

The End of the World

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I spot this Tweet warning of one of those big rocky snowballs headed towards our planet and my brain goes numb and frozen, like after that thing at the Christmas party on that cruise ship with my bro's girlf, how I just sat on the deck for a while with my brain stuck in a loop 'cause I didn't have my Valiums. What's the difference between typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones? That's what I was stuck on that night. What's the worst out of comets versus meteors versus asteroids? Gotta find that shit out, pronto.

I pull the blinds down and look outside. I've never noticed how gross it is having all that diesel and soot blackening my nose, and how ugly all those bandages of tarmac are all over the road, and how concrete actually shines and reflects when it gets hot enough. Maybe we can keep an alleyway in a museum for nostalgia after the world ends.

I start making this list of what I should do first-off, tipping all the smokes and lollies out of the fruit bowl and trying to find a pen and paper then I'm like, Stuff it, no time. I shake a smoke out of a pack but I don't even want to put it in my mouth, it radiates a sticky, dusty smell and I'm like, Why? Fifteen bucks a bloody pack, bro. I want there to be a stirring in my pants, I want a hooded cobra to rise up and order me to find a female and get laid one last time, but all my dick wants to do is take a piss.

I decide the quickest way to get off is to cram my face with those rolls you get from the Vietnamese place, with that fatty brown duck meat that's like eating butter, and I start looking for the cordless to ring the restaurant 'cause I got no credit on my mobile but I've got this Mountain Dew in my hand and I spill it on a real good remote control and notice my hands are quivering and when I do pick up the phone the beeping of the voicemail makes me spazz out. My heart reminds me that it's inside me. It's like the vibrations of a scary ogre treading up the stairs. The voicemail? It'll be Mumsy, telling me to call my bro, but I don't need them bad vibes when it's the end of the world.

I haven't switched the handset off and I can hear the phone buzzing from the couch. Jeez, Mum's voicemails can be a total downer, you know, saying the postman's trying to send her to the poorhouse by misplacing her bills. It's just 'cause she never closes the lid of the postbox and her mail gets soaked until you can't read the letters. I always say stuff on the phone like 'Oh the rain musta wrecked the ten page letter I wrote ya' and she gets a stiffy about that even though I haven't written her jack since I was in school.

I think about the hot, crowded feeling of the rain falling on my ears when I would gather an armload of mum's laundry to bring in, well, my laundry. Mum? She wears the same crap every day, to leave more room in the wash. I still take my washing 'round to her now but I ain't got a clue who hangs it out for her. Her arthritis makes it too sore for her to squeeze the clothes pegs. I should put

something in the post for her right now but they won't deliver it in time, in mere hours the postman will be a sooty black skeleton with white donkey teeth jutting out of his screaming gob.

Thinking about Mumsy isn't a good use of my last hours. I have to get my head on straight. So the scientist who Tweeted the end was nigh, right, he's called Dr Amitesh Chhima and he works for that supercollider gimmick they got up in Switzerland. I'm suspicious about the two aitches thing in his last name so I read around, standing over my keyboard, no time for sitting, and I find some different spellings of his name, but apparently some of these Indian weirdoes do spell it that weirded-up way, with the two aitches. Go figure. Bro, I go to myself, if you survive this, somehow: learn more about India. Book a one way flight. Open up your chakra. Then learn about your ancestry. Travel to the old country. Clean your grandparents' graves.

I try to F5 Chhima's tweets but his page has disappeared. The post – about the end of the world – has been taken offline. Obliterated.

The obliteration has begun.

