

End of The World

By Milos Doroski

Stephen C. Hammond strolled out of his apartment building nearly falling onto the ground. In his early thirties with a receding hairline and baggy pants he looks like someone who fell out of a Nickleback video. Dizzy, like he stepped off a rollercoaster ride, he grabbed the side of the door to avoid falling. Stephen is not a stranger to a hungover or two, but even he must admit defeat. He drank too much last night.

The day just started. For Stephen that is. He is not a morning person. Not that he doesn't like mornings, it's just that he can hardly get up before noon when his body and mind went to sleep around 5AM. That is fine for him as copywriters have the luxury of working from home. With a swift, pre-practiced, move Stephen put Ray Ban sunglasses over his red, baggy eyes. Lighting up a Lucky Strike cigarette was the final step. His mask is ready. Now he can fit in as another member of the consumer society.

The town was unusually empty. The streets were eerie silent with only the wind making some kind of effort to be noticed. Lonely tumbleweeds made their way from one side of the street to the other. It looked like the scene from the beginning of Vanilla Sky.

Around the corner, one wall was filled with posters. Many of them had messages about the apocalypse coming. Posters with messages like 'The end of days is near', 'Save yourself - Elite Shelters for rent' and 'Final Sale - everything must go!' dominated the wall. Over them, one intricate poster caught Stephen's eye: Joanna Mitchell - Art Exhibit. One night only! Sedona Arts Center.

Sedona isn't a big town. Safely secluded near the Old Creek Canyon. One of those places where old couples come to retire, and dreams go to wither and die. The scenery is nice however, if you're into that kind of stuff. Stephen isn't. He came here to support his girlfriend Joanna, or Jo to her friends.

Last year, while still in New York, Joanna got an offer to come to Sedona and teach at the Sedona Arts Center. An aspiring artist with windswept burgundy hair, she jumped at the chance at once. After a

couple of friendly arguments, of which some ended in tears and others in a warm embrace, the two packed their one-bedroom Brooklyn apartment and moved to Sedona.

Joanna started painting from the moment she arrived. Landscapes are her specialty and the Old Creek Canyon was a godsend. Portraits, on the other hand, are not. Just ask Stephen. Or better yet, look at the portrait Jo made him which is stored somewhere under his bed. Their first year was perfect. Painting was good. Inspiration came like the gush of the wind. Joanna produced painting after painting. She even sold some of them.

One month it happened: Girl leaves boy for her arts mentor. An old age story. Stephen never thought something like that could happen to him. But it did and he still hasn't wrapped his head around it. The poster just reminded him of that. Like any self-respecting dumpee, Stephen tore the poster off the wall and threw it in the nearest bin.

The 'Last Stand' pub at the corner of the street was almost empty. During the weekends, when the tribute bands play Metallica and Iron Maiden, it's usually packed. For reasons unknown, people don't like drinking coffee in the last place which condones indoor smoking. A yellow 1970 Plymouth Cuda is parked in front of the pub. Stephen, like always, caresses the hood of the car as he makes his way inside.

The only patron inside is Buck Johnson. Positioned behind the bar, in front of the large television which was showing highlight reels from the weekend game. Gray hair tied in a ponytail is sticking out from beneath a grayed-out cowboy hat. The lines on his face tell a story of adventure and courage but Buck would seldom talk about that. Tired from polishing the counter, Buck puts the rag down and pours himself a whiskey.

"Hey Steve! Regular?", Buck already grabbed the beer dispenser. "No Buck", Steven sat down at the bar. "It's still early for me."

"What you talkin' 'bout son?! It's past noon!" Buck replied with a sincere laugh. "In that case, better make it two!" Stephen lighted a cigarette.

"It was a great gig on Sunday. Damn "" Said Buck while pouring the beautiful blonde liquid into the glass.

“Where did you go afterwards?” “Home. I guess.”

Steven stared down into the void. Trying to remember if he actually went somewhere after the gig in question. But, alas, he was drawing a blank. His night ended in the pub when the mind went into the witness protection program and left the body to care for itself.

“I woke up this morning in my apartment.”, Stephen said, still looking at the void. “Between this morning and the gig, I don’t know what happened.”

“You realize it’s Tuesday?” Buck placed the beer in front of Stephen. “Jolt this down. Maybe it will jog your memory”.

Without second guessing Buck’s words of wisdom, he took a couple of sips. Even though his brain cannot remember the events between Sunday evening and Tuesday morning, Stephen wasn’t worried. Black holes caused by beer, whiskey, vodka, gin or everything combined have long become just an everyday experience.

