

“Without ceaseless power”—*some personal reflections*

Adrian Friday

1. Day 1

1.1. Darkness

When the power went, darkness and silence descended. Not a single light. The myriad glow of tiny LEDs I'm so accustomed to, no more. An eerie silence: without the background hum of faithful appliances, no music, no TV. Beyond the house and up the hill: no streetlights. The stars returning, normally obscured by the haze of reflected light from streets and houses. But not tonight. Not to worry, the power will be restored soon, it always is. No need to panic, I'll just wait for a bit.

Only the power did not come back. It'll be back by the morning I thought. I've got a torch, I've found the candles. I'll go to bed. The sleep without the glow from the street, with only the distant trill of countless alarms, each fearing the worst. I sleep well, content in the knowledge that the absence of power is only temporary.

1.2. Habits broken

Day broke. No power, no clock, no radio alarm. Waking naturally?, that's not, well, natural for me! Morning routine disrupted. No kettle, no coffee. No energy related sounds. Peace. Even the road is unusually quiet today, what has happened? No TV, no radio, no broadband, no mobile signal, no news... We have a conventional phone, and it has a dial tone. The substation is flooded it seems, they're talking about power on Tuesday at 7pm. We'd better start thinking about how we're going to manage this.

1.3. Without electricity

We have gas. The gas fired central heating won't work: the controller is dormant, there's no power, no backup, no heat. But, we have wood. I light the wood burner, we're lucky, we'll have a source of warmth. I can use the hob, I have matches, there's milk in the Fridge (for now): I can have a cup of tea! It's very quiet, no morning news. I miss the morning news. No email. I'm not missing that... for now.

Food. We won't starve. There's plenty to cook. At least two days of food. But it's not going to last: it's all chilled or frozen, or at least it was. What then? Best not to worry about that for now. Preparing food will be hard in the dark by head torch. Best do a cooked lunch. The kids'll need a hot meal. I'm glad we didn't swap the hob for an electric one as we were planning, we'd be really stuck about now.

Sandwiches by candle light for tea, it's fun. The kids have stopped asking for a fix of 'electronics'. They like the candles, and enjoy using the dark as a resource for play. Best game of hide'n'seek for ages. "*Of course, I'll do my homework daddy, but I want to do it by candlelight...*" or not, as we find out, candles cast a really dim light! I'll remember tomorrow: homework during daylight hours!

1.4. Rations

Relief: I can wash up the dinner things. There's some hot water in the tank. Since the solar thermal panel last year, we're used to thinking about 'how much hot is in the tank'. Without the controller temperature display (doh! of course, no electricity!) I don't know how much, but there's some: I run a shallow sink of hot water and make it last: at least the kitchen isn't filled with dirty dishes. We'll be able to wash in warm water for now. I'm glad it's the mains water pressure and not a pump that makes the water flow. Basic hygiene continues.

2. Day 2

2.1. Marshalling energy

How I wish I had an energy reserve. My phone is getting really flat now. I wish I'd had it on charge before the power cut. Not that there's a signal much anyway. I idly wonder how cellular base stations are powered. They'd have generators surely? Isn't the phone a critical infrastructure now? Isn't the Internet? I'm glad BT still runs their own copper network. I'm not totally cut off.

The iPad has 50% charge. Time to explain to the kids the concept of energy conservation. You can have more now, or some later. We might not get to charge it for a few days. Do you really want it all now, I wouldn't... we save some, we ration, they take turns. A few minutes each, then put it aside. And no, youtube won't work, and no, Minecraft can't contact the server. The layers of Internet magic laid bare.

What's for tea? Freezer surprise. I wonder whether the food is okay, the freezer has been off for a while now. I'll give the kids the food I'm more certain about. Pan fried part frozen sea bass and breaded chicken it is... We'll be okay for another day or so, then I'll have to work out where to buy some more. I think about the shops: how 'just in time' our food is, how vulnerable food supply can be when things break down. What's the phrase: "*no king is more than two missed meals away from a revolution*"?

2.2. Communication

Getting twitchy. I know the rest of the world is still turning. No email for over 24hrs now. What am I missing? Phone is ‘in the red’ and the power level is heading for single digit percentages. Where can I get some charge? Where can I get some data? I can read while there’s light, but without certainty I can recharge the laptop or the Internet, my work is severely limited. I’ll venture onto campus. I know there’s a backup generator associated with my building at work, there’s sure to be power and data.