Or does he not want anyone to know? That's some typical New World Order government B.S. All that's left are posts about the conferences he's been to, and whining about where funding for science ventures is going and where it isn't. He writes about ice core samples, keeps using the word 'unsustainable.' Either he can't bear to tell the world and he's killed himself in despair or a ball of sulfurous outer-space diamond has crashed through his ceiling and pulverised his head. I feel seasick. Honking horns outside, making my eardrums bleed. Dr Chhima had gone where the future can't find him. This vision drips down over my eyes, of a whole corner of the world being ripped up by a burrowing tsunami, busting dirt and lava everywhere, the comet ploughing up the soil like when my little bro tried to divert the stream through our backyard. Matty. Matthew. The respectable brother. He wears a backpack everywhere, even inside, around the house, you should see him. I've never stood up for him when I should've. These grown-ups were picking on him one time, at the swimming pool, saying the lifeguards wouldn't give a fuck if he drowned. I had this girlfriend at the time and when she said I should stand up for my brother, I said he's not really my brother. Only half.

I take a dump and leave the door open, what the hell, listening to the familiar sounds in the toilet bowl and wondering as a species why we were never able to poop in front of each other.

I flush my last-ever shit and all I can think about for some reason is tipping rum into Sasha's hair, and Matty coming up with his Christmas hat on and even with his condition, you know, how he's got no throat and his flesh is all splotchy and wobbly like luncheon meat, he said those words to me and dried Sasha's tears with a red and green napkin with mistletoe printed on it and as I walked away, I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed the DJ had stopped and everyone from Sales was watching and –

I don't wash my hands. I seize the phone and crush it like it's just smart-mouthed me. I dial the first government number I can think of – Work and Income.

The hold music is a man calmly playing guitar and singing from deep inside himself. It's beautiful. It's sunrise on a cold beach with froth on the shore and soaked bits of black driftwood. I tap my foot on the ground. I need to piss again. They feel my urgency and answer.

'I just wanted to tell you,' I begin, and stop. I just want to tell you I slept with my Mongoloid brother's Mongoloid girlfriend? I pressured her into sex, and all Matty could do was shout state capitals at me?

'Sir, this is Prayag. Who I am speaking with, please Sir?' I can hear in his voice that he wears a shirt so crisp and creased it'd snap if you rubbed his back. I can tell he's never been in a fight his whole life. He's never done heaps gusty shit he should've. None of us have.

'What? Who cares? Pyro, bro, the world's about to end. Do something.'

'Please confirm your date of birth, sir.'

'What? I'm really – I'm scared. What do I do?'

I hang up. What'd he make me say that emo stuff for? Made me sound like a girl. I picture Prayag's woman – glasses with lenses in the shape of a wasp's head, sideways ovals, and her hair pulled painfully back. One of those ones who's always a step ahead on the street, dragging the poor sucker to another store that sells lampshades. The kind who's anti about capital punishment even though no one had been put to death on this side of the world since 1950. He'll never marry her. She'll marry a property developer and he'll start going to strip clubs in the middle of the day.

I know what life's like for Prayag. Women hate me too. Every one of them on the planet. Know what? Good riddance to 'em. Let them be squished by a ball of rock sent by God to punish all of us sinners, every –

Not Mum. Guess she's a woman. God should leave Mumsy alone. Come to think of it, she doesn't hate me. One fewer hater.

My walls are burning. The air is full of invisible smoke. I grab my wallet and nearly grab my house keys but I'm like, fuck it. I leave my front door wide open.

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I tell the taxi driver to hurry, tell him to turn the news up on the radio, throw my last fifty at the driver, what does it matter, we're gonna get into a barter economy if anyone survives. Cash will just be toilet paper to us, you'll swap blowjobs for a loaf of bread. What if the nuclear power plants spews gunk into the rivers, will we all grow gills and stuff? I have to stop it all. I have to do something good to get into heaven, just in case I was wrong about church. Or what if I shoulda gone Muslim? I've always had this, like, feeling those Muslims picked the correct God.

He finds a way around the traffic. It's– what day was it? You can't tell, what with the honking and the bumpers – Saturday afternoon, it feels like– there'll still be some midgets scurrying about work shouting about Pacquiao vs Aquino. It's

hard getting out of the taxi, there's something inclement in the air, something stony about the clouds, I can tell they've been punctured and are deflating too slowly for the average person to notice. A stone skitters out from under my foot and I gasp. It's the first meteorite hitting the ground. They start off small, and before you know it, it's the end of the world.