BEEEEEEEEEP! - An annoying sound replaced the commentator from the television. EMERGENCY BROADCAST stood on the screen, accompanied with the terrible hissing.

“Dear mother of god!” Buck turned in despair. “What kind of blasphemy is this? Who changed the channel?!”

Buck grabbed the remote and flipped through the channels in despair. Every single one showed the exact same screen. With no more hope Buck tried to switch of the sound but failed because this was a television set which provided crucial plot points and he wouldn’t be denied this time.

Soon the president of the United States replaced the EMERGENCY BROADCAST message. Buck and Stephen looked at each other before turning their attention back to the television. The president’s face was sweaty and full of despair, even though he did his best to conceal it.

“My fellow Americans! Our missiles have failed. The asteroid is still headed for Earth, and there’s nothing we can do to stop it. So, this is it. If the world does go on, it will not go on for everyone. We

have now been able to calculate the asteroid's final trajectories, and we have determined where they're going to strike. The smaller of the two comets, Pandora, will hit first, somewhere in the Atlantic Seaboard, probably off the waters of Cape Hatteras, in just under twelve hours, at 4:35 PM Eastern Daylight Time. The impact of the comet is going to be... well, disastrous. There will be a very large tidal wave moving quickly through the Atlantic Ocean. It'll be 100 feet high, traveling at 1,100 miles per hour. That's faster than the speed of sound. As the wave reaches shallow water, it's going to slow down, but the wave height, depending on the shelf off the coast, will be anywhere from 1,000 to 3,500 feet high. Where the land is flat, the wave will wash inland, 600 to 700 miles. The wave will hit our nation's capital forty minutes after impact. New York City, Boston, Atlanta, Philadelphia, all will be destroyed. If you have any means of escaping the path of this wave, leave now. The impact of the larger asteroid, Adolf, will be nothing less than an extinction level event. It will strike land in Arizona, three hours after Pandora. Within a week, the skies will be dark with dust from the impact and they will stay dark for two years. All plant life will be dead within... four weeks. Animal life within... a few months. So, that's it. Good luck to us all."

The screen returned to the highlight reels of the game. Like nothing happened. Stories about two asteroids plunging towards Earth dominated the media in the past weeks. But in this day and age nobody gave it too much importance. It was labeled as 'Fake News' by the majority. The general public was preoccupied with Instagram profiles of celebrities anyway.

Buck took out a small key from his pocket and unlocked the cupboard underneath the bar. A 50-year-old Macallan whiskey appeared in front of Stephen along with two shot glasses. The sun beams, breaking through the bottle, emitted a surreal, reddish glow.

"You know when I bought this?" Buck asked while turning the bottle. "No. Should I?" Stephen lit up another cigar.

"When Emily and I went on our honeymoon to Scotland..." - "Who goes to Scotland for a honeymoon?"

Stephen interrupted, not meaning to be rude. - "Emily did. You wanna hear this or not?" Stephen nodded in silence, apologizing with his eyes. "Anyway... We were at this 5-star hotel. One of those swanky places where you don't even have to ask for a refill. You know. They treated us like royalty.

Lobster dinners, champagne, spas... Everything was magical. It cost me an arm and a leg, but I didn't

care. If I were to do it again, I'll do it the same. Emily deserved that. She deserved more than that. She

didn't deserve cancer." Buck paused for a moment, holding back tears.

"Anyway. One night, we were at the pool. On the twelfth floor. Just finished dinner you know. The sun was setting. It was magical man. And then, from the floor above, out of the blue, this huge dude flies through a glass window and lands in the pool. It was a stag night. His asshole friends looked on from above, bottles in hand, screaming like schoolgirls. They did nothing. So, I'm sitting there with Emily. She panicked, naturally. Nobody was coming for the dude. Nobody! And he was not coming up. Let me tell you! The bubbles on the surface became less and less frequent. So, I jumped in after him. And the dude was huge. I mean *huge*! I barely brought him up to the surface! I thought he was a goner, you know?! There was a moment of panic as he lay motionless in my arms. After a few minutes he came to, thank god, and screamed: "party on"! Stupid asshole. Anyway, as a sign of gratitude he gave me this as a thank you. Emily said that I shouldn't open it until I have an absolute reason to celebrate. She was never a whiskey girl. When I lost her to cancer, it felt stupid to open it. You know? The love of my life, my soulmate is gone and I'm cheering. Fuck that shit. Now is the time!"

Buck poured the liquid gently into the glasses. They clinked glasses and downed the drinks in an instant.

