

# APOCALYPSE TOURISM

By Henry Felsman

# Apocalypse Tourism

## PART I

With that certain sexiness that only doom knows, the idea of impending apocalypse had seduced and captured the imagination so totally that it was, needless to say, giving life a strange new feel. What had once been, in more innocent times, a singular linear experience, had now become a series of once-in-a-lifetime events, each self-contained and full of poetry. You would meet a friend and think: I hope not, friend, but it might be a long time before we meet again. And the whole conversation, the whole interaction, the whole round-trip it took to make this perhaps final encounter happen... each of these events, however measured, was perfect, was whole, made absolute sense and was completely and utterly in line with the cosmos. And like bubbles beginning to multiply in a pot of water heating up to an inevitable yet still-distant boil, these events lived and died underneath a similarly romantic intuition with respect to the future. Visions, in lieu of unimaginable catastrophe, of living in your sixties off the Spanish coast, reunited with an early love. Wishful, fetishistic visions, and yet, such was the promise of light in the dark, the cool air above a pot of boiling water. Born a hundred years ago, I might have called this vision Heaven. But this was different, and Heaven here and now, for me, was simply: the calm after the storm.

So *this* was the storm. Here and now. Summer 2017. We had just arrived in Montreal, the first destination on a road trip in search of signs of the apocalypse that would take us on a loop through Toronto and

abandoned Buffalo and then back to Philadelphia. In my 28 years as an American, it was my first time in Canada.

It felt foreign, or more so than I expected, more like Europe, or a European movie set. But of course, this was not Canada alone inspiring this impression, but something more specific, namely *French* Canada. The speech, the scents, the white noise: these were all French, all European. Properly put, it was a feeling of having just driven from Philadelphia to Europe, in a day. And this fueled our touristic adrenaline, this placebo momentum built up from having traveled to the point of damn near time-traveling, propelling us three young millennial dandies from landmark to landmark, hilltop to waterfront, café to pub, all in a very real, non-placebo matter of hours. Every window sign in French, every single one, why not, would elicit a reading aloud, a laugh, and a witty comment to boot. About half of the women that each of us noticed, we all praised together, in singular harmony.

Today was Day 2. We each wore big tinted paper-rimmed glasses from the Rio Tinto Alcan Planetarium, acquired for free that Monday morning after a frantic bicycle chase through the otherwise tranquil residential backstreets of Royal Mountain. We watched from a bench in Parc La Fontaine, the three of us all wearing those ridiculous paper glasses, sharing a typically touristic picnic of beers, leftover poutine, and Gatorade. The once-in-a-lifetime solar eclipse came on slow and remained slow; we were too far north to witness the full spectacle. But regardless, we were enchanted; there was nothing we'd rather be doing in that city at that time. When finally, after about half an hour, the sun was partially eclipsed, about halfway eclipsed, which was as much as it could be from our perspective in Quebec, we all stood, and all said something to the effect of "whoa, weird," and then the moon began to pass, and the sun began to wax, quicker than the moon ever waxes, though always as a growing crescent, never a gibbous, and we began to leave the park.

But before we left completely, we each chose to give away our glasses, each to a different group of locals, or to whom we assumed were locals, little groups of locals that had all been looking at us like we were

either crazy tourists, or just well-informed locals. We put our heads down, a small gang of traveling Samaritans, and walked up the path that led to the street. That's when we noticed the ground. The reflection through the trees. Hundreds of half-moons, or thick crescent suns, an endless fractal pattern through the trees of apples bitten once. Hundreds, thousands; hundreds of thousands. Incredible, incredible. But all the press, and all the people, all over social media, everywhere... Everybody was talking about the sun, the one in the sky, and maybe to a lesser extent the moon, but no one – *no one*, we imagined – was talking about the infinite, once-in-a-lifetime arrays of shadows on the ground.

We made this comment to each other, the three of us, in some combination, making the point and agreeing with one another. And then we got back on the road and we never really spoke of it again.

## PART II

Anyone who has ever outgrown his or her youth in the City of Brotherly Love remembers a time when nights out drinking concluded with night-caps on the porch among friends. And anyone will tell you that it is here that companions, once tied to one another merely by circumstance, become true friends. Real friends. Good friends. But it is also here that silence becomes your friend. And not everyone will tell you that.

At some point on the porch, in the warm, late spring pre-dawn hours during just such a silence, I looked out at the dark rowhomes across the street, and the few scattered lights among them, red white and blue, and remembered, as if it was what I had been trying to remember all along, the half-moon shadows in Montreal. As usual, we had been discussing the apocalypse: specifically, why the collective “we” tend to avoid talk of the apocalypse, if we can help it. In another state of mind, this would certainly have struck me as ironic; but here on the porch, it only reminded me of those enigmatic French Canadian shadows. I was just about to bring this up, when, turning to my friends and locking eyes, it became apparent to us

on the porch together, within that silence we had shared, that we had failed to bring up, or even failed to notice, the fact that there were four police cars and an ambulance idling across the street, lights flashing silently, and that they had been there for at least the past half hour. That's how long it seemed; of course, none of us could recall them showing up, we admitted to each other. We had been too involved in our own conversation, not the current one about the apocalypse, but the much longer conversation that had led up to it, a story about the fight that had taken place earlier that night.

Two of us, my friend and I, had witnessed this fight and been recounting it to our third friend. This friend, our single audience member, had been with us earlier that night, but had gone home before the action had really begun.

We left the bar, we began. Like how so many stories begin; or rather, like the reverse of how so many jokes begin. We had been walking west on Walnut, between 18th and 19th, we said, when we heard the sound of an argument, coming from up ahead, but out of sight, around the corner. We picked up the pace. At 19th, we peered right, and there we saw the source of the sound. A girl with a buzz cut and t-shirt, her back to us, was hollering back and forth with a group of girls. These girls, it seemed worth mentioning to our friend on the porch, were all in black cocktail dresses and heels. Suddenly, the buzz cut girl began to approach the cocktail dress girls, appearing to zero in on one girl. But the group of girls quickly mobilized, instinctive as any herd in the natural world, four of them forming a barrier around the targeted girl. Seeing this barrier, the buzz cut girl charged.