I hurry through the long white tunnel into work on these legs made of helium and pause beside a dumpster full of broken light-bulbs and shake my head at all the waste in the world. We never solved drought or AIDS, did we, all we did was invent new types of burger. The idiots I work with love their burgers, me too I guess, but there's no love in the food. Mumsy thawing out a big hunk of lamb to roast all day and take it out just when the fat's bubbling and the rosemary's turned golden, that's food love. Matty dribbling lamb fat while I asked him endless science trivia til I'd run out of questions. Matty and me fighting over who got to sit in the old man's huge empty seat.

I distribute kitset furniture for a living, deck chairs and tables and shit like that. Actually, tell you the truth, I don't touch the furniture with my own hands, we use Filipinos for that, I coordinate the designs and make sure all the right shit's in each box – well, actually, there's a margin. We get so many boxes coming out of the distribution centre, what I do is check all the boxes worth more than \$112, they've worked it out exactly. Customers won't bother to send back anything worth under \$112, the accountants figured out, 'cause once you subtract the courier charge and the waiting time, maybe you get only \$50 back. I suppose my job for the last four years hasn't been making money for the company, it's just been keeping the company from having to pay out. Would \$50 stop the world from ending? Would all the money in the world save us? Should I have given my bus money to the Greenpeace collectors outside the bank?

The guys are all looking at me funny, unknowing. Don't ask what I'm wearing, my Jets singlet I think, when I should have my hard hat on and vest. They made me a fire warden, that was pretty cool. I almost phoned Mumsy that day, I remember, but my calling plan was, like, way too pricey, like 60 cents a minute. Had to save 60 cents, eh. She phoned later that month, anyway. I told her I had some good news and she was like, Oh good gravy, are you off your pills? and I just told her to tell Matty I got a promotion and hung up.

My legs take me to the pigeon coop, that's where all of our pigeonholes are. It's just a room of boxes stuffed with mail, really. I take next week's shipping roster and roll it out flat. It's been printed off Excel. There are totals and subtotals and zeroes everywhere, like a constellation. The kit-sets we mail out are pretty inferior woodwork, but the customer gets what they paid for. If everyone knew how little time we had left, would they have saved up and invested in decent wood instead of what we sold 'em? Wouldn't everyone invest everything in building a shield in the atmosphere, if we knew it could all end?

The pigeon coop's got all these humming pipes and air ducts running across the ceiling. It's noisy in there, but comforting and white, like Mumsy's laundry room. I press my head against the cold plastic surface of the Carvalho Mark IV

table. The Carvalho Mark IV is an ordinary dinner table with a plastic lacquer, just splinters glued together with industrial glue, to be honest. One of the workies pops in to open his pay slip and says something to me and I just look at him and go, 'I wish you all the best, God bless,' and he walks away fretting over how much student loan's come out of his pay packet. I stretch the shipping roster over my head and as I pull, I think about the customers in red who've bought the shitty furniture, whose calls are directed to some random little island when they ring, to keep their complaints away from us.

I've wasted my life doing this shit when I could've been... What did I want to be when I was a kid? One of those police dog handlers, the ones that go around the schools. I'd got inspired by this cop with a dark brown beard who used this real crisp, undecorated language when he answered our questions. My dog was gonna be called Frosty, and he was gonna have some husky in him, you'd be able to see it in his snout. Mostly he'd be a *Canis lupus familiaris* German Shepherd. Matty knows the Latin name of any animal you wanna throw at him. Did you know all dogs are the same species? Matty taught me that. He doesn't even look smug when he teaches you stuff, he just rolls his eyes like everything in life is like sooooo obvious.

