

## **End of the World, Drinks Half Off**

By Paul Griffiths

When the Christians disappeared, they left behind a fine orange dust in their place. This, in itself, was not unusual. We had seen this happen in a movie where a comet passes too close to the earth and everyone who sees it turns to sand. The survivors slowly become zombies and try to eat each other, but nothing dramatic like that happened to us.

We felt fine.

That morning it wasn't clear, at first, how much had changed. It was a Thursday; we had yoga. Driving home from class, we noticed stray cars on the roadside adorned with metal fish. Some thought it coincidence – faulty work on the part of the local auto shop. Others disagreed; a few cars were still idling, keys left in the ignition as if awaiting the valet. What could have caused it? On our doorstep, our newspapers had already arrived, thanks to the Muslim boy down the street.

The headline caught our attention: THOUSANDS VANISH, PANIC ENSUES. A series of unconfirmed disappearances were listed on the front page. Details were sketchy – authorities tried to find eyewitnesses, but no one could recall a single event. They only remembered the moment *after*, finding a pile of rumpled clothes where a person had once been. The accompanying photo featured the distressed face of a stewardess who'd been serving passengers mid-flight. “People are missing,” she said, clutching her purse to her chest. “A whole bunch of people, just gone!”

We rushed inside to wake up our families. We didn't want to be alone at a moment like this. Finding our husbands and wives and children still asleep in bed like angels, we gave thanks – many of us really for the first time in years – that they were safe.

Sometime around breakfast, we began to hear about folks from our town – people we knew – had gone missing too. The Koops family, in the Shady Acres development. One of the Beaumont twins on route 15. Then closer still: Jack O'Connell, right down our very street, vanished. A group of joggers had found his wife Mary standing in her driveway, as pale and shaking as a dove.

We had all known about Jack; he'd changed since he'd started going to a small Baptist church, forsaking poker for a weekly Bible study. We can appreciate such things in proper doses; in fact, we like religion just fine. Jack, however, had become dour and serious, preoccupied with “a personal relationship with Christ” and “winning us to Jesus” and “punching our ticket on the S.S. Heavenbound.” Whenever we tried to chat about the weather or Letterman or the football team, he'd begin to weep and try to wash our feet with his tears. Walking by his house at night, you could hear him crying in his office, alone. It didn't seem like anything we wanted to be a part of.

Mary led the joggers upstairs and motioned to the bed where her husband ought to be. Instead, there lay his empty bedclothes sprinkled with tangerine grit. “What should I do?” she asked. It was clear she hadn't been expecting this either.

The joggers assessed the situation. “We should try and save him,” one of them said. Another retrieved a tupperware and a measuring cup from the kitchen. They shook out Jack's pajamas and scooped what was left of him into the plastic bowl.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” a third added gravely.

Some unusual indicators: we noticed a peculiar stillness in the air. The birds refused to sing. Also, a tinny odor, as if lightning had struck. At the high school, no students held hands around the flagpole. School was closed, anyway; the governor declared a state of natural disaster. None of our horoscopes predicted this kind of catastrophe.

TV News had basic information – Southern states were hardest hit, almost no one in LA – but comprehensive explanations were hard to come by. Some pundits argued bio-terrorism, others extraterrestrial invasion. We made popcorn and hot cocoa and settled in with the kids (having never been proponents of home-schooling, it seemed silly to start now.) It was a historic day, an election in reverse.

When a John Tesh concert was canceled abruptly, a new suspicion began. *What Would Jesus Do?* bracelets turned up at an alarming rate amongst the dust. Journalists questioned family members point-blank: *Yes*, relatives said, *they listened to Bebe & CeCe Winans. Yes, they owned a copy of More Than a Carpenter.* The classic rock station played “Rapture” by Blondie non-stop.

We had always thought our town was Christian enough. We are Congregationalists, after all; we read from a book of common prayer. We still had pews so we could get down on our knees. Now, to think this?

Frank Reed called a neighborhood meeting. He was a good politician, having successfully barred our post office from carrying Madonna and child stamps, and a man we could trust. We met on his lawn and tried to brain-storm some way to manage the crisis as the sun inched higher in the sky.

“First order of business.” Frank hiked up his shorts. “Who here's got a gun?”

“And why do we need firearms?” Leonina asked. She refused to let her children play with water pistols.

“In case they declare martial law,” Frank said. “In case the shit goes down. Show of hands. Anybody?”

But we didn't. None of us did.