My good friend reacted decisively, to his credit; I had hesitated for a second, dumbfounded. He caught the buzz cut girl before she hit the barrier of cocktail dress girls, and at first, it seemed that he had broken up the fight. While continuing to holler at the buzz cut girl now in my good friend's arms, the cocktail dress girls boarded a special bus – not a city bus, but a bus just for them – of girls (surely twenty or thirty of them) all in black cocktail dresses. We left the buzz cut girl to herself and continued on.

But only for a few steps; one of the girls in cocktail dresses (at this pace of action, they would have remained indistinguishable to anyone, any stranger, not just me) had re-emerged from the shelter of her special bus, and was now shrieking at the girl with the buzz cut, and the buzz cut girl turned to charged again. This time, we were too late. Buzz cut girl ran up to the shrieking girl in the cocktail dress, and within seconds, after a single blow to the side of the face, the girl with the buzz cut had been knocked to the sidewalk.

As the victorious cocktail dress girl was led back onto the bus by half a dozen others of her kind, the girl with the buzz cut and t-shirt remained down. We went over to her. She was bleeding badly, rubbing blood all over her face, from a wound that looked to be just above the eye.

A cop pulled up in his car. "Everything alright?" he said.

"Yeah," we said. "All good."

The cop hesitated before nodding. "Alright," he said, mistrustful, but also grateful – a rare and, as such, a remarkable combination.

The buzz cut girl was covering her face with her hands, tears mixing in with the blood. My friend and I didn't know what to do. We had just told the cops all was good, or all would be good; in other words, we had taken responsibility.

We told the girl to come with us, to get off the main pedestrian street. Then we told her to sit. We needed napkins. McDonald's was our best chance. I ran. I got a handful of napkins. I ran back. My friend was sitting with the girl on a dark stoop. Her hands were still all over her face, far bloodier by now. We offered her the napkins. She refused. "Why were we helping her?" she might have been thinking. "What did we want from her?" We insisted she take the napkins. Again she refused, this time with an arm bar. She had too much pride. We told her she's bleeding. We told her to take the napkins and wipe her face so she wouldn't get stopped by the cops. And this worked, to a point; reluctantly, she took the napkins, the whole stack of them, and wiped her face for a few seconds. Then she stood up, threw the bloody stack onto the sidewalk, and stormed off, careening side to side, drunk and concussed, back into the heart of the city.

Now back on the porch, back home, we watched the team of police officers carry out a chair from the rowhome across the street. Seated on the chair was our neighbor – a neighbor we had never met, but nonetheless our neighbor – passed out with his head drooped down to the side, bobbling like an old and broken jack-in-the-box. We poured whiskey and watched the pallbearer policemen load the ambulance and drive off. Bringing up the half-moon shadows from Montreal seemed totally irrelevant, now. Instead, we watched the woman from across the street, our neighbor’s wife or girlfriend, who we had also never actually met, walk into the street, walk back up her steps, walk back into the street, walk up and down the block, walk back inside, walk back outside, get into the car in front of her home, and drive off into the darkness.

The next night, we saw both of them back home again, on the porch across the street. Man alive, and woman. Observing, we talked about how we had no idea what in hell, the previous night, we had observed.

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On the last day of class, in which I was one of only five students, I asked my professor, point blank, what he thought the global population would be in the year 2150.

“Twenty fifty?” he said.

“Twenty-*one* fifty,” I said firmly. This was graduate school, the final class, my last chance.

He leaned back in his rolling desk chair, hands interlocked behind his head, the desk chair ready to roll. He glanced at the young Assistant Professor auditing the class. She said nothing.

He looked me right in the eye. “One billion,” he finally said, firmly as I had asked him. And yet, also with a hint of dream. He glanced over at his colleague again.

She again said nothing.

“Thank you,” I said. I appreciated his honesty. One billion people. Both a pessimistic and optimistic guess. Lots of suffering. *Lots*. Utter

catastrophe. Unprecedented suffering. A 90% loss of human life. Ten billion, expected by 2050, down to just one billion by 2150. But at the same time, one billion still alive. One billion, the population back to what it was roughly at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. One billion, the homeostasis to which our species will inevitably return. One billion, from which we will continue to push the limits of our biological and environmental constraints, aiming for the ever-receding Kingdom of God, via an evolving genetic and moral code of conduct, shaped endlessly by trial and error and great acts of unity in the face of what we may only ever comprehend as utter catastrophic chaos.

One billion of us. A chance for our grandchildren, mine and yours. A chance.

### PART III

That winter, at an existential crossroads, I took a trip to Bolivia to meet the girl with whom I envisioned spending the apocalypse in 30-40 years. Just when we needed to, we met an old Romanian “goods” smuggler (he was adamant he never smuggled drugs, only “goods”) and his 20-year-old first-generation American nephew.

Well, first we met the nephew. “You guys have to meet my uncle,” the nephew said. “He’s *absolutely* fucking insane.”

They were both named Sam. The uncle was Big Sam. The nephew was Young Sam. We had met Young Sam hiking up a mountain. We met Big Sam at his hotel patio. He was in a recliner, with his shirt unbuttoned and his big sunburnt belly out, smoking calmly and, prior to our intrusion, alone.

After speaking to us for about fifteen minutes, somewhat mistrustfully but at the passive insistence of Young Sam, Big Sam invited us to join him and his nephew in the morning for a day trip through the mountains – by taxi. The mountains around Coroico are meant to be seen from a mountain bike speeding down Death Road at some 30-40 mph, but



as Big Sam put it, “you don’t see anything, because you’re looking down the whole time, afraid for your life.” Plus, Big Sam added, he (Big Sam) is old and fat he has done the “Death Road” many times before, and it gets more touristy, and more expensive, every year. Just in general, it’s not all it’s made out to be, and this driver, I know him, and he’s giving me a discount, just 100 Bolivianos (about \$14) for the entire day. But you decide.