I rip the shipping roster in half, but it doesn't make the names go away. They're victims, all of them, every last customer who bought every last crappy side table. I lock the door to the Pigeon Coop. I can feel the air con turn my skin blue, but so what? I'll be blue a long time when I'm incinerated when the asteroid hits....Comet? Typhoon? I read a couple of the memoos the boys've got. Every bit of it is a waste of the tree the paper came from. Every typed letter could've been a plea to get an imprisoned journalist out of a Brazzaville prison. Brazzaville's the capital of the Republic of Congo – thank you, Matty.

I ring someone called Ansari Al-Aziz, the first number on the Do Not Engage list, that's the register of people who've been unfortunate enough to buy products below the refund threshold.

'Hello? Is this Ansari al-Aziz? You ordered a rocking chair from us, right, E-Z-Semble? It's a piece of garbage. Ask for a refund right now. Ask for me when you ring. Tell them to give you your money back... No... An E-Z-Semble? You should be getting it this month. The world is ending... Out there... but it is... Harish Chhima. He's a scientist... I don't know, NASA or something? He's the first one dead, I think. Destroyed his computer, maybe. I got to go. Just – ask for your money back. We're almost outta time. Makeitrightgodbless, gotta go—'

I have to phone Adrienne. She was my girlfriend for two summers, with an interlude between when she just went to lectures and joined these groups on Facebook hating that Italian president guy. I used to jerk off in the shower thinking about punishing her for being popular.

Someone's banging on the door of the Pigeon Coop. I shunt the table over to it and barricade it. I can see my breath forming a speech bubble whenever I exhale. The bubbles disappear quickly. Adrienne, yeah, she woulda loved Frosty, I had Frosty all planned, all pictured, the colour of his collar and tag and everything. I

can see his pink tongue hanging down like fly paper. Frosty should be in here with me. Know what effed it up? Matty god-damned squealing on me for the medical experiments I used to do on him in the sandpit and the bath tub and that, that's how come Mumsy said I wasn't allowed a dog. Matty's always been a narc. I don't give a shit about his IQ, he's never had street smarts, and he was always Mum's favourite just because he was a freak and he was the reason we weren't allowed to play on our own because he poured motor oil into that ducks nest that time and—

'You are there, Mister Sir?'

'What? You're still on the phone? I've got to go.'

'When can I receive this refund?'

'Let me go – I've gotta – I've gotta phone my old lady.'

They're really smashing the door now. It sounds like a concert crowd milling outside the stadium doors. I don't like the way they say my name, like I'm in trouble. I can distinguish like six different voices out there, and the one with good grammar that has to be a floor manager, all desperate and worried about memoes and newsletters and reports and checklists and the stupid chilled doughnuts they have in the fridge. I'll eat them while the sky turns the colour of fire and the angels touch-down.

Mumsy – what good is it calling her? I slam the phone back into its cradle. I roar at the door that all the Filipinos are being ripped off by the company, that it's blatant, that them and their whole stinking race of people are cowards for not standing up against the management. I tell them their faggy little union is going to be crushed and they're gonna get their asses deported, but no, no, they won't, I put them right about that, they're going to die, yessir, within hours. They must get back to their families and kiss their babies, pronto. I try to think of the right words in that lingo they speak, what's it called, Tag-a-long. I wish I'd learned one beautiful language from every continent.

'HellOOOOO? I'm contacting the police, I am, you can't just ring a member of the public and—'

'Mumsy, it's me.' I must've dialled by mistake. 'Did I ring you?'

'My Chicken Little! You didn't have to phone... '

'I didn't mean to... I left the phone on. You would've heard all of that yelling... Hello? The world's ending, mum. A meterorite, we've only got, I dunno how much time –'

'Is this you? Chicken?'

'It's me. Me. Don't call me that.'

'Tell me what happened, Chicken. Are you going to the meetings?'