I cycle to work past the Shell garage, and they’re closed. The lights are off, the pumps are dark. No fuel. I know I’ve got a $\frac{1}{4}$ of a tank in the car, and that will be fine for now. I’m lucky, I live near work.

2.3. In search of power

The office building where I work is dark. The pungent odour of diesel fills the air. The backup generator is working hard powering something. Something critical. But not the lights, and not the doors. Electromagnetic locks don’t work without power. I walk into the building, the security foiled by a simple power cut. The doors are open, once secure labs now vulnerable. I head upstairs to try the wifi, no signal. I try wired Ethernet, nothing. No power to charge my precious phone. I head for a drink of water. The taps in the kitchen don’t work. I suppose there must be an electric pump somewhere. I muse on how the power is so taken for granted that it is just endemic to the design of the building—there really is no fallback. The building just “doesn’t work” without electricity.

I bump into a colleague. We talk of power, and blackouts and reaffirm we’re all ok. Interesting how adversity brings people together. Rumours of power, Internet and cups of tea at the Chaplaincy centre¹. I head up there and serendipitously meet the campus energy manager, Jan. He tells me about backup generators, and attempts to power up the campus, but the demand was too high and there is no way to shed loads to trim it, so the power just tripped again. There are islands of power now, but the students need to go home. The smoke detectors won’t work in the residences now their backup batteries are flat - they’re not designed to go for more than 24 hours without power—it’s “no longer safe”.

I get my cup of emergency tea, it tastes good. I park myself with my laptop in the conference centre. I greedily Hoover up power and data for an hour, letting people know we’re okay, and not to expect me to respond to email. Remote friends are shocked by the flooding and the lack of power. But I’m one of the lucky ones, I tell them, and I don’t live next to the river—and I mean it.

¹An iconic building housing a multi denominational centre of worship on our University campus.

2.4. Sociality in adversity

I set off for home. Gaggles of students are walking along the A6 towards town, engaged in lively conversation. This stretch of road normally almost devoid of pedestrians. Isn't it extraordinary how people emerge blinking into the daylight when their entertainment infrastructure isn't there to imprison them?

Lorries arrive carrying diesel generators. Power comes on for a few hours. Heroic efforts from the service provider brings light, and warmth, and temporary reprieve. I top up the hot water. I charge the iPad. I cook while I have light. I know the 'real power' isn't back from distant friends who can access the web: I don't want to use the oven or the washing machine, I figure that will load up the system too much. I muse on how difficult it is to communicate the state of the power network to us, without mobile or broadband access to social media and the web. What would I do without my 'remote Internet watchers', or if they were in the same situation?

3. Day 3

3.1. Venturing out

Fast wind to the next day. Power off again. Emboldened by my foray out I'm feeling more confident about venturing out from home: I attempt to return to normality and drive my daughter for her piano lesson on the edge of town. The roads seem okay—there's not much traffic. The diesel powered car isn't affected (for now). Contraflow around big metal boxes on lorries feeding energy through thick cables into substations. I marvel at how many homes have lights on now; liquid energy (diesel) propping us up so directly. Can I imagine doing this without fossil fuels?

We arrive and park. Walking past houses without the customary flicker of TVs. I see families huddled around candles, board games, conversation. I'm buoyed up, it's Christmas, people are talking to one another. The streets have a cosy ambience without the stark glare of street lights. A lesson by candlelight? Perhaps not. Left over food is offered, kindness, and an enhanced sense that we shouldn't waste what's not needed, won't last, and hard won.

3.2. The other side (of the river)

Power is restored longer term. No mobile or broadband still. It's been several days now, surely they're fixing this? I speak to a vulnerable friend on the phone. I'm worried about him as the bridges are shut and I can't go and see him and make sure he has some food. We coped, I even delighted in early bedtimes, a quiet house, the slow pace of communication, the warmth of the fire. My work life on pause.

My friend tells me of a different story: of a freezing cold house, a broken cooker and a dead microwave: no hot food. But also of kind neighbours looking out for him and ensuring he's fed. He tells me of houses robbed because an

absence of candles betrayed their empty vulnerability. Of an enterprising fellow offering photo opportunities with scavenged supermarket celebratory Christmas food as fodder for bogus insurance loss claims. I marvel at his enterprise, and at my naivety. Adaptivity and survival has many forms it seems.