That night, while the girl with whom I envisioned spending the apocalypse rested in our hostel, I met Young Sam in the Plaza Principal. We went into a small corner store, bought big bottles of Bolivian beer, and walked downhill, looking for a remote yet safe place to drink. We settled on the bleachers of an empty soccer field, overlooking the dark, invisible mountains. There, Young Sam prepared me for the day ahead, explaining a few things about his uncle. How he believes in the apocalypse. How he believes in aliens – specifically, ancient alien civilizations, including the Tiwanaku in the area that is now here, present-day Bolivia, and of course, the ancient Egyptians. How he has sailed around the world, smuggling. How he comes to South America every year, and has at least for the past 25 years, for about 3-4 months at a time.

But of course, I wanted to hear all these things from Big Sam himself.

The next day, Big Sam did not disappoint. In the backseat, window rolled down, Big Sam smoked and talked, talked and smoked, smoked and talked, happy, I thought, to be smoking and talking to people in English with whom his nephew (who couldn’t speak Spanish and who didn’t smoke) could also talk. Coroico, Big Sam said, was one of his favorite places in Bolivia, maybe all of South America, maybe all of the world. But... *was*. He comes back here every year, and it makes him sad. The increased tourism. The new development sprouting up all over, on the mountains across the valley, or along Death Road. The changing character of the compact little town. The new vegetarian restaurants. The girl with whom I envisioned spending the apocalypse challenged Big Sam’s pessimism. This was one of the most beautiful places she has ever been, she said in Spanish. Her English was poor. She was vegetarian.

“It’s still very beautiful. That you are right,” Big Sam replied in Spanish. “But you should have seen it before.”

Carefully, I tried steering the conversation to the future, to the apocalypse. But keeping with the Spanish, so that the girl with whom I envisioned spending the apocalypse could understand.

“What do you think is the future of Coroico?” I said. “What will it be like in 30-40 years?”

“I don’t want to think about that now,” Big Sam said, releasing the smoke from his nose out the window with a silent sigh. “Let’s just enjoy the view in silence, for a minute.”

It was a minor setback. But after I shared my story, about how I met the girl sitting between us, how we met as fellow solitary tourists in Shanghai, how I followed her to Buenos Aires, and now to Bolivia – and, though I left out this part, will lead or follow her in 30-40 years to the Spanish coast, just north of Barcelona, as the whole world burns and humanity comes together – Big Sam opened up again. He began smuggling in the first grade, he said, growing up near the Bulgarian border in communist Romania. He had a little boat, and he would travel back and forth with his first-grade friends, trading soda, and other items rationed to the town in excess, for sneakers, mostly sneakers, which, significantly, had become abundant in Bulgaria back then, thanks to the magic of capitalism. Eventually, he smuggled his way around the world, marrying three times, most recently, back when he was 50 years old, to an 18-year-old prostitute from the Solomon Islands, with whom he is now divorced and has been divorced from for several years. Today, he runs ponzi schemes in Chicago until he gets caught, at which point he declares bankruptcy, renounces his possessions, and finds refuge in South America for 3-4 months, or until he can legally work again in the United States. Inevitably, that time comes, at which point he returns to Chicago, develops a new ponzi scheme, etc. Twenty-five years he’s been coming to South America, he said, reminding us. Make of that what you will.

Later that afternoon, on the way back, after a day of bonding through activity, something like that, I finally felt sufficiently comfortable to ask Big

Sam about aliens, the Tiwanaku and the theory that they were aliens. Immediately, as if waiting all day for this topic to be raised, Young Sam turned around from the front seat. “Sam, tell them about the Inca!”

“*You* can tell them about the Inca.”

“No, you just tell them,” Young Sam said. “You’re the one who believes it. How the Inca was just one person.”

“The Inca King,” Big Sam began. He put out his cigarette with his fingers. He looked out the empty car window, took out his cigarette box, and put the cigarette butt into the box. He spoke around deep breaths, as if talking to us younger travelers were boring the life out of him. “Inca is not plural. It’s singular. One King. That all the people follow...”

“And the one King was an alien,” Young Sam chided in.

“Yes, an alien...”

And we learned that day that there were several ancient alien civilizations. The Harappan. The Egyptians. The Tiwanaku. The Incas, kind of, but not really, since they were not alien but instead learned from and worshiped the alien Inca King. And the Jews, who we learned were not aliens, but unique among human beings in that they were the only human society to be enslaved by two alien civilizations: the Egyptians, and the Babylonians. That’s why they know so much about money. Because slavery can only exist in the lexicon so long as money, and paid labor, exists in the lexicon.

“And so what happened to these ancient alien civilizations?” I said. “Some apocalyptic event?”

“I don’t know that anything happened,” Big Sam said, smoke coming out his nose. “Corruption?” he suggested, smirking at us mysteriously, and then letting out a hearty, reflective laugh.

## PART IV

I was visiting my oldest friend in a Jersey Shore town that I was taught was a good bet to be underwater within 30-40 years. The bar was

right on the beach, and there was a fairly large outdoor section whose little fence extended out onto the sand. There were beach chairs and picnic tables, but since it had just stopped raining, they were all wet and empty.

Beyond the little fence, large rocks extended into the sea and pointed in the direction of the full moon. The moonlight reflected off the dark water and fanned out toward us, creating the impression that we were staring down an empty highway, decently lit, and covered with a quarter-inch of rain.

