpit, but it was not his habit to carry any of the larger weapons with him into the city. On this night, however,

things were different.

The drains ended two miles short of Hollywood—which means he would be forced to cover a long and particularly hazardous stretch of ground in order to reach the book store. He therefore decided to take along the .30-caliber Savage rifle in addition to the small hand weapon.

You're a fool, Lewis, he told himself, as he slid the oiled Savage from its leather case. Are the books important enough to risk your life? Yes, another part of him replied, they *are* that important. If you want a thing badly enough and the thing is worthwhile, then you must go after it. If fear holds you like a rat in the dark, then you are worse than a coward; you betray yourself and the civilization you represent. Go out and bring the books back.

Running in the chill night wind. Grass, now pavement, now grass, beneath his feet. Ducking into shadows, moving stealthily past shops and theatres, rushing under the cold moon. Santa Monica Boulevard, then Highland, the Hollywood Boulevard, and finally—after an eternity of heartbeats—the book store.

Pickwick's.

Lewis Stillman, his rifle over one shoulder, the small automatic gleaming in his hand, edged silently into the store.

A paper battleground met his eyes.

In the filtered moonlight, a white blanket of broken-backed volumes spilled across the entire lower floor. Stillman shuddered; he could envision them, shrieking, scrabbling at the shelves, throwing books wildly across the room at one another. Screaming, ripping, destroying.

What of the other floors? *What of the medical section?*

He crossed to the stairs, spilled pages crackling like a fall of dry leaves under his step, and sprinted up the first short flight to the mezzanine. Similar chaos!

He hurried up to the second floor, stumbling, terribly afraid of what he might find. Reaching the top, his heart thudding, he squinted into the dimness.

The books were undisturbed. Apparently they had tired of their game before reaching these.

He slipped the rifle from his shoulder and placed it near the stairs. Dust lay thick

all around him, powdering up and swirling, as he moved down the narrow aisles; a damp, leathery mustiness lived in the air, an odor of mold and neglect.

Lewis Stillman paused before a dim hand-lettered sign: MEDICAL SECTION. It was just as he had remembered it. Holstering the small automatic, he struck a match, shading the flame with a cupped hand as he moved it along the rows of faded titles. Carter ... Davidson ... Enright ... *Erickson*. He drew in his breath sharply. All three volumes, their gold stamping dust-dulled but readable, stood in tall and perfect order on the shelf.

In the darkness, Lewis Stillman carefully removed each volume, blowing it free of dust. At last all three books were clean and solid in his hands.

Well, you've done it. You've reached the books and now they belong to you.

He smiled, thinking of the moment when he would be able to sit down at the table with his treasure, and linger again and again over the wondrous pages.

He found an empty carton at the rear of the store and placed the books inside. Returning to the stairs, he shouldered the rifle and began his descent to the lower floor.

So far, he told himself, my luck is still holding.

But as Lewis Stillman's foot touched the final stair, his luck ran out.

The entire lower floor was alive with them!

Rustling like a mass of great insects, gliding toward him, eyes gleaming in the half-light, they converged upon the stairs. They had been waiting for him.

Now, suddenly, the books no longer mattered. Now only his life mattered and nothing else. He moved back against the hard wood of the stair-rail, the carton of books sliding from his hands. They had stopped at the foot of the stair; they were silent, looking up at him, the hate in their eyes.

If you can reach the street, Stillman told himself, then you've still got half a chance. That means you've got to get through them to the door. All right then, *move*.

Lewis Stillman squeezed the trigger of the automatic and three shots echoed through the silent store. Two of them fell under the bullets as Stillman rushed into their midst.

He felt sharp nails claw at his shirt and trousers, heard the cloth ripping away in their grasp. He kept firing the small automatic into them, and three more dropped under the hail of bullets, shrieking in pain and surprise. The others spilled back, screaming, from the door.

The gun was empty. He tossed it away, swinging the heavy Savage rifle free from his shoulder as he reached the street. The night air, crisp and cool in his lungs, gave him instant hope.

I can still make it, thought Stillman, as he leaped the curb and plunged across the pavement. If those shots weren't heard, then I've still got the edge. My legs are strong; I can outdistance them.

Luck, however, had failed him completely on this night. Near the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland, a fresh pack of them swarmed toward him over the street.

He dropped to one knee and fired into their ranks, the Savage jerking in his hands. They scattered to either side.

He began to run steadily down the middle of Hollywood Boulevard, using the butt of the heavy rifle like a battering ram as they came at him. As he neared Highland, three of them darted directly into his path. Stillman fired. One doubled over, lurching crazily into a jagged plate-glass store front. Another clawed at him as he swept around the corner to Highland. He managed to shake free.

The street ahead of him was clear. Now his superior leg-power would count heavily in his favor. Two miles. Could he make it back before others cut him off?

Running, re-loading, firing. Sweat soaking his shirt, rivering down his face, stinging his eyes. A mile covered. Half way to the drains. They had fallen back.

But more of them were coming, drawn by the rifle shots, pouring in from side streets, stores and houses.

His heart jarred in his body, his breath was ragged. How many of them around him? A hundred? Two hundred? More coming. God!

He bit down on his lower lip until the salt taste of blood was on his tongue. You can't make it, a voice inside him shouted, they'll have you in another block and you know it!

He fitted the rifle to his shoulder, adjusted his aim, and fired. The long rolling crack of the big weapon filled the night. Again and again he fired, the butt jerking into the flesh of his shoulder, the smell of powder in his nostrils.

It was no use. Too many of them.

Lewis Stillman knew that he was going to die.

The rifle was empty at last, the final bullet had been fired. He had no place to run because they were all around him, in a slowly closing circle.

He looked at the ring of small cruel faces and he thought: The aliens did their job perfectly; they stopped Earth before she could reach the age of the rocket, before she could threaten planets beyond her own moon. What an immensely clever plan it had been! To destroy every human being on Earth above the age of six—and then to leave as quickly as they had come, allowing our civilization to continue on a primitive level, knowing that Earth's back had been broken, that her survivors would revert to savagery as they grew into adulthood.

Lewis Stillman dropped the empty rifle at his feet and threw out his hands. "Listen," he pleaded, "I'm really one of you. You'll *all* be like me soon. Please, *listen* to me."

But the circle tightened relentlessly around Lewis Stillman. He was screaming when the children closed in.

**Transcriber's Note:**

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