“Maybe we should wait it out,” Dr. Sherman said. He made the case for mass hysteria; perhaps we were under the effects of some psychotropic substance released into the drinking water. Terrorist cells could be anywhere.

Mary O'Connell shook the ziploc bag of her husband's ashes in his face, furious and mute.

“Cool it, cool it,” Frank said. “Any other suggestions?”

Lawrence Walsh raised his hand. “Why don't we setup a neighborhood watch? We could take turns walking the perimeter in teams of two. You know, assign shifts throughout the night.” His partner, Alan, suggested we make uniforms, something basic in black. Alan had a great sense for fashion.

We were still organizing and dividing the neighborhood into zones when the Mormons came by that afternoon. The Mormons handed each of us a pamphlet, all smiles and excessive hygiene. “The world is not lost,” the leader said. “Salvation is still at hand.” He wore a tie and a pressed short-sleeve white shirt and his hair was slicked back behind his ears. On the shirt was pinned a black plastic nametag a dentist might wear. He called himself an Elder; he appeared to be twenty-two.

“We believe in the Atonement of sin,” he said, thumping his hand on a Bible. “We believe in Christ, who has yet to return. We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” He described heaven as a family reunion, with our children and our children’s children and so on encircling us like stars. Mary O’Connell broke down in tears.

Before he had finished, the Jehovah’s Witnesses came up the other side of the block. The Witnesses wore suits; they had copies of the Watchtower showing blissfully happy people of varying races. “We believe that the earth will remain forever,” their leader shouted over the Elder. “That all persons, living and dead, who will fit in with Jehovah's purpose for a beautified, inhabited earth may live on it forever. What has happened today is a trick of the devil. Earth will never be depopulated. Earth will never be lost. The dead will rise from their graves in their bodies and this is proof the Earth has been cleansed.”

Hours passed. We listened to one side and the other. Each time we thought the Mormons were right, the Witnesses would refute them. Each time we thought the Witnesses were right, the Mormons would refute them. After a while, we became hungry. Frank took control. “I think you all need to leave,” he said. “We’re going to eat and no one’s about to say grace for anyone here.”

We gathered up food for a BBQ. In such a time, we reasoned, we needed to come together. Leonina tended the vegan grill; Alan minded a lactose-free station. Even Mary cheered up, pitching in with a bowl of ambrosia salad, until some joker brought deviled

eggs and she fell to pieces again. We were muddling through, trying to make the best of it.

Some of us had lived through the Kennedy assassination and could tell you, with accurate detail, every feature of the room we were in when we heard JFK had been shot. This was not as exciting; we were all lazing around Frank's backyard half-listening to NPR, until the reporter broke down in tears. "The President is among the missing," he said. A sad turn of events maybe, but we never liked the President very much anyway. Then the announcement came the Vice President went missing too, even though they were never supposed to travel together.

Also, it seemed, the Secretary of State. And the Secretary of the Treasury. Plus the Secretary of Defense and Attorney General. Then the Secretary of the Interior, Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Commerce, and Secretary of Labor. The list didn't stop there: the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Secretary of Transportation, and Secretary of Energy – the entire Presidential cabinet all dust, all gone, all missing – except one. The Secretary of Education, Andrew Markowitz, a nice Jewish boy from Massachusetts and a Democrat, no less, picked up as a bi-partisan gesture, was the only one passed over.

It was quiet in the field behind Jack's house. A small cloud in the shape of an up-turned umbrella – some said a cross – floated by. We moved closer to the radio; this *was* news. "Ladies and gentleman," the reporter said. "The new President-elect of the United States, Dr. Andrew Markowitz."

"Jesus Christ!" Lawrence Walsh cried.

"I guess that's right," Leonina said. "He finally helped us win an election."

The rest, we're sure, you know by now. Forty-eight of the fifty states went blue (Utah didn't believe it; New Hampshire didn't care). We overturned every lousy political decision in the last thirty years and sure, a few abortion clinics opened next to Starbucks and maybe three or four men married their horses. Still, we lifted the embargo on Cuba and merged currencies with Canada and later, feeling a little guilty, with Mexico as well.

But that first night, after our children had been put to bed, we sat in our living rooms, marveling at how quickly the world could change. Faith is hope in the face of all other evidence. Our long national nightmare was over! We looked at our husbands and wives and decided to go to Joe's Bar & Grill where Happy Hour ran through the night, every night.

We wanted to celebrate with a beer and a good friend. You have to understand, it seemed like heaven on earth. Oh, when the Christians of the world disappeared, we danced and sang and drank until dawn and there was no one – no one! – to make us feel guilty about it the day after.