

Chapter 1: The Hum Stops at Nine O'Clock

The refrigerator goes first, though you don't notice it right away. What you notice is the quiet. The furnace fan stops. The clock on the stove goes dark. Then comes the one sound you never knew you were listening for: the low hum from the kitchen that has been there every night of your married life. It stops.

You stand in the dark and do arithmetic you can't finish. How long has it been? How long will it last? Is the chicken in the bottom drawer already in trouble? Somewhere a timer has started running on everything you own that needs cold. Nobody handed you the dial.

This book is about reading that dial, and then slowing it down with things already in your house.

The first quiet minute and the clock nobody can see

The first winter after we moved into this house, an ice storm took the power for most of three days. I opened the chest freezer that first night "just to check." I checked again before bed, and again at breakfast. Each time I let out a little of the very thing I was trying to save. I didn't know that then.

I wasn't alone in that. On SurvivalistBoards, people post "lessons learned" threads after real outages. They list which preparations worked and which gaps showed up once the grid was down. The same pattern runs through those threads. The trouble rarely comes from the outage itself. It comes from not knowing how much time is left, and from guessing badly.

On Permies.com, a long-running survival forum, members keep repeating one plain observation. A full chest freezer stays cold a long time **if nobody opens it until the power comes back**. That sentence holds most of this book in small form.

So here is the first idea I want you to carry. I call it **the Cold Bank**. When the power fails, your freezer stops making cold. It still holds a balance, though. Every frozen roast, every bag of peas, every jug of ice is a deposit made while the electricity was cheap and running. From the moment the hum stops, you live on that balance. Every time the lid opens, you make a withdrawal. A fuller freezer starts with a bigger account. A closed lid keeps the account from leaking.

In a blackout you can't make cold. You can only spend it slowly. Your job is to start each outage with the biggest balance you can and withdraw as little as possible.

The federal food-safety agency puts hard numbers on that balance. The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service says:

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"During a power outage, the refrigerator will keep food at a safe temperature (below 40°F) for up to 4 hours. A full freezer will hold a safe temperature for approximately 48 hours (24 hours if it is half full). Discard perishable food after these timeframes." (USDA FSIS, 2023-03-27)

That guidance also appears on the current USDA FSIS and CDC food-safety pages for emergencies. It is still the federal standard as of this writing. Those hours assume the doors **stay closed**. They start when the power goes out, not when you first notice the problem. We will go through them line by line in Chapter 6.

How long food stays safe with doors closed (USDA FSIS)



How long food stays safe with doors closed (USDA FSIS)

Look at the gap between the half-full freezer and the full one. Same appliance, same kitchen, same storm. One gives you a day. The other gives you two. That extra day comes almost entirely from **what you put in the empty space** before the lights went out.

What is really at stake: the meat, the water, the house

Most of us think first about the meat. That's fair. A freezer full of beef, a deer from the fall and a few holiday hams is real money and real meals. But three things are on that invisible clock, and the meat is only the first.

The meat. Once the closed-door hours run out, perishable food has to go. No smell test brings it back. The food can't be seen to fail, and that is what makes the 40-degree line so important.

The water. Many of us have city water that keeps running through a short outage. Wells with electric pumps stop at once. FEMA recommends storing **at least 1 gallon of water per person per day**, about half for drinking and half for cooking and washing. It asks for at least three days' worth, and up to two weeks for long emergencies (International Bottled Water Association, citing FEMA guidance). For two people over three days, that comes to six gallons. Hold that thought, because the jugs that fill your freezer can also become that water.

The house, and the people in it. This is the one we skip, and it is the one that kills. Heat is the quiet danger in a summer outage. An investigation by NPR and Boston University estimated that heat has contributed to about **9,000 U.S. deaths a year since 2018**. That is roughly five times the official count of about 1,700²³. Older adults carry the most risk. Chapter 3 explains why a hot house also runs the freezer's clock faster.

The meat is what we count. The people are what matters.

Why panic buying at the hardware store fails

When the forecast turns ugly, the parking lot at the hardware store fills up. People grab generators, gas cans, extension cords and the newest portable power stations. Some of that gear has its place, and we'll cover generators honestly in Chapters 19 through 21. But buying in a hurry fails for three reasons.

First, the outages got longer, and store-bought power runs out. In 2024, U.S. electricity customers averaged about **11 hours of interruptions**. That was nearly double the average of the previous decade and the most in ten years (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024 data). South Carolina customers averaged about **53 hours** without power that year (Utility Dive, reporting EIA data). A battery sized for a three-hour outage is a poor match for a three-day one.

Second, fuel goes faster than people expect. On Permies.com, one man bought a 4,000-watt generator. He planned to run it a couple of hours each evening for a few devices and a small chest freezer. Other members warned him that a unit that size burns roughly **4 to 5 gallons a day**. Multiply that by three days, then picture the gas station line during a regional outage.

