

THE **END** IS
NIGH

THE APOCALYPSE TRIPTYCH

EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS AND HUGH HOWEY

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INTRODUCTION

John Joseph Adams

"It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed. With the brass nozzle in his fists, with this great python spitting its venomous kerosene upon the world, the blood pounded in his head, and his hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history."

—*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

I met Hugh Howey at the World Science Fiction Convention in 2012. He was a fan of my post-apocalyptic anthology *Wastelands*, and I was a fan of his post-apocalyptic novel *Wool*. Around that time, I was toying with the notion of editing collaborative anthologies to help my books reach new audiences. So given our shared love of all things apocalyptic—and how well we hit it off in person—Hugh suggested that Hugh and I co-edit an anthology of post-apocalyptic fiction. Obviously, since his name is on the cover beside mine, Hugh said yes.

As I began researching titles for the book, I came across the phrase “The End is Nigh”—the ubiquitous, ominous proclamation shouted by sandwich-board-wearing doomsday prophets. At first, I discarded it; after all, you can’t very well call an anthology of post-apocalyptic fiction *The End is Nigh*—in post-apocalyptic fiction the end isn’t *nigh*, it’s *already happened!*

But what about an anthology that explored life *before* the apocalypse? Plenty of anthologies deal with the apocalypse in some form or another, but I couldn’t think of a single one that focused on the events leading up to the world’s destruction. And what could be more full of drama and excitement than stories where the characters can actually see the end of the world coming?

At this point I felt like I was really onto something. But while I love apocalyptic fiction in general, my real love has always been post-apocalypse fiction in particular, so I was loathe to give up on my idea of doing an anthology specifically focused on that.

That’s when it hit me.

What if, instead of just editing a *single* anthology, we published a *series* of anthologies, each exploring a different facet of the apocalypse?

And so The Apocalypse Triptych was born. Volume one, *The End is Nigh*, contains stories that take place *just before* the apocalypse. Volume two, *The End is Now*, will focus on stories that take place *during* the apocalypse. And volume three, *The End Has Come*, will feature stories that explore life *after* the apocalypse.

But we were not content to merely assemble a triptych of anthologies; we also wanted *stories* as well. So when we recruited authors for this project, we encouraged them to consider writing not just one story for us, but *one story for each volume*, and connecting them so that the reader gets a series of mini-triptychs *within* The Apocalypse Triptych. Not everyone could commit to writing stories for all three volumes, but the vast majority of our authors did, so most of the stories that appear in this volume will also have sequels or companion stories in volumes two and three. Each story will stand on its own merits, but if you read all three volumes, the idea is that your reading experience will be greater than the sum of its parts.

In traditional publishing, this kind of wild idea—publishing not just a single anthology, but a *trio* anthologies with interconnected stories—would be all but impossible, so it was just as well that Hugo and I had already decided to self-publish. But the notion that this was something that traditional publishing wouldn't—or couldn't—do made the experiment even more compelling, and made working on this project even more exciting.

Post-apocalyptic fiction is about worlds that have already burned. Apocalyptic fiction is about worlds that are burning.

The End is Nigh is about the match.

THE BALM AND THE WOUND

Robin Wasserman

Here's how it works in my business: First, you pick a date—your show-offs will go for something flashy, October 31 or New Year's Eve, but you ask me, pin the tail on the calendar works just as well and a random Tuesday in August carries that extra whiff of authenticity. Then you drum up some visions of hellfire, a smorgasbord of catastrophe—earthquake, skull-faced horsemen sowing flames and famine in their wake, enough death and destruction to make your average believer cream his pants—and that's when you toss out the life-preserver, the get-out-of-apocalypse-free card. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200, do not get consumed by the lake of righteous fire, go directly to heaven on a wing and a prayer and a small contribution to the cause, specifically the totality of your belongings and life savings, 401Ks and IRAs—for obvious reasons—included.

Here's how it's supposed to work in my business: You tuck that money away for safe keeping, preferably in a bank headquartered in a non-extradition country, await the end days with clasped hands and kumbayas, and then, when the sun rises on an impossible morning, oh, you praise the Lord for hearing your prayers and offering a last minute reprieve, you go ahead and praise yourself for outarguing Abraham and saving your modern day Sodom and Gomorrah, and let's all give thanks for living to pray another day, even if we live in bankruptcy court.

If you don't have the juice to pull that one off, there's always the mulligan—*oopsy daisy, misread the signs, ignored the morning star, overlooked the rotational angle of Saturn, forgot to carry the one, my bad*. Dicey, but better than drinking the Kool-Aid—and if you can't envision a Great Beyond worse than prison, you might be in the wrong line of work. You do your job right, by the time the fog clears and the pitchforks and torches hit your doorstep, you're long gone, burning your way through the lifetimes of pinched pennies one piña colada at a time.

Like I said: Supposed to.

I'm a man who likes a back-up plan, a worst-case-scenario fix for every contingency, a bug-out route in case anything goes wrong. Never occurred to me to plan for being right.

The signs are bullshit. Have to be. You know who "read" the signs? Pick your poison: Nostradamus, Jesus Christ, Jim Jones, Martin Luther, the whole Mayan civilization. Every flim-flam man from Cotton Mather to Uncle Sam. And every single one of them screwed the pooch. Then, somehow, along comes me. You know what they say about those million monkeys banging away on their millicolumn typewriters until one of them slams out *Hamlet*?

Just call me Will.

••••

Hilary dumped the kid five days after I made the prophecy, nine months before the end of the world. I remember, because by that point the Children had rigged up the calendar, a blinking LCD screen hanging over the altar to keep them constantly apprised of the time they had left. Nine months had seemed an auspicious period—long enough for the kind of slow burn panic that empties wallets but stops short of bullets to the brain, brief enough that I could keep smiling and stroking the Children Abraham without letting slip that I wanted to throttle every insipidly trusting last one of them. B

Hilary tracking me down had me questioning the timeframe, and not just because she dumped her stringy ten-year-old in my lap and took off for greener and presumably coke-ier pastures.

I'd only been Abraham Walsh, né none of your concern, for the last five years, and before that Abraham Cleaver, and before *that*, back in the days when Hilary had decided to fuck with her parents by fucking the itinerant faith healer, Abraham Brady. If a headcase like her had managed to track me through three names, ten years, and twelve states, who knew how many cops, parishioners, shotgun-toting fathers or snot-dripping toddlers might have picked up the trail?

I had a good thing going in Pittstown, had for the last three years. The Children of Abraham had picked up about forty families and, thanks in large part to the penitent auto-parts mogul Clark Jeffries, had cobbled together some nice digs: a church, a few houses, a gated estate complete with indoor pool. Unfortunately, Clark Jeffries' efforts to buy himself into heaven—not to mention his attempt to paper over two decades of embezzlement and hookers—didn't extend to forking over the land deeds or an appreciable fraction of his ill-gotten gains. Always a borrower and a lender be, that was Clark's way. Donations were for suckers.