I walked toward it, about as far as I could go, right up to the little fence. I looked back at my oldest friend. He stood a good deal back, back near the wet seats. My beer was in a clear plastic cup and filled to the brim. If I squeezed, it would spill, so I took a sip. Then I lifted one of my legs up into the air and leaned vulnerably over the top of the little fence, trying to catch myself with my non-beer hand by placing it on top of the little fence, so I could steady myself before lifting my second leg over. But the fence was too high. My first foot could not reach the ground on the other side, and the fence was not sturdy. The fence fell forward, as did I, and but, compounding my futility, since it was my non-beer hand that I had used to steady myself atop the fence as I attempted to high-step cleanly over, it was the beer hand that I had no choice but to use to steady my fall. There's nothing more to say about this other than that I spilled half my beer and fell elbow-first gently into the sand.

I got up quickly and looked back at my friend on the other side of the fence. I smiled; all was going according to plan. I hollered at my friend, motioning him over, suggesting we go sit on the rocks and look out into the water and at that highway of light. No, he said and shook his head. He had no interest. We locked eyes; it was as if we were children again, and I had just asked if he wanted to play, and he had said that he couldn't, that perhaps he had outgrown me as a friend. Only, that had never happened to us as children. And it was just at this point, amid this void, this purgatory between parallel universes, between childhood and adulthood, that the security guard came running down the steps, shining her light at me, telling me to stop, come over, what was I doing? I did. Obediently, I acquiesced.

Apologizing, hopping back over the toppled fence that I had toppled, I looked from my best childhood friend to the security guard and I said I didn't know.

So we sat on the wet benches for a little while, facing one another, talking about careers, beers, business, technology, and occasionally geography. It did not feel appropriate for me to bring up climate change and sea level rise. Inevitably, once our asses soaked up the wetness, and we were still the only ones outside, we stood up to head back towards the main bar area under the roof. On the way, we walked by the little fence I had climbed and toppled over and had looked at periodically throughout our conversation, thinking how this stupid little fence stood between my oldest friend and myself and the great abyss, and how our conversation may have been affected had we been sitting out on those rocks, under those stars, that moon. I did not share these thoughts aloud.

But I think I know what my oldest friend would have said, had I shared these thoughts. He would have asked me, how would it be different, if we were over there?

And I would have said, I don't know, maybe it wouldn't be any different.

And he would have thought that this meant I was feeling disappointed in our actual conversation, because I was imagining what our conversation could have been, how it could have been better. So what he would've *really* meant when he asked me how I thought our conversation would have been different, had it taken place on those rocks, was really, how could our conversation have been better?

And to that, I would have known exactly what to say: honesty. Calling a spade a spade.

And he would've said, what do you mean exactly? Go on.

And so on.

Until eventually, he reveals that he moved to the shore for a front row seat.

## PART V

I had just finished my first week at my new job as a so-called “consultant” when Hurricane Florence hit, my first job out of grad school, and it consisted of a variety of activities I would forever struggle to describe singularly, or ascribe to a single discipline, probably because I refused to call it what it actually was, which was simply: consulting. That first Friday, I came home exhausted and flicked on the news. I saw all my favorite cable news studio anchors, out of the studio and inside the hurricane at the edge of the Carolinas. You heard it all. Record wind and rain. Utter destruction looming. Billions of dollars in flood money. Days and days on end.

Finishing off my Styrofoam, coffin-shaped platter of by-now-cold Halal-truck chicken and rice, propping myself up off the couch by the elbow for the final bite, collapsing back onto said couch from whence I had propped up... In a food coma I had brought upon myself, already glassy-eyed from staring at a computer screen all week, I let hours of Hurricane Florence coverage wash over me. I absorbed very little – only that I was not there, and that others were. Others were, or would be, suffering, helping, drowning, rescuing, doing, being... And what was I doing? Who was I becoming?

When I was ten, I remember sitting in my den during Hurricane Floyd, playing solitaire on the floor because the power had gone out and that meant that the TV had gone out, too. School had been canceled. The rain resounded like an endless barrage of pebbles against the windows. It was dark in the middle of the day. I was not allowed to go outside. Nor down to the basement.

In high school, the summer after Hurricane Katrina, I spent four weeks sleeping on the floor of a suburban Mississippi middle school classroom and doing various “hurricane relief” tasks in the local community, which meant that whatever the community needed, we would do and call it “hurricane relief.” Which I liked. And which perhaps helps explain how I had ended up a “consultant.”

When I was 23 and living in Brooklyn, and Hurricane Sandy had knocked out the power in Lower Manhattan, I had my first brush with post-apocalyptic society. Without traffic lights, the traffic had slowed, more obedient than ever to the right-of-way of pedestrians. Without refrigeration, restaurants staged mass cook-outs and gave away free meat. Without radio, bar patrons sang songs, a cappella or accompanied by a ukulele unplugged.

But where was I now?

Weeks passed, and work continued. I liked my job, was good at it, was challenged, and was learning. I began seeing a girl who was very talented, very cultured, and very good to me. So things were clicking. On a personal level, life was good. But only, it seemed, on a personal level. One weekend, I went back to New York City and went on a beautiful bike ride with a friend up the East River Bikeway that led us to the United Nations Secretariat Building. We docked our bikes and walked over. It looked like a giant computer chip, the UN Building did, one of us said. It looked like where the Architect in *The Matrix* works, said the other of us. It's amazing that it's both transparent all over, and as imposing as it is. All clear glass, and yet, impenetrable. A week later, the UN's IPCC Report *Global Warming of 1.5°C* came out and I thought of the world ending, and the world's most urgent warning a product of that building. And rumbling on a bus across the Bolivian Plateau, past Lake Poopó, which is big and blue on the map but in reality has been completely dried up for three years, having just kissed the girl with whom I envisioned spending the apocalypse Goodbye, for the final time perhaps. And became very sad, very concerned. Even on a personal level.

