

Coincidence

by Mike Sennott

The first hint, for me at least, that something was happening came from the television. Over the past few weeks there had been a bombardment of advertisements about last night's lineup on all the major networks. For whatever reason, maybe just to shake things up, it was the series finale of no less than a dozen shows last night. I hadn't held any particular attachment for any of the programs, but I had nothing better to do than just sit and watch what may have been a historic television event. I flipped back and forth between the channels trying to collect bits of denouement, but it all just ran together. Friends cried and hugged, lovers kissed and got married, criminals finally got caught. I really just couldn't pay much attention. I thought it was all too neat, and too trite. At the time, I hadn't been surprised in quite a while.

Nothing new ended up airing at all last night, so I decided to watch the news. It was just as uninspired as any of the series finales. Planes crashed, buildings collapsed, wars ravaged some places that I had never been to. The ticker seemed to be going faster than usual, the names and locations of victims blurring slightly as they sped by. After changing the station once again, the local news warned me not to drive. I felt somewhat flattered to be included in the pageantry. Apparently there had been a record number of car accidents in and around the town in the past few hours. I didn't think it had been raining or foggy outside. Instead, it felt like it should have been a dreary overcast Sunday afternoon, despite being Monday evening. There was that same languid weight in the air, a pervasive ennui that made it feel like life would never be what you thought it should be. It had been clinging to my every step yesterday, battering my expectations until I felt that television would be preferable to the uncanny stagnancy about the world. Maybe last night had proven once and for all that bleak weather was more deadly than an ice storm.

I barely had time to process the day's tragic notoriety when the news blared a second warning. A quick cut shot showed the local hospital filled with masses of ailing figures, while the bottom of the screen read, "ALERT: FOOD POISONING EPIDEMIC. AUTHORITIES SUSPECT WATER SUPPLY, WARN AGAINST DRINKING WATER." I couldn't remember the last time that I had drank water. It always seemed to have a funny metallic taste to me. I wondered if I should call any of my friends or family. I was understandably concerned, but on the other hand, if anyone was hurt, they probably had more important things to do than to talk to me. I looked at the clock. It was just past midnight. That settled it. I wouldn't want to wake anyone up just to experience the consummate bad night. They probably wouldn't be able to get back to sleep.

From outside, I could almost hear the sounds of people panicking. Or it could have just been the couple across the street throwing another loud party. Two people were screaming, possibly to each other. I didn't know what to make of it. I just felt tired. I thought that the best thing to do would just be to go to bed. Let things sort themselves out. If I woke up in the morning, I would probably feel much better, and so would the world. I wouldn't have bet money on myself waking up, though. I wasn't sure if I wanted to. It was just a bad night. That was what I was thinking as I went to bed. Strangely enough, I fell asleep very quickly.

I hadn't set my alarm. There was no way that work would be open tomorrow, and if it was, there was no way I would be able to concentrate. I cannot remember whether I dreamt last night.

I woke up to the sound of an explosion. I didn't open my eyes right away. Though I

tried to just stay still and not think of anything for a while, I had reflexively gotten out of bed while doing so. I didn't want to look out the window. That would be my last resort.

I turned on the television in an attempt to find out what was happening. Snowy dead static slowly crept onto the screen. I wondered if the cable was out, or if the news had celebrated its series finale as well. I tried logging onto the computer and opening a news site, but according to the error page that opened, "A connection to the server could not be established." It suggested that I may have made a typo. I appreciated the advice, but disagreed about the source of the problem. I checked to see if the phone lines were dead, confirming my suspicion. Even my cell phone was out of service. Eventually I concluded that the only way to find out what was going on would be to look outside.

That's where I'm at right now. I have been standing in front of the door for a few minutes, trying to collect myself. I take a deep breath, feel the air fill my lungs, and trace the path of my nerves all the way to my fingers and toes. They aren't being charged with more or less vitality from just standing here. There is only one thing for me to do. I open the door and step forward.

I must have slept for quite some time, because the sun is already setting. But what first catches my eye is that the house diagonal from mine, across the street and to the left, with the white siding and blue roof, has dissolved into a smoldering crater. I can hear the smoke rising from it. It is hissing, and on occasion crackling. The hissing seems directed at me.

The lawn surrounding the hole looks strange. It is wavering slightly in blurry streaks,

as if it were the middle of summer. I take a few more steps forward onto my walkway, where I see that the cause of that particular visual effect is the heat mirage rising from a wall of fire blocking off part of the road. Actually, it appears to be more akin to a pool of fire. The flames are coming out of a recession in the ground, a roughly circular gap slightly larger than the width of the road. Had the house fire spread to a pool of spilt oil in the road? Or had there been some sort of chain reaction when some unfortunate car was driving by? Hell, with the way things have been going, maybe it was just a coincidence, two completely unrelated explosions. I wouldn't doubt that I had slept through the first.