We weren't a growth operation—proselytizing only gets you the wrong kind of attention—and so we didn't go in for fancy costumes or banging cymbals in airports. Tacky. None of that polygamist stuff either, not if you wanted to keep under the radar, and definitely not if experience had taught you that one wife was already one too many. The Children were a pacific and obedient bunch, and even if it got exhausting at times, playing God's sucker so I could sucker them, the sheets were thousand-thread count and there was a hot tub behind the indoor pool. Better than working for a living, especially eight months and twenty-six days from retirement. Then in walks Hilary Whatshernan and the apparent fruit of my loom, Judgment Day come early.

"And what do I know about kids?" I said.

"But you've got so many Children, Father Abraham." It was her best look: wide-eyed innocent with a soupçon of irony. It was the reason I'd kept her around for all those months in the first place, even though she'd seen through the big tent act from the start and could have set her daddy and his county club buddies at me on a whim. At twenty-five, she'd nearly managed to pass as a teenager; a decade later, she'd have had trouble persuading a mark she was under forty. But even with sun-spots, muffin-top, and the ghost of a moustache, there was still a certain sex appeal there—like a stripper who's hung up her thong but still knows how to shimmy, exuding an air of possibility, a slim hope that at any moment, the clothes might come off. "What's one more?" she asked.

"Come the fuck on."

"You'll get the hang of it," she said. "Probably."

"He's your *kid*," I tried. "You want to bet on probably?"

"Better you than my parents. Better anyone than me."

The kid didn't say anything. We were sequestered in my office, where Hilary had settled herself onto the leather couch and kicked her feet up on the Danish modern like she owned the place. A cigarette dangled from her lips that would, knowing Hil, soon be stubbed out on the teak, leaving behind a small but permanent scar, her very own *Hilary was here*. Which I wouldn't have begrudged her if she hadn't been leaving so much else behind.

The kid, on the other hand, was still standing at attention, hands clasped before him, church-style, his glance not bothering to stray toward any of the room's curiosities, the titanium safe or the shrine with its portrait of me (a substantially less flab-faced and balding me) in the thick gold frame. Just beyond the door, in the veloured ante-room, my Children waited, no doubt, with ears pressed to the wall, ostensibly to ensure that this wasn't some kind of clever assassination attempt, likely hoping it was more of a holy visitation, Mary and overgrown Baby Jesus come to make their pre-apocalyptic crèche complete. Meanwhile here was this kid, center of the action, eyes glazed over like he was

watching two strangers play a particularly dull game of cribbage. No indication that he realized he was the pot. Here's his mother dumping him on a gray-hair with the body of a linebacker—a hundred push-ups every morning since I sprouted my first pubic hair, with plans to keep it up until the day my dick gives out, thank you very much—who happens to be, *surprise, you probably thought he was dead but!* his long-lost daddy, and the kid's about as fired up as a pet rock.

I envied him his decade of ignorance. There's nothing more beautiful than a void, a blank screen you can project all those Technicolored fantasies onto, no one to tell you they're misplaced or far fetched. Easy enough to fill that father-shaped hole with the tall tale of an astronaut daddy stranded on the moon or a CIA daddy defusing bombs in some windswept foreign desert. That could be an epic hero's blood running through your veins, the strength of an Achilles, the bravery of an Odysseus encoded in your DNA. Who wouldn't be disappointed to come face to face with the real thing, to trade in epic poetry for the genetic equivalent of a joke on a bubble gum wrapper? I knew he couldn't look at me without seeing himself, at least the funhouse mirror version—*congratulations, this will soon be your life*—just like I couldn't look at him without wincing at what had once been and what was to come.

His hairline was several inches closer to the brow line than mine but already receding, and it would be a few more decades before his crooked nose and uneven eyes came into their Picasso-like own, but he was already skidding down a slippery slope. I'd had that same thatch of sandy hair, and whatever I'd lost on top was replenishing itself in my nostrils and ears, conservation in action. I'd have to be blind to doubt he was my kid, and he'd have to be nuts not to want to trade me in for a better model. But he didn't look disappointed. He didn't look much of anything. I wondered if he was autistic or something. Glory be. Not only did I have a kid, but the kid was weird.

"Parenting's not complicated," Hilary said. "Accept that you'll fuck him up, whatever you do. Just try not to fuck up so bad that it kills him."

"I'll put him out on the street as soon as you're gone," I warned her.

She grinned, the way only someone who's seen you roll off her naked body with a groan and *must've had too much to drink* while she said *it happens to the best of 'em* and you both thought *no, damn well doesn't* can grin.

"No. You won't," she said. And she was right about that, too.

••••

The kid was no prize. He knew how to talk, at least, turning into a regular chatterbox once his mother peeled away, informing me in nauseating detail about what he required in terms of food, bedding, shampoo brand, toothpaste flavor, internet access, a list that stretched on in such detail and scope that I had to call in one of the Children to take notes.

"What, no limo?" I said, once he was done laying out his demands. "You don't want to throw in a request for a weekly manicure or your own personal masseur?"

Mandy Herman, who was scribbling down everything that came out of the kid's mouth, shot me a sharp look, and I wasn't sure if it was because she didn't think sarcasm was appropriate or because every few days I called her into the office and rewarded her with the opportunity to rub some life back into my shoulders, spine, and ass.

"You said you didn't know what to do with a kid," the kid said. "I'm telling you."

Mandy, that traitor, laughed.

He was, it turned out, like one of those preciously precocious movie kids, the kind who melts the smiles of old men, heals the hearts of bickering lovers, and teaches every neighborhood Grinch the true meaning of Christmas. This, despite the big ears and the lopsided face and the fact that he never

shut up.

~~It did nothing for me, but the Children gobbled it up with a spoon. He wasn't there twelve hours before they took up a collection of spare kid junk: secondhand clothes and filthy toys and a brand new racecar bed courtesy of our very own Scrooge Jeffries. Mandy Herman vied with the Babbage girls for babysitting duties, eventually compromising on a roster that had Mandy on the couch with him Monday through Wednesday afternoons while the three Babbages—buxom and blond in a way that the kid was a few years too young and I was a few decades too old to make use of—covered the rest.~~

Alison Gentry, who'd been a high school math teacher in her discarded life, had taken charge of the younger Children's education, setting up a one-room schoolhouse in what used to be the stables, and it was no trouble to scoop the kid into the fold. We had no others exactly his age—a clutch of toddlers, some first and second graders, and of course the Babbage girls—but the kid seemed to prefer the company of adults anyway, if you could call the Children that, and with their naïve, infantile willingness to believe as they were told, maybe that made sense.

Because what child doesn't love a story? And when you get down to it, that's all I am: a storyteller. Nothing more, nothing less. Back in the Hilary days, I'd thought I needed more smoke and mirrors, some laying on of hands, but eventually I wised up. You don't need to cure the lepers to be a faithful healer. We're all of us in my business doing the same work, because what is faith but another story that you tell yourself to feel better? That's what these idiot skeptics, the do-gooders, the ones so desperate to snatch the wool from my Children's eyes, would never understand: Lies don't hurt anyone. Lies are the balm; *truth* is the wound.