'I've got a sponsor, Mum, I don't need – you're making this worse, you're making it hard. Haven't you heard? Tell me you've heard. Everyone's – it's – how can you not've – **TURN THE TV ON RIGHT NOW.**'

I put the phone down for a moment. I can't hear any sirens, or any mass evacuation, all I hear is humming, and banging, and people actually giving a damn about me, calling my name, demanding me. If Frosty was been here, he'd protect me right til the end. It's all Matty's fault I'm alone at the end.

‘Chicken? How do I work this thing?’

I face-palm and peek out a tiny window at the threatening, too-blue sky. It’s nice I can hear Mumsy so clearly on the line. The pigeon coop’s cool and insulated. It’ll take them something serious to get the door down – or they’ll just have to find the keys.

‘Don’t worry about it, Mum.’

‘Okay, my chicken, oh gosh, sorry, you don’t like me calling–

‘It’s okay, you can call me it. Only you.’

‘But it makes your anxiety worse.’

‘I don’t have... that condition, I’m better now. I’ve got a sponsor.’

‘Well what’d you telephone for?’

I go numb. I go silent.

‘You said something was wrong, my Chicken? You said something about a comet? Your brother would know about that business. I think you’d better ask him. Here, his number is –

‘I know what his number is, Jeez. I should probably go, Mumz... And, don’t take this the wrong way, but I sorta love you and stuff. I heart you.’ By now I can hear the metal scratching the inside of the lock, but it doesn’t matter. It looks like an orange ribbon has been wrapped around the sky, and it’s snowing outside, and the vibrations are getting worse.

‘LEAVE ME ALONE! MUM, GET SOMEWHERE SAFE!’

Matty’s phone number is the Fibonacci sequence, he’s got one of those personalised numbers you can lease from the phone company. I punch in 0-1-1-2-3-5-8-1-3 and wait. He’s on the opposite side of the country. He won’t feel The End for a few moments; he can use the extra fragments of time to mock my corpse. Dying will be the only thing I’ve ever beaten Matty in.

‘Brother Chicken. Why are you ringing?’

There is a delay, then he starts in with the heavy breathing. People with his condition have these twisted, cramped lungs. They’re super-smart, but they don’t live long, especially not when their bigger brothers pour boiling water into the bathtub to see if it’ll make cancel regular hot water and turn it cold, and the experiment turns their legs pink for the rest of their lives, and makes them think you hate them when all you wanted to do was play with them.

WHUMP. WHUMP. Wankers are trying to knock the door down, I can see the wood bulge. I get a stapler and hold it up to the keyhole and open and close it a few times. Chick-chick-chick. ‘HEAR THAT? BACK OFF OR I’LL BLOW THE LOTS OF YOUS AWAY.’

‘Dear Brother, do you have a scam today, an insult, an abuse of our relationship or something novel?’

‘Sorry, I had to... I’m at work. Yo, how’d you know it was me?’

‘I would explain caller display to you, but I’m not convinced you’d understand,’ he snorts. I can practically hear him slide the Coke bottle glasses back up his schnoz.

‘Mum’s... I just spoke to her. She’s all good.’

‘I’m perfectly capable of figuring that out for myself. Tell me why you phoned, otherwise I shall terminate this call. Are you sober for one nanosecond of your existence?’

‘I just.... I just wanted to say —’

‘Oh, this ought to be grand. Continue.’

‘Just, just one question, alright?’

‘Proceed.’

The sky is dark blue now, and a plane is heading over. It can be only metres ahead of the first comet, or asteroid, or meteorite. ‘What’s the difference, you know, between, like, a hurricane, and a typhoon and a cyclone?’

He doesn’t do the gross breathing for ages, and then he sighs and goes, ‘It would take me all day to provide an answer that wouldn’t make Newton spin in his grave.’

I slither down the wall and plop onto the cold floor, hunching my shoulder, pressing his voice into my ear and blocking out the sound of the Armed Offenders Squad trotting into the hallway, crouching and whispering. ‘Go ahead, bro. I got time.’