"Now this is the good stuff!" Exclaimed Stephen in joy. "Pour another one Bucky. Just tell me why celebrate now? The whole world is coming to an end and you're just standing there. Calm. Drinking. Makes no sense. Shouldn't we try and escape? Get clear? Run away?"

"Listen to me son." Continued Buck while pouring another set of shots. "I made peace with myself a long

time ago. All this shit going on... You must ask yourself, does the human race deserve another chance?

We ruined everything that was given to us. Oceans, animals, even air. I think it's time to walk

hand in

hand into extinction and join the dinosaurs.”

“You have a pretty grim look at the world there Buck” Stephen concluded and sipped the whiskey. “What I’m trying to tell you is that I have nothing to live for anymore. My health is bad, this damn bar barely makes money, and my wife of 28 years is dead. And soon I get to join her. After all this time I think there is kind of a victory in that.” Buck pulled out a CD case from beneath the bar. “I guess you really did love her.” Said Stephen.

“So much so that the words themselves sound incredibly lame. Aha! Here it is!” Buck pulls out a CD from

the case and lifts it over his head like the Stanley Cup Trophy.

“What is that? A CD? You know it’s 2019, right?” said Stephen with a smile.

“This is the shit! And I think it’s the right time to play it.”

Buck goes to the CD player and with a swipe of his hand removes the thick layer of dust from the top. He puts the CD inside and presses play. “R.E.M. - It’s the end of the world” starts to play. Buck starts to sing along to the tune and in a Sinatra-like-way comes to the counter and pours two more shots.

“What about you kid? Any family?” Buck asks honestly.

“No. Not really. My parents are dead. Both. Couple years back. Only child. What can I tell you Buck. All that I have is Jo. I had. All that I had was Jo.” Stephen sighed.

“Stop beating yourself up Steve! You care about this girl, right?” Buck slams his fist on the bar!

“I do. I don’t know Buck. It’s all so fucked up. I thought she was the one. It turns out relationships don’t have happy endings. At least the kind you want.”

“12 hours to go until everything becomes history and you’re moaning. Don’t get me wrong kid. I

enjoy your company. But you gotta go see her. This is it son. There is no tomorrow. Get up and go find her! Where is she?"

"She was supposed to have a show today, but I guess that is canceled now." Stephen makes a sad grin. "Go there kid! If you don't, you'll regret it until the day you die."

"Today is the day I die Buck!" replied Stephen.

"Don't be a smart ass! Here, take my ride!" Buck offers his car keys. Stephen looks at them in astonishment.

"The Cuda?! Honestly you're gonna let me ride her? After all this time?"

"There's no time like the present, I guess. And don't scratch it!" Buck smiles and hands over the keys.

Stephen downs the shot in front of him and jolts to the door. Just before going outside he stops and turns towards Buck. His eyes start to water as he looks at him. The man who made peace with himself.

"What about you Buck? What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna drink this whiskey. Maybe smoke a joint and watch the Twilight Zone before I get sent to

kingdom come." Buck smiles. "Go get your girl kid!"

On the other side of the street, across the pub a group of young hooligans are looting a store. One of the boys pushes out a cart containing a PS4 and a huge television set. 'Boys will be boys' - Stephen thinks to himself. He thought about stopping them but gave up. There's a girl waiting for him.

Running towards the car Stephen stopped to look at the sky. The sun was joined by two asteroids which were alarmingly close to Earth at this point. To a layman it seemed like three suns were shining upon all humanity. Even though two are moving towards the surface at an alarming rate. No time for too much thinking for Stephen.

He jumps into the Cuda and lands into the driver's seat. He wanted to drive this beauty since forever, but Buck was always too protective. It's funny what the end of the world does to change people. Stephen turns the key in the ignition, slams his foot on the pedal and the car soars!

All other vehicles are driving towards the town exit, hoping to get to the freeway and then reach some place which would stay immune to the imminent destruction and chaos. The Cuda dances through the traffic like Baryshnikov on stage. To all the others, it seems odd that only one car is going from the town exit. The driver is focused. For the first time in god knows how long Stephen knows what to do!

The Arts Center is located on the outskirts of Sedona. Before it was converted to a place where hipsters come to drink overpriced coffee, it was once a Gothic Church. Huge glass windows and gargoyles gave it a sinister tone even though the facade was recently spruced with a white-pink tone. Like in the movies, the Cuda furiously comes to a halt in front of the inviting stone steps. The sun is setting but the asteroids are illuminating everything. If death and destruction wasn't imminent, one could boldly state that it's

beautiful. Without any hesitation or considering the surreal image of the asteroids above the surface, Stephen jumps out of the car and runs inside.