Even the Man himself, if you believed in him up there, napping on his cloudy throne, doesn't have much more than pretty stories to offer these days. Sure, Joseph, Moses, Jesus's precious lepers, *they* got miracles. But now? God's out of the direct action industry, and all he's offering in its place is a bedtime story. The fairy tale of heaven, the promise that whatever shit happens, your story gets a happy ending. The Bible, boiled down: Once upon a time I helped some poor suckers out and someday, maybe, if you're good, I'll help you too, but in the meantime, isn't it a nice story to fall asleep to?

You can't say I'm not doing God's work.

All those social workers, estranged relatives, those Pittstown neighbors who turned their nose up at the Church buying up property in their suburban midst, they called us a cult. Maybe so. But the work we carried a sinister whiff that didn't match up with its reality, something that maybe you had to be in charge of one—to know. My Children were gentle, most of them treading through life with the care of the permanently damaged, whether by drugs, abuse, or simply the ordinary existential indignities, loss of job, loss of love, loss of dignity, loss of purpose. That was their universal: Loss. Who else would so desperately need to be found?

That's what I'd done when I first arrived in Pittstown, what I did when I arrived anywhere: I collected the lost, the ones who'd fallen through the cracks, like a dog-catcher scooping up strays from the pound. It was a service, not just to the feral, but to the tame and well-housed, all those cockles secure, too good-for-it-all townsfolk satisfied with the comfort of their own homes who preferred not to acknowledge what I was doing for them, tending to their damaged so they wouldn't have to.

Alison Gentry's sister left nasty voicemails every few months, and once she'd set the local cops on us, but where was she when Alison's three kids and husband plowed through a guard-rail and into Lake Michigan? Where was she a year later when her sister washed down the anniversary with a vodka and Percodan cocktail?

Where were Mandy's parents—with their team of trust-fund-busting lawyers doing everything they could to keep her hands off her money—when she and her crack pipe had driven a Pontiac through a neighbor's living room window, and then been promptly hauled off to jail, where she stayed, because

mom and dad thought teaching her a lesson would be kinder than bailing her out?

Where were Clark Jeffries' kids when his board of directors dumped him on his ass, or Merrill Babbage's husband when—having been traded in for a secretary with a bad dye job and a dick—she was feeding her three kids with food stamps and blowing the landlord when she couldn't make rent?

I was the one who wiped their tears and salved their wounds and fed them some bullshit to live for and if I took a little something with me when I went, it was only fair payment for services rendered.

Despite my best efforts, plenty of the Children still had a hole to fill, and somehow, with his ugly gap-toothed smile and post-nasal drip, the kid filled it.

That was my smile. Those were my mother's big ears and my father's vampire canines—and the way he chewed his nails, but only the ones on his left hand, was like seeing my brother's ghost. That was the kind of genetic detritus that was, I knew, supposed to kindle a fire in me, as if it mattered that we came from the same stock.

I didn't know whether my parents were alive or dead, and didn't much care—had never understood it, this obsession people have with *blood*. This fixation on *children*, as if popping a baby out and watching him grow into your big nose and type 2 diabetes was your best shot at staving off oblivion.

Ask people to worship you? They call you a megalomaniac. Ask them to worship your kid? They call that good parenting.

Still, I played along, let them all believe what they needed to believe. That was, after all, my business. And it wasn't the hassle I'd expected, raising a kid, especially with the Children so eager to do it for me. It was only once he started up with the questions and all that end-of-the-world shit, that the trouble really started.

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He'd been at the compound for a week, and though I dumped him on the Children whenever I could during the day, at night he was all mine. He got himself set for bed all on his own—*mom calls me her little man*, he said, when I caught him flossing for the third time in a day, and that was the second and last time he mentioned her—but my responsibilities had been made clear.

"At eight, you tell me it's time to go to bed," he told me the first night. "I read for a while, and then at nine you come back and turn off the lights."

So that's what I did, standing in the dark for a while after, watching this kid—my kid—lie on his back with his legs straight and his arms crossed across his chest like a fucking corpse. *I made that*, I thought, and waited to feel something.

"You got everything you need?" I said. This was before the racecar bed and the hand-me-down pajamas. "Comfortable?"

He didn't look it.

"Sometimes I like to practice being dead," he said, staring up at the ceiling.

"You're a weird kid, you know that?"

"She's not coming back, is she?"

That was the first time he mentioned her. And because he wasn't crying or behaving anything like you'd expect from a kid in his situation, I gave it to him straight. "Doesn't seem likely."

"Because I'm weird?"

"Because she's a loser."

"Oh."

"Always was. Always will be. You're probably better off."

"Doesn't seem likely," he said. Then, apparently finished playing dead, he curled up on his side. I watched him until he fell asleep.

That's how it went until the night, one week after she'd dumped him, when he broke routine. I just turned out the lights when he said, "I get five questions."

"What?"

"Before I go to sleep, I get to ask five questions."

"Says who?"

There was no answer, and so I knew who.

"Why now?" I said. "All of a sudden?"

"I was waiting until I had the right questions."

That didn't sound promising. "I don't think so," I said.

"I'm willing to negotiate."

"Negotiate what?"

"Questions," he said. "How about four?"

"How about zero."

"Three questions."

"No questions."

"You're really bad at negotiating," he said.

"That's a matter of opinion."

That was when, for the first time since he'd set foot on the compound, he burst into tears. Burst like a clogged pipe, ten years of misery spraying out of him in a gusher, and even in the dark I could read his fury, that his pathetic little body had betrayed him. I remembered that, trying to survive the battle zone, dodging artillery fire between the kid you were and the man you were supposed to be. The word screamed at you to grow up, your zits and your twitchy dick agreed it was about time, but you were still afraid of the dark, you still slept with that old teddy bear, you still wanted your mommy.

Maybe you always wanted your mommy.

"Okay. Three questions."

And that right there was my mistake.

••••

"Do you really get messages from God?"

"I do."

"How?"

"It varies. Sometimes I read His intent in the signs. Sometimes He's got something more direct He wants to say, and He talks to me in my dreams."

"Why you?"

I shrugged. "Why not me? I didn't ask for the responsibility, I'll tell you that much. It's no picnic devoting your life to the word of the Lord. You'd be surprised how many people don't want to hear it."

"How do you know it's really God? That you're not just hearing voices or something?"

"That's four questions. Good night."

••••

"Does God hate us?"

"God loves us. We're all his children."

"And you have to love your children."

"That's the rule."

"That wasn't a question."

“Got it. Thanks for clarifying.”

“If he loves us, why would he kill us?”

“Everyone dies, kid. It’s not punishment; it’s human nature.”

“No, I mean, why would he kill *all* of us. Jessie Babbage says the world is going to end. In eight months and twenty days.”

“That another question?”

“The question is: Is it true, the world is ending?”

I won’t pretend I felt good about it, but there was no other way. The kid had shown no sign he inherited his mother’s proclivity for bullshit, and I couldn’t show my hand without risking he’d spread the good news like a virus. “It really is.”

There was a long silence, long enough to make me nervous.

“What do you think of that?” I said.

“I think it explains a lot.”

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“How’s it going to end?”

“You mean, specifically?”