Another couple of weeks passed. Work was still good. Hurricane Michael struck Florida as by certain measures the most powerful storm in 50 years. My new relationship was budding nicely; I was beginning to contrast this new girl favorably with the girl with whom I once envisioned spending the apocalypse, since the life I was now able to envision was, I dreamed, how life might be should there be no apocalypse. A month passed. Wildfires in California raged, the country's worst in a hundred

years. The name of the wildfire, since all natural disasters had names these days, was Camp Fire. It was the kind of name that made one do a double-take in the direction of reality. Camp Fire, really? But even stranger was the name of the town in which the Camp Fire originated: Paradise, CA.

Another month passed. I turned 30 years old. I was changing. Like a photograph left out in the sun, the way photographs used to exist in physical space and be left out in the sun, the girl with whom I had once envisioned spending the rest of my life, but not the apocalypse, had begun to fade in detail, until inevitably it occurred to me, with singularity-like clarity, that perhaps I knew even less about her now than I had when we first met. And then like a dream she was gone and reality set in.

## PART VI

It was time for another trip, and the choice of where to go was easy: Shenzhen, China. It was a city I had heard so much about in graduate school. My professor had called it “the greatest urban planning success story of the past 25 years.” And when I had heard that, it dawned on me that this meant, logically, that it was representative of the future. That Shenzhen was the perfect rose into which all budding megacities, from Addis Ababa to Zanzibar City, could inevitably bloom. And as much as I feared the apocalypse, I craved the future.

But most importantly, one of my best friends was living there.

On the plane ride over, flying Air China, I was pleased to find several apocalypse-themed western movies: *Geostorm*, with Gerard Butler; *How It Ends*, with Forest Whitaker; *Mad Max: Fury Road*, with Tom Hardy and Charlize Theron; *Snowpiercer*, my favorite in the genre, at the time, due to its emphasis on the human response to climate change specifically; and *Children of Men*, with Clive Owen, one of the most influential of its kind since Al Gore’s iconoclastic *An Inconvenient Truth* in my opinion truly ushered apocalypse entertainment into the mainstream. I had seen them all except for *Geostorm*, so I began watching that. But after twenty minutes, I



had lost my patience, finding that, for my taste, it focused too much on the personal relationships of the characters, rather than on the actual storm, the tangible titular apocalypse.

When the stewardess addressed the passengers in front of me, I woke up. I was hungry. “Pork or beef?” I heard the brochure-caliber Chinese stewardess ask the passengers in English.

“Is there a vegetarian option?” asked the one in front of me.

The Air China stewardess hesitated, like a computer that does not understand a command. “But this is all we have,” she said.

The passenger in front of me sighed. “Pork, then,” she said.

The stewardess continued her routine. A moment later, it was my turn.

“Pork, please,” I said.

On the second flight, which departed from Beijing, there were very few western movies. I tried a Chinese comedy and fell asleep.

I woke up to turbulence. Beeps, voices, overhead lights. I sat up straight and gripped the seat in front of me, looking around. Others were looking around, too. My heart – I became conscious of it. I thought of the last email I had sent, the last person I had talked to, my mother, my brother. My uncle, my aunt. A girl named Carolina Perez, who I had thought of before on another plane experiencing turbulence, another time I had asked myself: are you prepared to die? I thought of the friend I was visiting. I thought of the girl I had met in Bolivia, who had broken my heart, only to patch it up again, once upon a time. But then the turbulence subsided, and I remembered why I was flying to Shenzhen, not Bolivia nor Buenos Aires, not this time. I found *Dynasties* in the TV section and learned about chimpanzee bands, lion prides, and emperor penguins for the rest of the flight, how complex they are.

Shenzhen did not disappoint. With its electric cars and electric bikes, silent as a herd of wild animals (which we forget can be quite silent, going about their business), and its silent, motorless boulevards. Its wide sidewalks and narrow side-streets full of people, always – but not too full, always with just enough room to walk anywhere as fast as you like. And its

cashless capitalism, where even the fruit-cart peddlers have a barcode you can scan with your phone, rather than pay in cash, oh so cumbersome cash, to buy oranges and dragonfruit and sliced pineapple that, here in the delta, are always in season.

A week later I said goodbye to my friend on a narrow sidewalk in Hong Kong. I turned away without looking back, no sentimental shit, and marched ahead defiantly. Within seconds, tears had filled my eyes, as was becoming the norm for me, as I had been getting older, during moments of deep appreciation – of deep gratitude to a God that must exist in some shape or form, in some universe or dimension – for all that is good in life. I was tearing up, grateful, because I did not know when the next time was that I would see my friend.

## PART VII

Back in Philly, back on the porch. My roommate had just gotten married and was moving out tomorrow, to a new apartment in New York, with his new wife, a longtime girlfriend. She was living with us now and sleeping in the other room, resting up for the long day ahead.

They had gotten married in Nicaragua and I had flown down with my other roommate to contribute what we could to the celebration of true eternal love. Within minutes of our arrival, we had been handed Tequila shots and were being directed to the top of a water slide. The water slide lasted for four days, and the Spanish birdsong of its final splash – the laughter of the women, so high-pitched and full of excitement, that one is born into when one emerges from underwater – had been echoing on indefinitely in my memory. And now, my good friend, my roommate of three years, now married, was moving out.

The ice in our whiskeys had melted and we refilled without ice, the kitchen so far from the porch, all the way down the hall. We talked about technology, the future, the prospect of children, immortality. I wanted to live forever, I said. My roommate was not convinced he wanted the same,

but he was open to hearing my argument. I want to find out what happens, I said. Want to see how this movie plays out.

Talk veered, time passed.

At some point, he said: “What are you looking *forward* to?”

It was not clear to me if this was a change of subject or not, or if it was a callback to the topic of immortality. The only clue was that he had emphasized *forward*.

“This year, that I have planned?” I said. “Or in life?”

He did not answer right away.

“In life,” he said finally.