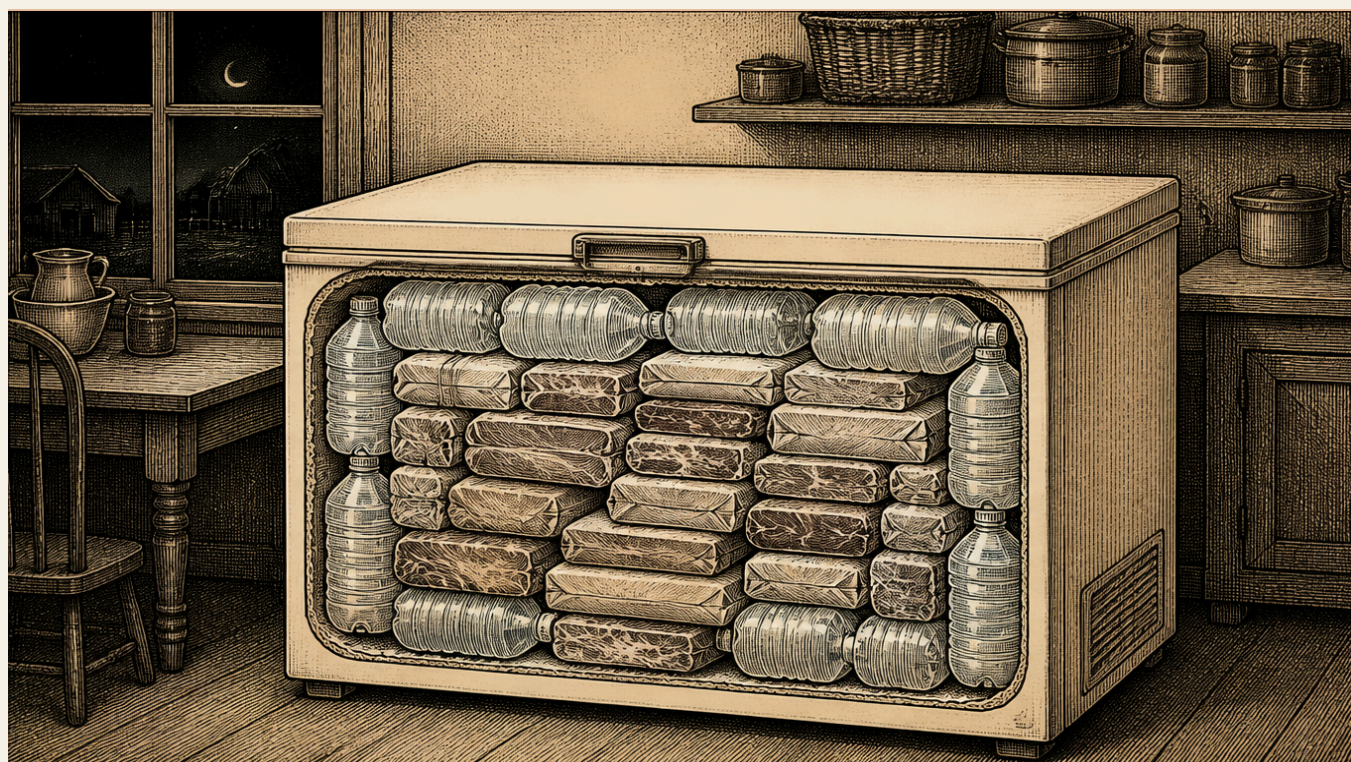
Third, rushed gear brings rushed danger. About 100 people in the U.S. die each year from carbon monoxide poisoning linked to portable generators (U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission). If you already own one, the CPSC rule is simple. Run it **only outdoors, at least 20 feet from the house**, and never in a garage, basement or porch, even with the door open. Keep a battery-powered CO alarm working inside. As CPSC Acting Chairman Peter Feldman put it, "Hurricanes and severe storms can turn deadly long after the wind and rain stop" (CPSC news release, 2026-05).

There's also the money. Market researchers can't agree on how big the portable power station business has become. One estimate puts it near \$4.6 billion for 2025, and another near \$662 million (Research and Markets, 2026; Fortune Business Insights). Both say household emergency fears drive part of the growth. That is a lot of money spent on fear, much of it the week before a storm.

The promise of this book: cold you already own

My grandfather never owned a generator. His porch smelled of kerosene and wet burlap, and the burlap was there for a reason. It wrapped the ice. He thought about cold the way he thought about firewood: something you put up ahead of time and spend carefully.

That is the way of thinking this book will hand back to you. You already own the most reliable cold-storage device ever sold in America, which is a closed, full freezer. The extension services agree. Michigan State University Extension recommends filling empty freezer space with **frozen plastic jugs of water, ice or gel packs**. A fuller freezer stays cold longer, and the melting ice can serve as backup drinking water (Michigan State University Extension). One jug covers two needs, the meat and the water, and costs almost nothing.



Over the coming chapters you'll learn to fill that space, pack it like 1955, wrap it when it dies, and read how many hours remain without opening the lid. You'll learn which foods to cook first, where your hidden water is, and how to keep the house itself cooler. None of it needs a store run the night before.

- ✓ Tonight, open your freezer **once** and look. Is it full, half-full or emptier than that?
- ✓ Write down which clock you have: about 48 hours (full) or about 24 hours (half-full).
- ✓ Count the empty pockets and gaps where a jug could fit.
- ✓ Rinse a few clean plastic jugs, fill them with tap water, leave room at the top so the ice can expand, cap them and set them in those gaps.
- ✓ Close the lid and don't check on them until tomorrow.

That last step matters most. Practicing restraint before the outage makes it easier when the outage comes.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Treat your freezer as a Cold Bank.** When the power fails, you live on the balance already inside it, so build that balance before the storm.
- ▶ **Keep the doors closed.** The USDA's 4-, 24- and 48-hour figures all assume you stop opening them.
- ▶ **Fill the empty space with frozen water jugs now.** Going from half-full to full roughly doubles your safe time and gives you backup drinking water.
- ▶ **Plan for long outages, not short ones.** In 2024, outage hours hit a ten-year high and some states averaged more than two days.
- ▶ **If you run a generator, keep it outdoors and at least 20 feet from the house.** Keep a working CO alarm inside.

Still, a fair man will ask whether 2024 was just a bad year with three big hurricanes. Were the old three-hour outages simply a run of good luck? Or has something changed in the wires running to your house, so that your next blackout is likely to outlast your freezer's 48 hours? The answer is in the records, and it is the subject of the next chapter.