“Yeah. Nuclear war? Asteroid strike? Global warming? I read online about a giant volcano that might explode and kill us all. Also there could be a plague. Or some kind of alien invasion, but that’s not statistically likely. Did your dreams say which it is?”

“God’s a little hazy on the details,” I said. “But the Bible’s got a lot to say on the subject, if you’re interested.” I wasn’t about to give him the whole Beast rising from a lake of fire sermon—let the Children take care of that.

“What will we do? When it happens?”

“We’ll go to heaven with the rest of the righteous people,” I said. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“You don’t even know me. How do you know I’m righteous?”

“Fair point.”

After that, the kid started having nightmares. And maybe I was partly responsible, but what kid doesn’t have nightmares? Anyway, these particular nightmares? Gold. Because he told the Children about them, and the Children took them to heart, figuring any kid of mine having visions of the apocalypse must be getting his info straight from the horse’s mouth. Purse strings started to loose. No one wanted to be counted among the sinners when the big day came. Maybe I helped it along a bit by encouraging all that talk of divine visitation, but it’s not like I was forcing the dreams on him.

I just put them to good use.

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“If we know when the world is going to end, shouldn’t we be *doing* something about it? Like warning people? Or doing something to save ourselves?”

“That sounds like three questions.”

“It’s one,” he said. “Multi-part.”

“Uh huh.”

“So?”

“So we don’t have to worry about it, because God’s going to save us, and whoever else he wants. That’s the whole point.”

“But don’t they say God helps those who help themselves?”

“Where’d you’d you hear that?” It wasn’t one of my favorites. Operations like mine didn’t tend to thrive on a philosophy of self-reliance and personal accountability.

“The internet.”

It killed me, the way people said that now, like they used to say “the Bible.” Or “TV.” As if it were Truth.

“I don’t think the end of the world is one of those help-yourself situations,” I said.

“But what if you’re wrong?”

••••

He wouldn’t let it drop. He wouldn’t keep it to himself, either, and before I knew it, the Children were buzzing with the prospect of preservation. The kid was a natural, only ten years old but already better than I was at talking people around to his way of looking at things. I’d taught them to be open to persuasion, and they were model students, repeating the kid’s questions and arguments and internet-supplied statistics about asteroid impacts like a bunch of ventriloquist dummies. I did my best to point out that righteousness was all about faith and faith was all about accepting your fate and waiting for God to intercede, and that’s when the kid—who had apparently taken my suggestion on the Bible-reading front—brought in Noah. Before I know it, we’re building a damn ark.

Metaphorically, that is.

It turned out you could order anything on the internet, including whatever supplies you might need to survive in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Canned food, wilderness gear, medical equipment, solar panels, ammunition—*lots* of ammunition. The kid spent hours at the computer, doing research and making lists, and then, like a Dickensian miracle, the wallets opened wide, even the tightest of wallets. Sure, the Children had given lip service to buying the prophecy, but with the kid channeling the energy into survival scenarios, they felt it in their *bones*. Judgment Day. End times. No reason to save up for retirement when doom was on the horizon, and so they threw their credit cards at him, and anything left over after the bottled water and campfire stoves? That was mine. The kid, I realized pretty quickly, was like a money laundering shop for bullshit. I fed in my lies, he spit out a pretty good simulacrum of truth.

It wasn’t enough to gather supplies, the kid said. We needed a place to store them—a place we’d be safe from the ravaging hordes, not to mention the Horsemen and the Beast, though the specter of the Beast had been overshadowed by the kid’s visions of power grid failure and food hoarders. We needed to move off the grid, and Clark Jeffries—who, in the duration of our acquaintanceship had never once gifted anything that could be lent—violated his cardinal rule and dipped into the principal. The kid had befriended a bunch of doomsday kooks online, one of whom must have believed in cash even more than he believed in magnetic pole reversal, because he was only too happy to trade his kook compound for a couple million of Jeffries’ hard-earned bucks. And this time, the deeds went to the church, along with the rest of his savings. There it was, my retirement account: Fully funded.

A third of the Children—fortunately, none of the big fish—decided to tough it out at home, whether due to a lack or overabundance of faith, and we kissed them a weepy farewell, promising to meet again beyond the Gates of Heaven, pretending to believe it. The rest of us loaded the supplies into a fleet of retrofitted armored schoolbuses—bug-out vehicles, the kid called them—and headed for the hills.

Our Garden of Eden was a rectangular compound built out of old shipping containers, bullet-proof and impenetrable, and a poor substitute for my marble flooring and twelve-jet Jacuzzi. The kid was happier than I’d ever seen him, and he was doing a hero’s job of keeping the Children busy. They taught themselves to can food, forage for mushrooms, fire automatic weapons, build solar generators.

suture wounds, identify poisonous snakes, milk goats and slaughter pigs—the internet truly was wonder. As was the sight of all these accountants and housewives transforming themselves into mountain warriors, the kid at their fore, a pipsqueak Napoleon commanding his troops. They were disciplined in their mission, wild with abandon in everything else. Christian temperance gave sway to desire, to what the hell, to affairs and drunken revels, to one rumored orgy and two suicides. The kid honestly believed it was all coming to an end: Because I'd told them I dreamed it—and because the kid really had.

He'd stopped having nightmares, stopped asking questions. Now he was the one with the answers.

"It doesn't scare you?" I asked him one night before turning out the lights. We'd abandoned privacy at the new compound, the Children sleeping dorm-style in their hollowed out shipping containers, but I still had the special privileges that follow from a direct line to the Lord. The kid slept on a cot beside me. I'd almost gotten used to the sound of his breathing, and his occasional muffled snore. It had been a long time since I'd slept beside someone long enough to recognize the rhythm of them falling asleep. "It really doesn't scare you, the thought of it all ending?"

It scared the fuck out of me. The kid liked to walk me through potential apocalyptic scenarios—his version of a bedtime story. I fell asleep imagining the oceans rising, volcanic ash blotting out the sun, supergerms knocking out fifty million in a week. The kid taught me about nuclear winter, and in my dreams my skin sloughed off and my Children died a rainbow of deaths, atomized in a cotton candy puff of light, poisoned slow and steady by food and drink and acid rain, huddled in caves before flickering fire as the ice rose around them and the sun set on human life. There were nutcases with nuclear buttons and physicists messing with black holes; there were alarming seismic indicators and supervolcanic eruption 40,000 years overdue. This was not to mention the potential damage of a solar storm, a not-so-great leap forward in nanotechnology, an asteroid impact, or what might happen when computers the world over gained sentience and turned on their masters. (That last was the kid's favorite, and one of the reasons all computing devices on the compound were nearing their date with the sledgehammer.)

All that talk about reading the signs, and I hadn't realized the signs were everywhere. The world was like one of those supersaturated solutions we'd played around with in chemistry class a thousand years ago—a class I only remembered, and only attended, because of my lab partner's tendency to lean over the beakers and grant me a heavenly glimpse of her sacred mounds. They were solutions with more crap in them than they could bear, suspended in perfect balance, the dissolved particles invisible until you dropped one last, miniscule, harmless particle—and wham, liquid turned to crystal just like that. I never got how it worked—was too busy plotting my way down Jenny Crowley's v-neck—but I never forgot the sight of it, the possibility of instant transformation. Until the kid started sniffing around dark corners, it hadn't occurred to me that we were living inside the beaker, waiting for someone to drop in one final speck of dust, make one tiny, irrevocable mistake. You didn't need God for a scenario like that. You just needed bad luck or human idiocy, and those I believed in with all my heart.