I did not have a readymade answer. Unable to imagine the future on command, my thoughts landed on the previous midnight, when I had taken the last subway home. The car was almost full. The man on the seat in front of me had his legs out in the aisle, his head hunched down over his phone. I looked at his phone, looked away, and back again. Something about the shape and tone on that enormous iPhone 10 screen. Was he watching pornography? Away and back. He was watching pornography! Away and back. Shamelessly, in the middle of the aisle in a crowded subway car, bright as day. The woman on his screen was stripteasing. Away and back. Was this pornography, or was this his girlfriend, livestreaming? Either way, it was shameless.

As I pondered all of this, a young girl, maybe 16 years old, walked up in the aisle from behind where I sat. Since the man watching porn was hunched over and out into the middle of the aisle, the young girl had to stop before him; there, she turned, standing between him and me, facing me and the rest of the subway car, her back to the man watching porn on his phone. “Excuse me, everyone,” she began. She did not seem to be on drugs, did not smell strongly of anything. “I’m sorry to bother you this evening, but I was hoping that maybe one of you might be able to help me get something to eat, spare some change or a little bit of food, anything. I’m really hungry. Anything would help. Again, I am sorry to bother you, I’m just really, really hungry. Please...” Behind her, the man hunched over his phone did not stir, eyes fixed on the ass and vagina of the woman now

bent over on his screen. “Anything would be a blessing.” The woman on the man’s phone had turned around and was now massaging her own breasts, her face off-screen. “I have not had a meal... Anything would help. I would be really, very thankful. So thankful.” And then, suddenly, as if in true fairy tale fashion, by the grace of God, a young man walked up to the young girl and handed her an aluminum plastic-sealed platter. He asked, would she take a chicken parm dinner? “Oh my gosh. Really? You really don’t have to. Are you sure? All of it? Okay, thank you! Wow, thank you so much!” And then, since the second miracle always comes easier, as the young girl turned around to put the hot meal into her backpack, the man watching porn on his phone on the subway looked up and met her eyes.

Hope, I thought. Hope.

“In life?” I said, thinking. The tree across the street looked different tonight. Gone was the profile of a face that I had become used to seeing in its leaves and branches, deformed beyond recognition, the branches grown, the leaves multiplied, the eye of the face having closed and canceled the whole face with it. “I think... I am looking forward to being hopeful again. Like I was before grad school, or when I was younger. Having that same kind of hope again. Being optimistic about the way things might play out. I’m not optimistic right now, but I’m optimistic about one day, once again, being optimistic. If that makes sense.”

My roommate smiled.

“How about you?” I said.

He said he was looking forward to being married, to be living in New York, being a New York architect, his dream since he was a kid, being married it bears repeating again, and one day maybe having kids. In short, he was looking forward to all the good things in life there was to look forward to. He fidgeted with one hand with the empty whiskey glass on the table. Here was a man with his head screwed on straight, I thought. And tomorrow he’d be gone.

## PART VIII

It had been two years since Montreal, since this search for signs of the apocalypse began. I was getting desperate. I hadn't found anything, only those little hints that apocalypse movies could provide. Except that really, they were not so little. When I closed my eyes and tried to imagine the future, nothing came to mind but them, yet they dominated the mind, just scenes from movies, apocalypse movies of all kinds, and the bleak outlook they held, the grays and browns of smoke and desert sand. And no comfort was to be taken from the idea that these futures depicted were only imaginary, for the very existence of such imagined futures was also real. Man-made and cultivated, incubated in cinema, the apocalypse was here, between conception and the final cut to be released in theaters everywhere.

In contrast with this backdrop, this mosaic of bleak Hollywood futures, I had only my own experience: the past, and the presently passing. And the presently passing was beautiful. Everywhere I looked, there was hope, good deeds, laughter, warmth. Each time I would meet a friend, my heart would swell with not just nostalgia, but the excitement and gratitude at being able to immediately trade this nostalgia in for the real thing, the present, at any moment. And each time, I would make this trade: a little nostalgia (a catch on a lawn, a trunk full of empty beer cans) for the present (a full glass of beer). And then a little bit of the present for a quick fix of nostalgia. And then nostalgia for the present. Back and forth, like breathing. And then sinking back again, eyes crossing beneath the surface, back into memory, trading a little fresh air of the present back for a little underwater nostalgia once again. The downside, of course, was that I could never will myself to remain present, to resist the warm temptation of nostalgia. If meeting a friend I had known for ten years, for example, I would simply not be able to help myself. My friend would begin talking, and I would immediately notice myself falling into the same thought pattern: first, I would think about how I had known this friend for ten years; second, I would wonder if this friend was thinking the same thing as I was; and third, I would dismiss the idea and attempt to listen once more,

returning to the present, though never quite catching up all the way, in endless struggle with the pull of the past. And then eventually, this friend and I would part ways again, and our parting would be like its own kind of apocalypse, an encounter ending forever, a present experience born into memory.

So this was my life, I thought: imagining the apocalypse unoriginally, and saying goodbye to friends. I looked at the time. My phone had thirty percent battery. I checked under the seat again for another outlet, but it was just like the one by the window, and I didn't have an adapter. In Prague, I would have to transfer to another train. Just make it to that train, I thought. Just make it to Dresden.

In Bratislava, I had said goodbye to my friend and then rushed to the station, only for the train to board thirty minutes late. Since originally, before the delay, I would have had only twenty minutes in Prague to transfer, I was now resigned to the fact that I would miss my next train. The best I could hope for now was that my phone would stay alive long enough to help get me on a later train, to get me to Dresden by the end of the night.

To save battery, I turned off the podcast I was listening to, a conversation about contemporary anti-semitism and the latest rise of European nationalism. As a Jew, about to visit Germany for the first time, I felt uneasy. This was a different kind of tourism. This was not Shenzhen, the beautiful future; nor Bolivia, the beautiful girl. This was Dresden, the horrible site of the merciless bombing by the Allied forces at the end of World War II, which I only knew about from reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut, 1969), and about which, beyond that, I knew nothing. And this was Germany, modern history's greatest villain. So what was I doing? Why not just spend the night in Prague, in charming Prague?