The halls are empty. Parts of furniture and rations are thrown around the floor, a clue that everyone left in a hurry. “JO! Joanna! Where are you?!” Stephen yelled, trying to catch his breath at the same time. Everything was silent. The lazy church bell was the only sound roaming through the halls. Stephen runs inside the main auditorium almost avoiding a fall.

Inside, everything was set for the exhibit. Landscape paintings spread all around the spacious auditorium. The light coming through the roof windows was getting brighter by the minute. On top of the stage, Joanna stood alone. She’s warm and wicked. A barely reformed party girl. The kind of girl first novels are written about. Her head is turned towards the ceiling. Stephen stops in his tracks and grabs his knees with his hands, trying to catch a breath. He is sweating like a pedophile in a schoolyard on a warm summer day.

“Jo! There you are. Thank god!” Stephen says while catching his breath.

“Oh, it’s you. Did you ever think something like this is possible? That something like this could happen to

us? In our lifetime.” Joanna looks on at the ceiling with her back turned away from Stephen.

Stephen slowly moves towards the stage, trying to calm himself. His hair is wet, pulse is skyrocketing, and his palms are sweaty, yet he doesn’t show it. At least he’s trying to. Joanna’s windswept burgundy hair is a bit shorter now but still beautiful. Especially in the light emitted by the two asteroids.

After what seemed an eternity to him, Stephen places his hand on Joanna’s shoulder. She turns around,

looks at him and smiles.

“That smile is going to be the end of me.” Stephen proclaims slowly.

“Actually Steve, those two asteroids will be the end of you.” Joanna responds and points towards the

sky. “What are you doing here? Why didn’t you run? Try and save yourself!”

“Funny enough, this got me thinking.” He laughs honestly. “This kind of situation makes one think about really important things. Like Fantasy Football, Instagram stories or who do you want to spend the rest of your life with.”

Joanna cannot help but smile. A single tear slides down her cheek. Stephen swipes it away with his palm.

“For me that person is you.” Stephen continues. “It’s always been you. I followed you here without question. I would follow you anywhere! I just want to be with you, come hell or high water. I know that until the rest of our lives we don’t have a lot of time, but my god I want to spend that time with you!”

Stephen comes in for a kiss, gently. Joanna backs away. She can’t hold her tears anymore. She walks a couple steps away from Stephen and holds her head in her hands. Even in this fragile moment she’s beautiful as ever.

“Oh Stephen. Why did you have to come here? Why did I have to see you?” She says slowly. “I never wanted this to be the last time we speak.”

“With the world going buy-buy soon I think this is the last time we will speak! And I love you!”

“And I will always love you. I spent three years of my life with you. Three beautiful years which I will cherish forever.” Joanna pauses for a moment. “But along the way something changed. But somewhere along the line, you changed. You stopped being you. You let people stick a finger in your face and tell you you’re no good. And when things got hard, you started looking for something to blame, like a big shadow. You closed off from the world. You closed away from me. You supported me all the time and I will always be grateful for that. But I wanted more. I wanted you to take chances. Believe in yourself. Not hide away from the world.”

“I know. I’m a coward. But a coward who loves you!” Stephen sobs.

Joanna smiles sincerely. She comes over to Stephen and they hug. Like they did every day in the past. The hug is long, firm and a bit longer than just between friends. Finally, Joanna moves

away from Stephen and holds his face with both hands.

“Oh Stephen. You always did carry your heart on your sleeve.”

“You wanna watch the end of the world together?” Stephen forces a joke. “I have front row tickets. Just up the hill. Best seats in the house.”

“Steve I can’t.” Joanna sighs and takes his hand. “Trent is coming to pick me up soon. He has a place in the government shelter for both of us. They have supplies there to last us for two years. Who knows what will happen? He says we have a fighting chance. He is the biggest optimist I ever knew! He is so passionate about everything. He loves cats and he...”

A loud mechanical noise interrupts Joanna. Like the sound of a fan turned on to full blast. The sound intensifies as a search light appears in the window. A helicopter is landing outside.

“He’s picking you up with a helicopter?” Stephen asks mockingly.

“The government sent one to pick me up.” Joanna moves towards the door. She let go of his hand. “I am so sorry Stephen. I will always love you” Joanna runs for the door and disappears. “Fucking Trent.” Stephen says to his chin.

Twilight Zone episode “Time Enough at Last” is playing on the television set in the “Last Stand” pub. Buck is already halfway done with his Macallan. He sits in the armchair with a big bowl of popcorn in his lap. Stephen comes over and sits in the armchair next to him. Buck pours him a shot glass. They salute themselves and watch the television set, with at least one of them in peace.