The Children wouldn't have appreciated the analogy; they had, on my advice, rejected the devil, science, chemistry labs and all. Maybe that explained how they could be so unafraid.

"Why would I be scared when I know how much God loves me?" the kid said.

"And how much is that?"

"He brought me to you at exactly the right time, didn't He? He *saved* me. And he must love you and the Children, too, because he brought me here so I could save you."

You could tell the kid believed it, that it would be a good thing, surviving the end of the world. The Children, too, and that made sense, because it was a child's belief, a child's naïve assumption that life was always preferable to death, because they had animal fear of the latter and no concept of the

hardships of the former. Children didn't know what life looked like at its worst.

I knew, and I'd decided a long time ago that when the cancer came—as it comes to everyone in general and my family in breathtaking specificity—I'd toss myself over a bridge or swallow my weight in pills, anything to outpace that slow cancer crawl, the chemo and the shitting and the pain. These children dreaming of survival, that was an arrogance risen from having forgotten pain. I had only myself to blame—wasn't I the one who'd returned them to innocence, replaced their hard truths with soft lies, taught them to hope? They say you can't remember pain—the fact of it, yes, but the truth of it, the physical texture of agony? Gone and forgotten. Which makes it easy to forget that pain hurts, that the wounded life isn't always worth living. I helped my Children forget, but I remembered for them, because someone's got to. Remembering pain is the only way to avoid it.

Let's say you save them, I wanted to ask the kid. What kind of life are you saving them for?

"He could have sent anyone to save you," the kid said. "But God chose *me*."

My son, the chosen one. My son, the sucker.

I tried not to think about it. Easier to imagine he was in on it with me, that we were running the same con, partners. Maybe I'd given him more than a thinning hairline after all; the kid was a bold talker. I could take him with me when I left, I thought, bring him along to Miami Beach or, even better, postpone retirement just a little longer, teach the kid the ropes. Everyone likes a father-son act. Two thousand years, and it hasn't gotten old yet, and maybe it wasn't such a bad plan, trading in all my Children for one kid. Even if the end times were upon us, we weren't dead yet.

It felt like an indulgence, imagining him into my future, almost indecent, a fantasy gone one step too far. But why should it have been? The kid was *my* kid—was parenting him the worst thing in the world? Wasn't that the right thing, the natural thing, that I should step in and teach him how to be the right kind of man?

It was my very own bedtime story, and I kept on telling it to myself, right up 'til that very last day.

The night before Doomsday, the Children locked themselves into the compound to brace for the end. The kid got them all situated, set them to battle stations, a rifle in every hand, ready for anything. I waited until the last minute to break it to him, that one last, painful directive I'd gotten from the Big Guy: the Moses treatment, exiled from my hard-won promised land.

"I'm not going in there with you," I told him, *sotto voce*—let him break the news to the Children, spare us all the tearful goodbyes. "Someone's got to stay out here, guard the entrances, keep the infidels away, you know the drill."

"But online they say—"

"Kid, this is coming from someone above Google's pay grade." I said it gently, and then I waited for him to call bullshit on me, finally, or maybe just to act like a freaking *kid* for once, cry and sue and cling to my leg or some such theatrics, because what kid wants to face the end of the world without his daddy. If he'd begged to come with me—or, hell, if he'd even asked politely, tossed out the suggestion—I'd have gone for it, walked him through some facts of life, then stuffed him into my own personal bug-out vehicle and gunned it. I would have found a way to explain things—he was just a kid, after all, and having bamboozled him once, how hard could it be to do it again—and it could have all played out like I planned, the father-son partnership, the two of us against the world, for as long as the time we had left.

But the kid didn't cry, didn't beg, didn't even suggest. He nodded, an adult's gesture of grave acceptance. "God's ways are mysterious, but they are just and they are right. I'll explain it to the Children." He said it as calmly as if I'd confessed I accidentally spilled some canned beans. "You can be sure I'll raise them well for you, and make certain they never forget your sacrifice. Goodbye, Father." He said *Father* exactly like my other Children said it, like he was one of them, like he'd never been mine.

He touched his fingers to my forehead like a benediction, and that was the end of it. The kid was exactly what I'd made him. A believer.

And so it was for the best when the bulletproof door shut between us; a believer was of no use to me.

He was better off without me, I told myself as I bugged out. Maybe he'd even go back to normal. Get himself adopted by one of the Children once they weren't my Children anymore, once they resurfaced after a lonely month or two inside, only to realize that they were the worst kind of fool—the bankrupt kind. But I knew better: Can't bullshit a bullshitter. I knew what happened to a weird kid no one wanted, and it was a sure thing none of the Children would want anything to do with him, not once they realized what he'd made them do and what his father had made them believe. He'd be lucky if they didn't lynch him.

Fuck him up all you want, just don't kill him, Hilary had told me, and in all likelihood, I hadn't even managed that.

That's what I was thinking about while I drove south—that and the plump bank account that was waiting for me, and the long stretches of beach with all the bikinis and the days to come. Nothing lasts forever, not even guilt. I could wait it out, I figured.

I figured I had plenty of time.

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It happened the next day, just like I said it would.

I don't exactly know *what* happened, because the power grid crapped out damn quick, along with the radio, and there went any prayer of knowing what was going on, just like the kid said it would.

Thanks to him, I knew enough to make a few guesses, or at least eliminate some options. Not a superbug, obviously, not global warming, not—sorry kid—a robot revolution. Not God. Not a divine judgment, not my prophecy coming to pass. That one, at least, I could be sure of.

Not a divine judgment, but easily mistaken for one, that blaze of light like the sun gone supernova, the sonic boom and answering shudder from deep in the Earth that shook branches from the trees, the thousand points of light streaking through the clouds, like a fleet of alien invaders, like the sky was falling, like every disaster movie I'd ever seen with a special effects budget ratcheted up to the billions, because this was an assault on the senses enough to make you believe the impossible, that this was real: the thunder and the silence, the taste of scorched chemicals, the rush of wind and spray of dust, the divine light—and then, switch flipped for good, central fuses blown—darkness at noon.

Dust and dirt and all manner of crap blocking out the sun, the kid had taught me. Suggesting something big enough—asteroid, bomb, whatever—to blow a whole shitload of earth into the sky. A smell in the air, something bad, something wrong. Something *coming*.

It'd be a prettier picture if I could say I wasn't surprised, that some part of me felt it coming, felt some high power speaking through me with the not-so-bullshit prophecy, guiding my finger to the most fateful of dates—that I had a feeling about this one, tasted something off about it, some acrid undertone of Absolute Truth.

Surprised? The only *surprise* is I didn't have a fucking heart attack at the wheel. They haven't got a word for what I was when the sky fell down. Or when I hit the point where the Philly skyline should've come into view . . . and didn't. Maybe it was lurking out there in the dark, its power failed, its spires hidden in a thicket of dust, but I don't think so. I think it's not there anymore. I think the end came, just like I said it would, and I think it's better not to think too much about that.

