

“One Second After” By William R. Forstchen
2009, Tom Doherty Associates, 350 pages

In the blink of an eye, John Matherson’s world changes irrevocably. One second he’s on the phone chatting with an old friend. The next, his phone is dead and his power is out.

Matherson wants to believe that it’s a local problem that will be resolved quickly. But his former military training and instinct tell him that it’s something much worse. There are no phones, vehicles, computers, electronics or generators functioning in Black Mountain, NC. Matherson suspects an EMP attack, and there is no way to determine just how widespread the effects are.

At first the town pulls together to make the best of the situation, assuming that help is on the way. But as the refugees stranded on I-40 begin to straggle into town, Matherson realizes that they’ve missed the opportunity to conserve their limited resources and prepare for the potentially long haul ahead.

The death toll in the early days is staggering, and the long-term outlook is terrifying. Patients in the local nursing homes and hospital begin to die off immediately, particularly the ones dependant on respirators, dialysis or other life support machines.

Days stretch into weeks and months. The local supply of medication is limited, placing Matherson’s diabetic daughter and many others at great risk. The threat of infection makes minor accidents fatal as sanitation worsens.

Without power, the town must figure out how to supply the most basic needs such as clean drinking water and heat for the coming winter. Without communication equipment, controlling crime is impossible. The town officials are forced to declare martial law.

Winter arrives, bringing cold and flu season. The malnourished residents can’t fight off common viruses. In an effort to stretch their meager provisions and protect the citizens from diseases such as hepatitis and the flu, officials erect checkpoints to keep refugees from entering Black Mountain.

There is a much more dangerous threat roaming the mountains. A gang of outlaws calling themselves the Posse is laying waste to every town in their path, and Black Mountain is in their sights. Matherson and others raise and train a militia to defend Black Mountain, fully aware that the toll of battle will be heartbreaking.

William Forstchen has crafted a chilling, thought-provoking look at an America thrust back in time without warning. Forstchen’s story is especially gripping because it is limited to one town and group of people. For most of the book, readers have no idea what’s going on in the rest of the county, or even the rest of North Carolina. Black Mountain could be any small town struggling to survive an unthinkable disaster.

Before its publication, *One Second After* was allegedly cited by members of Congress as a must-read for every American, because it sheds light on an all-too-real threat to our National Security. I don’t know how real the threat is, but can I guarantee this book will keep you up nights, recounting the cans in your pantry, studying survival manuals and contemplating living off the grid.