Years ago, while living in New York, there was nowhere in the world I had a greater desire to visit than Hiroshima, Japan. I don't know why, exactly. Perhaps it was just a kind of practical curiosity to see what a city looked like today that had experienced the apocalypse only 70 years ago, to gain some insight into the future of city planning, into what human beings

would construct if given a “clean slate,” and through this insight develop some deeper understanding of the human condition that might serve me in my professional career, whatever that might one day become, or even in my relationships with friends, family, women... Or perhaps it was just to visit a post-apocalyptic city, to experience a true escape from the reality of living in New York, as far away from reality and as deep into the post-war, post-apocalyptic imagination as one could delve.

But Hiroshima was nothing like I imagined. It was far, far richer; far more than a memorial, it was a vibrant city of bright lights, crowds, and commotion, of local scents, flavors, and style, rivers and wires, backstreets and boulevards, boats and trains, sunshine, rainbows. The A-Bomb Dome was the single sign that the apocalypse once struck, the ruins of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, the only structure within the blast radius of the first atomic bomb in human history to detonate still standing seconds later, and only because the bomb had detonated directly overhead, just as it's calmest in the eye of the storm; the building's skeleton now a tourist attraction, but above all, a powerful symbol of resilience and remembrance. My friend and I drank vending machine beers and wandered the red light district, just wandering, only wandering, observing, passing through, lost on purpose, eating okonomiyaki and long, convenience store sushi rolls, as if they were popsicles. Taking the ferry to Miyajima and getting pickpocketed by a wild, yet ornamental, urban deer, en route to the floating Itsukushima Shrine, erected in the 6th century, (or around the same time that it is believed that aliens from outer space were teaching the Tiwanaku people of present-day Bolivia how to carve stone with the precision of a 21st-century 3D printer); taking the ferry three days later from Fukuoka to Busan; meeting this friend again by chance in New York years later; and saying goodbye, for God knows how long, again... and again...

The train pulled into Prague thirty minutes late, consistent with its delayed departure. I hurried off the platform, to orient myself as soon as possible. Within seconds, I found the big board of arrivals. Dresden, Dresden... Now boarding, thirty minutes delayed. Incredibly, the train to

Dresden had waited for the train from Bratislava, had waited for *my* train, to arrive! I caught the train, found a seat, and within seconds, it began to roll. Within seconds, everything within seconds. The great synchronization of society. A great symphony, in the presently passing of its grand finale.

Pulling into Dresden, Hiroshima on my mind.

## PART IX

Three days later, my good friend, who I had visited in Bratislava earlier in the week, and with whom I had been roommates in both Boston and New York, came to meet me in Berlin. He was the first of my friends to have kids, and as a father of two young boys ages 4 and 1, was also the friend that I would least likely have expected to travel with at this juncture in life. Of course, this unexpectedness made it all the more surreal, and his sacrifice – his leaving his family for a few days to meet me – made me all the more grateful. And this sense of surreality and gratefulness, this sensation and feeling, combined to create an effect on me so powerful that I thought in the moment it was the pinnacle of human experience. Like a sun-hot streak at the tables; like looking up in wild fascination at a woman with whom you can't believe you're making love; like the view of the infinite valley from the peak at which you gazed up in wonder only yesterday... Surreality and gratitude. As we walked the city, just weeks before the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, I told him what I had done the day before in Berlin, and the day before that in Dresden:

“You know that's the main reason I wanted to come here, to Berlin,” I said. “To see how Germany is dealing with climate change. To experience a ‘sustainable’ city...”

Surreally, in Dresden, two Germans in my hostel dorm room had, after talking to me for five minutes, recommended that in Berlin, I go visit the Futurium. It was free, they had said. And all about climate change.

My friend asked if I had learned anything useful, any German secrets, or new ideas.



“Nothing really new,” I said. “Mostly it was just kids with their parents and really dark, blunt truths about how we’re all going to die and suffer immensely. Need to waste less and invent new technologies. Honestly, I really appreciated it, not sheltering these kids. And why not tell kids the truth? It’s refreshing.”

At Alexanderplatz, my friend lit a cigarette and looked on his phone for a quote from Albert Einstein that he couldn’t remember offhand.

“Dresden was incredible,” I said. “Like a mini-Istanbul, only the shape of the domes are different...”

It was taking a little longer to locate the quote than he had anticipated.

“Dresden...” I continued on in fragments, about how it was at first, so dark and cold, so German and full of ghosts, my arriving at night with only fifteen percent battery to make it to the hostel, but then saved as if by divine intervention by finding myself alive and present on this big pedestrian boulevard, lights everywhere, people, opening onto a big plaza, beautiful old buildings, or new buildings but in the old style, all lit up, a guy with a guitar singing “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door,” two nuns singing “Hallelujah” for a crowd of tourists, as I climbed the stairs to pass over the bridge from Altstadt to Neustadt, the two main districts on either side of the river that translate so purely of heart to Old Town and New Town...

“The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe,” Einstein had said in 1946.

“So yeah, Dresden was incredible,” I said again.

Facing the Berlin Cathedral, the Fernsehturm Berlin TV Tower behind it looked like a prosthetic bell tower.

“Looking at some of the architecture, it was like, that was the Age of Man, back then, when people laid brick, stone. The Anthropocene. And now we have moved on into the Age of Machine,” I said of Dresden.

We walked around where the Wall once stood, walked where it still stands; we walked through the Holocaust memorial, down into its depths,

locking and unlocking eyes with passing strangers as they weaved in and out of the labyrinth, in and out of sight.

“It kind of forces you to make eye contact with all these people,” my friend said. “Just to avoid bumping into everyone. Creates an interesting effect.”

We looked for a bar.

“The thing about Treblinka was that they didn’t even record the names of the people they killed,” I said. “Think about that shit. Even as controversial as the death penalty is today, we still go massive lengths to record every detail of the process, the appeals, the due diligence, the final meal. They say it’s even more expensive to give someone the death penalty than life in prison. But the Nazis did not even record the *names...*”

It got dark, as we kept looking, looking for the perfect Berlin bar.