I kept driving, long as I could, because what else was I supposed to do? Not north, back toward the compound—nothing was getting into that fortress, not for months, maybe not for years, and they

shoot me if I tried. East, toward the ocean. Tsunamis or not—and the kid had made it clear *not* was far less likely—I wanted to see it before the end.

Didn't make it that far.

Didn't make it very far at all. Cars swamped the highways, and somewhere in the distance, on the black of the horizon, a bloom of fire that said, pretty clearly: *Wrong way*.

I was no sign reader before, but the kid taught me well. I know what happens now. Destruction, devastation, cities vaporized, millions incinerated, gutted infrastructure, rotting corpses, starving orphans, endless winter, food riots, armed bandits, crime, punishment, plague, famine, hellfire and damnation. If we didn't need God to end the world, we surely won't need him to turn the wreckage into hell on Earth. Humans are capable creatures; we can do most anything ourselves.

It wasn't a bad stretch of road—concrete ribbon winding through lush woods—so I left the car in a jam and took off into the trees, and I waited, like I'm still waiting, for what comes next.

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There wasn't anything special about Hilary, nothing more or less special than any of them, and never led her to believe any different. That wasn't for me, the wining and dining shtick, and I certainly knew better than to tease a girl like her with a future. You'll notice those same people who turn their nose up at my methods don't hesitate to tell a few stories of their own when it comes to love and lust, parading around their sad little pretense of commitment, promising nothing will ever change when change is the only sure thing we've got. The Hilary episode was brief. It was fun. And then, when it wasn't anymore, it was over—but I guess everything has its moments.

There was this one night, same shitty motel room with its stiff sheets and unnamable perfume, same crap box wine and love handles, same greasy Chinese and sour breath, even the same routine, a little for her, a little for me, finish with her on top then finish her off with the same tired flourish, not a iota of difference from any of the hundred some nights we spent before the sight of each other made us both sick, but that night, after, she fit perfectly against me, a puzzle piece with sad eyes and downy blond peach fuzz up and down her arms—that night, I couldn't stop touching her, and we fell asleep together, like a couple of spooning teenagers. That night, and that night only, for no reason whatsoever, she smelled like home.

It'd be convenient to imagine that was the night we conceived the kid, because wouldn't that suggest there was some higher purpose to the whole thing, not just the sad motel sex, but fifty-some years of eating, sleeping, shitting, enduring one minute after the next? This kid, my kid, and all the Children he saved, our little ark up in the hills where, no matter what happens to the rest of it, some righteous sliver of the human race will survive. That's what the kid believes, and if he's right, it's a nasty joke for God to play on me, but I can't say I'd blame Him.

It'd be convenient, and it'd be easier—especially now. If I could believe in something aside from my own rotten luck. That after all these years of playing the odds, my number finally came in, the one jackpot that does me no good whatsoever. If I could believe that there really is a puppet master, some holy ghost guiding the chess pieces across the board, that this one time he broke with tradition and sacrificed the father instead of the son. But that isn't His way, and believing in it isn't mine.

A happy accident, that's all, for the Children and for me, because there may be no atheists in foxholes but there's at least one immune-to-bullshit bullshitter in these woods, and he may not be ready to die, but he's definitely not looking to survive.

Something will come next; something always comes next. But I'm guessing whatever it is won't be too friendly to bullshit—the world's not going to have much use for that anymore. Unless, maybe you're the kind that can buy into a lie so fully, so thoroughly, that it comes all the way back around

truth. There's a new world coming, that's what the signs tell me, and it's going to be dark, and it's going to be cold. It's the world I made, but my Children are the ones who'll have to live in it.—

My Children, and my son. There'll be no living on through them: God may have made His children in His image, but I made mine in the opposite—and whatever they remember of me will be a lie I made them to believe; I made them to survive.

I, on the other hand, am in the business of knowing when to quit. I'm in no hurry to die, but it's a comfort to think I'll be gone before they know enough to hate me for leading them into the promised land.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Wasserman is the author of several books for children and young adults, including *The Waking Dark*, *The Book of Blood and Shadow*, the *Cold Awakening Trilogy*, *Hacking Harvard*, and the *Seven Deadly Sins* series, which was adapted into a popular television miniseries. Her essays and short fiction have appeared in several anthologies as well as *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*. A former children's book editor, she is on the faculty of the low-residency MFA program at Southern New Hampshire University. She lives and writes (and frequently procrastinates) in Brooklyn, New York. Find out more about her at robinwasserman.com or follow her on Twitter @robinwasserman.

HEAVEN IS A PLACE ON PLANET X

Desirina Boskovich

It was 8:34 p.m. on a Tuesday, and it was almost the end of the world.

Actually, the world was expected to end on Friday, at precisely 5 p.m., eastern daylight time. That was not a forecast, or a projection: it was more like an appointment.

On Friday at 5 p.m. eastern, a thousand high-powered laser cannons would fire simultaneously from their hidden positions in outer space, instantly reducing Planet Earth to vapor and ash. At the exact same moment, the consciousness of every living human being would manifest itself on Planet Xyrxiconia. This planet was located a trillion light years away in a far-flung region of the universe Earth's scientists had not yet glimpsed. There, on Planet X, humanity would find themselves in fresh bodies—remade vessels. These reincarnations would live eternally in a world of infinite luxury.

At least . . . that's what the aliens claimed.

They'd arrived two weeks ago. They'd been rather vague on the subject of their origins; apparently they came from all over. And they'd been traveling a while. They'd spent more time in the dark empty places between stars than we could possibly imagine; they'd been staring into the endless void since before we were finger-painting on the solid walls of caves.

Through human mouthpieces, the aliens communicated their expectations. There would be no end-of-the-world parties, no apocalyptic adventures, no doomsday loss of decorum. There would be no orgies, no mass suicides.

Directive: Continue about your business, human citizen. Wait patiently for the appointed day. Shop, work, eat, sleep. Stick to routine. And stay calm. This mandate came with teeth. The aliens suggested that one out of every thousand humans on Earth be appointed to the noble task of enforcing. They left the details to our local governments. When Italy, France, Switzerland, and Mexico formed a coalition protesting this tyrannical treatment, their heads of state were promptly vaporized on the spot.

After that, no one resisted. As directed, local governments staged lotteries. One in a thousand. Of course, my number came up; it always does.

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It was 8:34 p.m. on Tuesday. I sat at the bar, running my fingertips across the polished wood sipping whiskey that burned like fire all the way down.

This was typical behavior for a Tuesday evening; I was in the clear.

Across the bar sat a frumpy middle-aged white guy in a neon sweater vest, tossing me dirty looks. Finally he stood up, strode over, and slammed his glass on the bar beside me.

"Lady . . . You must feel like a real hero," he hissed. "You must be really proud."

"I don't know what you mean, sir," I said, taking another measured sip.

"You know exactly what I mean." He gestured to the standard-issue ray gun—we called them "mistars"—hanging at my waist.

"Well, why don't you try using your words?"

"You're a traitor, that's what I mean. A murderer. Killing your own kind. You people make me sick."

“Hmm,” I said, nodding. I’d gotten used to this kind of thing.

“~~And I’ll tell you what else. If there is a paradise on Planet X, I sure wouldn’t want to share it with the likes of you.~~”

A tense silence had fallen over the bar. The other patrons were listening, observing with a kind of desperate curiosity. They wanted to know if I was going to enforce him, of course.

I didn’t see any reason to; a pissed-off guy from Brooklyn insulting some random woman at the bar was the very definition of “business as usual.”

“Go fuck yourself, you self-righteous piece of shit,” I said, and turned back to my drink.

A group of kids trooped into the bar. It was a regular’s bar, filled with old timers quietly mourning the world’s slow decline and their own gradual loss of hope; it had been that way for a long time, long before the aliens arrived. These kids were out of their element, but too drunk to notice. There were six or seven of them: white kids, the girls so young they looked like children, dressed in their spangled thrift-store finds, their gladiator sandals and embroidered leather cowboy boots. They gulped PBR and downed double shots. They were celebrating a wedding. The bride pulled the groom up onto a table and they began to dance. The wedding party cheered them on while the rest of the patrons looked on in disapproval; it was not that kind of bar.

“Just married, huh?” the bartender said to the friend who was buying a fresh round of drinks.

“Yeah,” she shouted, her voice hoarse. “We said—we don’t know if we’ll ever be able to like, get married, or do it, or anything like that, in that other place, so we’re all getting married this week.” She pushed her bangs away from her eyes. “We’re taking turns. They just did it today. Tomorrow it’s me and Pete.”

I pulled out my mister and enforced them all.

After that, the bar was much quieter. The frumpy white guy spit on me and walked out. I sipped my drink and watched the door, waiting for Sara Grace.

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Sara Grace was a nursing student at Columbia. She’d been raised in the suburbs of some sleepy Minnesota town. She hated New York.

We’d been assigned to each other randomly, like everyone else. It was part of the deal: all enforcers had a partner. That way, if anyone got squeamish, there was always someone to do the deed.

Sara Grace was dressed in a pink cardigan, khaki slacks, and kitten heels. Her blonde hair was tied away from her face with a silk polka-dotted scarf. Her mister hung at her waist.

“May I have a Cosmopolitan, please?” she asked the bartender. “Easy on the vodka, and could you have an extra slice of lime, if you wouldn’t mind?”

She sat beside me and we went over our numbers for the day.

“I just enforced an entire family,” she said, sipping her Cosmo. “The husband was buying a bunch of those suicide kits out the back of a van on Flatbush. They were planning to do it all together. Mom, dad, two girls, a little boy, even the dog and cat! Like, hold hands, pray, and die.”

“So what happened?”

“Oh, I followed him home. Then I enforced them all. Even the dog and cat. I wish I knew what happens to dogs on Judgment Day.”

“I wish you would stop calling it that.”

“Sorry, just a reflex from Bible school. We’re due for a meeting at headquarters, you know,” she said, checking her slender watch and suggestively eyeing my full drink.

“I know, I know,” I said. “I’m chugging.”

I chugged.

Headquarters was set up inside a warehouse in Red Hook. Twenty thousand square feet of concrete floors, and the ceilings yawned high overhead so the acoustics were terrible. The Brooklyn Division Enforcement Team gathered here to report our numbers and receive feedback on our performance. Our managers gave us little pep talks about how essential our efforts were toward ensuring a smooth and pleasant transition toward the end of the world.

On one wall was a whiteboard scribbled with encouraging messages and enforcement data. On the opposite wall was a countdown clock.

There were several thousand team members in our division. We filled the room to the brim with breathing and sweat and chatter and stink. We divided our attention between the stage at the front and the countdown clock, which was a handy measure of how late we were getting started.

Finally the meeting was called to order.

“Your numbers are down,” the boss shouted at us. He had reason to be nervous; managers with poorly performing teams tended to find themselves on the wrong end of the ray gun. “You’re down compared to Manhattan; you’re down compared to Queens. Shall I go on?”

There was a muttered undercurrent of rebellion.

“I don’t care, I don’t care, from now on I don’t want to hear any excuses,” he bellowed into the microphone. “We’re almost there. Three days from now—we’re in paradise. Seven virgins, clouds and harps, free beer, gold-plated toilet seats—whatever floats your boat. Just keep your goddamn numbers up.”

From now on, we’d be reporting every hour. Checking in, every hour, on the hour, and if we hadn’t been enforced anyone, there would be some explaining to do.

“Just three more days,” he said. “Just three more days and this will all be over. Now go home, get some rest, and I want to hear from everyone at 9 a.m. sharp.”

Sara Grace and I walked to the subway together. “Wanna come over for a nightcap?” I asked. “I bet you need one. I sure as hell do.”

“Thank you,” she sighed. “I really shouldn’t. I need to get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah. No problem. See you then.”

That night I lay awake thinking about her. It had been a long time since I’d let myself fall for anyone. Now I had it bad. And I didn’t have much time left.

The Aliens: most people called them The Travelers, but I thought of them as The Mickey Mouse Club, because of the human mouthpieces they’d chosen. They were all washed-up child actors and stars of reality TV shows. They all had those bland good looks, and none of them had ever said anything remotely interesting on their own terms, so they were the perfect avatars to relay the message.

Apparently, the aliens’ physical manifestations were repulsive to human sensibilities; I’d never seen one in the flesh, but I’d heard stories. These long-lived rumors started and spread with a twist of their own. From what I’d gathered, the aliens resembled something like scaly seahorses or obese horned toads.

But no one ever saw these bodies, at least not on TV. It was spectacle; it was all smoke and mirrors. They had technology we couldn’t even begin to comprehend. The universal translator, the ray gun, the spaceship, the empathetic mind links. So they hung back and spoke through their human avatars, and even if those actors were lost without their laugh tracks, they looked just like what you’d expect.

Of course, the government's dormant propaganda wing swung into full gear. There was no time for Victory Gardens, but citizen safety patrols were in business.

And enforcers, of course.

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The next morning I woke with dark circles under my eyes. I'd stayed awake too long, obsessing about Sara Grace and imagining a way out of all this. As far as I could tell, there was none.

I showered, made myself presentable, and headed to the nearby diner where Sara Grace and I met for breakfast every morning. The local clientele was pretty depleted, so service was fast, and we always got our waffles for free.

Sara Grace was late. Maybe she'd had a rough night too.

I was sitting there sipping my coffee when a guy I'd never seen before strolled in. He was tall and craggy, wearing tight blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a leather jacket that had seen better days. He obviously hadn't encountered the inside of a barbershop in some time. He slid into a booth and ordered the number five.

My first check-in was in thirty-two minutes, and I hadn't enforced anyone yet, so I went over to see what was up. "You mind?" I asked.

"Not at all," he boomed, and I slid into the booth across from him. He stank of cigarettes and the open road.

"So what brings you to the neighborhood?" I asked idly, taking one of his sugar packets and dumping it into my own coffee.