“An hour or two from train to gas chamber to grave,” I read on my phone, as we walked.

We stopped in a cafe to warm up.

“These patterns are found everywhere,” my friend said.

“Fractals...” I agreed, noticing the frothed milk in my latte.

“Spirals...” he said, stirring.

We left the cafe and kept walking, craving beer badly. Surreally, we found a bar called Dresden. From the outside, it looked wonderful inside.

And so there we sat in a bar called Dresden, in Berlin, talking about Richard Feynman’s explanation of sight as the sensation of light waves, about Renee Descartes’ evil demon, and how the goal of both these guys, and the goal of all science and philosophy, after all, is to convince oneself beyond all reasonable doubt that one is *not* living in a simulation. Or that things and sensations exist, and that whatever exists constitutes reality. That particles and waves can exist in reality. That information can exist and be true or false, and knowledge acquired. That one should not commit suicide. That a distinction exists between living and dying, and that living is more useful. That our most universal intuitions are true, for everyone and everything, forever. That an Old Town and a New Town can co-exist.

“It’s like you need to have sinned so terribly, to commit an act as terrible as the Holocaust, to experience the degree of guilt that Germans must feel now on some level and that is needed to be felt to be able to commit so totally to the path of redemption, the path that the whole industrialized world needs to be following right now,” we sung together. “We have sinned, but we do not yet feel guilty, and so we do not yet act.”

Long story short, it was a grand old time, drinking Berlin beer in Dresden and defining existence with this great friend from college. So grand, it was as if nostalgia had become an afterthought, then. So grand, and yet so simple.

## PART X

From Berlin, I flew to Oslo, and from Oslo to New York. From New York, I caught a midnight Megabus back to Philadelphia. I slept for as long as I could, got up to go to work the next day, and then came back home. I made dinner, some rice, beans, spinach, and tomatoes, all mixed together in a pan with some Mexican and Indian spices, some soy sauce, and some sour cream. As has always been the case, with every trip away I have ever taken, it felt like I had never gone away, like nothing that I had perceived to have experienced had ever really happened, like all that was real was just... the simulation, Descartes’ evil demon, particles and waves and nothing more. It was a feeling I always had and never understood.

Understanding has its limits.

As usual, I ate my dinner sitting on the couch, watching TV. I turned on the breaking news. Everything breaking, everything new. From down the hall, I heard the door open, creak, and then slam shut. Heavy footsteps on the hardwood.

“Hey, man,” I said between bites, eyes fixed on the current events passing through.

Since my old roommate had gotten married and moved out, I had a new roommate move in, a good friend of mine from grad school. For the

past few years, he had been living with his girlfriend, another grad school student, but she had graduated and gotten a job in New York. He had one more year to go.

“Hey, dude,” he said.

He put his things down and came into the kitchen.

We started talking.

“How was Berlin?” he said.

“Oh man,” I said, remembering Dresden, the magic of it all, the spirit, Altstadt, Neustadt, “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door” and “Hallelujah,” Martin Luther and Bach and the Fraunkirche, the old and new, the Age of Man and Age of Machine, Richard Feynman, and friendship... “Where to begin?”

I had a sudden desire to ask my roommate if he wanted to join me for a beer out on the porch. It was quite cold outside, November in Philadelphia, but the porch seemed to be the appropriate setting for my recounting him the experience. I didn’t know how I would tell it yet; I just had the sense that being out there on the porch would give me the boost, or perspective, that I needed to tell it properly, to convey in a clear, straightforward manner just how I had found all sorts of signs of the apocalypse in Dresden and Berlin, and how these signs all connected so naturally to the feelings and sensations that had stuck with me from past experiences in Montreal, Bolivia, the Jersey Shore, the future i.e. Shenzhen, or even from right here in Philly, etc. But it was just so cold outside, and so warm in here. To ask my roommate out to the porch, at this time of day and year, would be a show of sheer lunacy. It just wasn’t right.

Instead, I told an anecdote from Berlin that my roommate likely did not believe at all, because of how crazy it was, even though it really was true. It is a long story for another time, with several twists and turns of fate, all crucial to the telling, a story I will tell over and over again if given five whole minutes (a long enough time) to tell it within the proper context of a conversation about “this small world,” God, or the simulation (certainly not about the apocalypse), to tell and retell it so as to keep the impactful memory of Berlin alive and present, presently impacting. Not just

strengthening the memory through exposure to the present, but strengthening the present through exposure to the memory.

“Like it was too good to be true,” I concluded.

My roommate had begun cooking.

I cleared my plate and began washing the dishes.

As if making a show that I was a good roommate, I thought.

I laughed. What a ridiculous thought.

The porch was cold as I stepped out onto it alone. I turned the light on and sat down in one of the wooden chairs we kept out there. I blew hot CO<sub>2</sub> into my fists and then buried my hands in my warm jacket pockets. I did not hear any people in the porches and balconies across the street. There were a few dim lights on. I sat in silence. November Christmas lights, the kind that never go out. No people. A few dim lights also coming from inside. Occasionally a car would drive by. Lights flickered on and off, over the course of minutes, hours, years. No people, just signs of people.

I closed my eyes.

The hum of the motors from streets beyond sounded like a river.

Also a refrigerator.

It smelled of garbage. Also home.

One could get used to the cold, too.

Too good to be true, I thought.

And so it was.

True, and yet, too good to be so.

My eyes flickered one last time, capturing the silhouette of a squirrel on an electrical wire. Then it came for the squirrels, I thought, and I did nothing, hands clutching the felt of my inside pockets, listening as the silence filled with the kind of sounds that grow louder in darkness, which here in the city just means noticing the cars at different speeds, because I was not a squirrel, head racing with happy memories that spiral about and fall like stars into the shadow world of dream.

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