He laughed, a big laugh that filled the diner. The other patrons glanced over, then quickly averted their eyes. "I stick out that much, do I?" he said. "Like a sore thumb, I bet."

I shrugged in a noncommittal way. "Hey," I said. "I'm sure I'd stick out in your hometown, too."

"That you would," he agreed. "Well, it's kind of a funny story. I'm from Oklahoma, you see. Place called Muskogee. You probably wouldn't have heard of it. Anyway, spent most of my life working on a warehouse floor, stacking crates. Got married, got divorced, got married again, divorced again. Had a couple of kids. Always one thing or another. I went on this road trip when I was real young, a couple of buddies and me, right before Susie, that's my first wife, got knocked up. After that, you know, life happens. So when the news came down, I figured, it's now or never, right? Quit the job, bought a Harley, hit the road."

I wondered idly how he'd made it this far. Sounded as if the team in Muskogee was slacking off.

He told me about his trip, and I listened. His eyes shone as he described the breathtaking vastness of the Grand Canyon, the stunning beauty of the Nebraska plains. The St. Louis arch, that gateway to the west. The mist hanging spectral and ghostly over the Smoky Mountains, and the twisting, narrow roads winding their way through the foothills. The Carolina low country, the sun rising like a tangerine over the glittering ocean and the Outer Banks.

"It's been a life-changing experience," he said, mist in his eyes. "I'll tell you what. I just wish I had more time."

"I think we all do," I said.

I let him finish his breakfast and pay his check. He'd made it this far, and I still had a few minutes before my first check in. It was the least I could do.

I enforced him on my way out the door.

"Epic road trip?" Sara Grace asked. We'd developed a sixth sense for these kinds of things.

"Yeah."

"I always wanted to go to Newfoundland," she said. "And see the whales. A blue whale. Can you

imagine? This vast, majestic creature. You'd feel so small. But at the same time, so meaningful. To be part of all of this."

"Yeah. It's a trip, all right."

We both dialed the number and checked in. She had enforced someone on the way over, so we were in the clear.

"You know what I was thinking," Sara Grace said. "And this just sort of occurred to me. But isn't it kind of funny how we're basically getting rid of all the people who want to ask questions? Who don't follow directions? Who, you know, have like, a mind of their own?"

"Weeding out the troublemakers."

"Exactly."

"Yeah. It's funny, alright," I said. "Sara Grace? I know you were raised in Bible school and all that shit."

"You were, too."

"Yeah, I know." (It was true: church every Sunday, sitting on the hard pew, sandwiched between my mother and *her* mother, who still gave me a hard time that I refused to go anymore.) "So when did you start thinking, this whole God thing, maybe it's all made up? Maybe there's no such place as heaven or hell, except for the one we manage to make for ourselves here on Earth?"

"I don't know, actually," she said, uncomfortable. "I guess I'm just not sure."

Part of her, I think, still believed in all that: baby Jesus, right and wrong, redemption and faith.

And crucially, she still believed that whatever long look or tense moment or charged laugh we shared was just circumstance, just the pressure of surfing the harshest days in history and being the most hated people alive.

Because she wasn't raised that way, and maybe it wouldn't be right.

Neither was I.

But I'd given up on all that a long time ago.

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It was 2:11 p.m. on Wednesday.

We took a long walk through Prospect Park. It was a good place to find people who'd given up.

A man lying on his back in the grass looked like a good candidate. He was dressed in slacks and a button-down, hands interwoven behind his head, as he stared up at the blue skies and the rustling leaves. His shoes and socks lay haphazardly beside him.

We sat down.

"Hello," he said, without looking at us, still staring up at the sky. "You must be enforcers. You're probably wondering if I do this every day, or if I'm currently having some kind of nervous break."

We didn't say anything. Sometimes, it was better to just let them talk.

"Well, as a matter of fact," he said, with a little chuckle, "I'm a scientist. So I've been overwhelmed with despair for the last ten years at least. It's all seemed pretty hopeless for a while now."

"A scientist! Where do you work?" Sara Grace asked eagerly.

"Columbia," he said. "Physics department. Astronomy, actually."

"Columbia? Me too! I'm in the nursing program. Or I was. I had to quit in order to fulfill my enforcing duties."

"You know," he said, musing. "It's funny how you guys are the only ones allowed to make those breaks with your former lives. In fact, you were actually forced to. Ever think about that?"

"Well," she said, rehearsed. She'd been over all this before. "It may seem that way, and we did have

to stop doing our old jobs, but in everything else, we're held to the same strict requirements as the rest of you. ~~No calling up old friends, no making up with old enemies, no visiting family members one last time. No crazy spending sprees, no desperate partying. No out-of-character romances.~~"

I felt like her eyes met mine when she said this last part, but I wasn't quite sure.

"Interesting," he said. "I'm Paul, by the way," and he shook our hands without sitting up. "Don't let me keep you from your work. I know I look suspicious, but the truth is I've been coming here for years, both day and night. I like to lay in the grass and look up at the sky and think about everything that's out there. It's so endless, space . . . so full of promise and mystery. All the things we just don't know. Now we know a little more, of course, or at least we think we do. But this is my routine, so I like to keep it up. You know, it clears the mind."

"What do you mean, '*At least we think we do*'?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing," he said, and chuckled, again. "It's just—my colleagues and I, we've had our telescopes trained at the sky for a long time. A long time. A lot of telescopes. If someone was out there . . . if those *laser cannons* were out there . . . I think we would have seen them. Maybe. You know? But governments don't listen to scientists. They never have. And like I said, there are a lot of things we just don't know. Like how it's possible that billions of souls could instantly be transported to another location within our physical plane. That would seem to defy the laws of physics. But there's always more. If we know one thing, it's that there's always more."

"Do you believe in God, Paul?" Sara Grace asked.

He brushed away the wispy brown hair from his receding hairline. "I'm not really sure," he said after a long pause. "I can't one hundred percent rule out the existence of a deity. I would say, at this point, that it strikes me as a very low possibility."

"Hmm," she said. "Hmm." She was thinking deeply about all this.

I was thinking about the empty skies.

"We should probably keep moving," I said. "Next check in is in twenty-three minutes."

••••

Sara Grace was wrong, though.

We weren't like everyone else. Everyone else was supposed to go about their business, pretending like the end of the world wasn't right around the corner.

But for us, it was the opposite. It was all we thought about, day and night. Because the only way that we could do what we were doing—the obscene, revolting, monstrous thing we were doing—was to remind ourselves constantly that this was not Real Life. None of this had anything to do with reality. For us, life as we knew it was already over.

The end was nigh, except it had already come and gone.

Otherwise it was too terrible. You couldn't live with that kind of thing. That horror. That brutality. That inhumanity. You had to disconnect. You had to turn off.

And another thing, too. Everyone else was supposed to maintain their same old routines. See the same people. Say the same things. But thanks to some random lottery, the two of us—people who never would have had any particular reason to meet—we'd been thrown together into the most intense experience of our lives.

So for us everything had changed. And they were the ones who changed it.

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Last week—which seemed like another lifetime—when the enforcing first began, we'd each had our

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