"Hey! Johnny!" I hear. Nobody calls me Johnny that often, but I look up. I catch some movement over to my left. Mr. Peters waves to me from the roof of the next house down.

"Hello, Mr. Peters," I yell back, "Good to see you're okay!" I've been in the neighborhood long enough to know him pretty well, but I still call him "Mr. Peters." He must be used to it, though. I think he was a corporate bigshot before he retired a few years back. Walking closer, I asked him the first thing that popped into mind. "Do you think that the Andersons will mind that you're on the roof of their house?"

"What? Oh, no, they're on vacation. I don't know why they'd want to come back anyhow. Come on, climb on up here. The view is great," he says, motioning to the crater across the street where his house once stood.

I see that he had propped a ladder against the side of the house. I hesitate briefly, but then began climbing. When I reach the top, I see that Mr. Peters is sitting in a lawn chair. I sit down on the floor of the roof.

"I'm sorry about your house, Mr. Peters." He nods. After a pause, I continue, "How did it happen?"

"The short answer is that a cigarette I threw out this morning must have sparked a gas leak or something later on. I was coming back from my afternoon walk when I saw the whole place just blow up. The long answer... well, I have no idea what the long answer is."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You heard about everything that's been going on?"

"You mean the car accidents and the water scare and everything?"

"Yeah, that's a part of it. I think that my house going under is another."

I don't know who he's trying to blame. He must be used to people pretending they know what he's talking about from his executive days. Still, I'd like to know more about what's going on. "Man. I mean, things just haven't felt right the past few days, but... you think there's some sort of connection between those things?"

"Awfully big coincidence, don't you think?"

"Well, it's just terrible that there would be so many accidents yesterday, at the same time as that outbreak. There must be too much for the hospitals to handle. And now this." To me, this is one of the worst feelings in the world. Not feeling any real sympathy for some mind-numbing tragedy, and having to call it *terrible* or a *real shame*. Some people thrive off that, but it tears me apart. I think the pain itself might be a subconscious attempt to conjure up selflessness, but it never seems to work.

"John, how much of the news did you watch yesterday?"

"I just caught those two things on the local news. Why? How could everything be related?" I don't feel as skeptical as that last sentence sounded. I wish I could think of some explanation other than this just being the ultimate bad day.

He chuckles quietly. "How?" he asks, staring into the distance. "That's a damn good question." For a few moments he is lost in thought, but then he shifts in his seat. "The last that I heard on the radio, it wasn't just around here. Almost every city in America was reporting a record amount of car accidents yesterday, and other places around the world too. Not just cars either. Planes, trains, boats, horses, whatever."

I stay silent. I have no idea how, but could everything be connected to some sort of terrorism?

"John, do you know how many people died of lightning strikes yesterday in this state alone?"

I don't need to shake my head.

"They're estimating over seventy thousand. The funny thing is, it wasn't even raining."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know, but I saw it with my own eyes. I was out walking to the tavern, figured I'd take in the sunset on the way there. When I was almost there, I saw a lady walking her dog across the street. Bam! Just like that, a flash of light from the skies, and she falls to the ground. A young man ran up to try and help her, but when he touches her he gets electrocuted too. Somebody called 911, but I sure as hell didn't stick around to see what happened after that." He shakes his head. "Seventy thousand people. On the radio, they were talking about what

that projects to worldwide. Almost a hundred million people. One hell of a coincidence.”

When I was a kid, I once heard that more people died annually of bee stings than lightning strikes. I wonder if that was still the case yesterday.

“There’s gotta be... what... almost a billion people who have died in the past couple days. Any more than that and you’d think something suspicious was going on, am I right?” He laughs, the sound of cigarette smoke.

“You think that somebody is behind it?”

“What? Listen to yourself. Somebody behind millions of completely unrelated tragedies? No, things are just happening like they’ve got to happen.”

I think that I may have caught on. “Wait. You think that the world is ending... by coincidence?”

“You were expecting something grand? Something poetic? Who knows, stick around and maybe you’ll get it.”

The remark is punctuated by a dull percussive blast. In the distance, a cloud of smoke and flame billows up into the air. It seems almost small from here, but it probably isn’t up close. I sigh. “Man, of all the times I’ve thought it was the apocalypse...”

Mr. Peters turns to face me. “Here’s what I think. I don’t think this is any apocalypse.”

I brace myself, determined to hear this one out no matter what it is. His eyes show some small measure of amusement, a considerable deal of annoyance, and infinite determination. It is the same look he had when the neighbors a few houses down were blaring Bob Seger music and he rang their doorbell and demanded that they put on the Rolling Stones

instead, or when he got tired of trying to call public works after a storm knocked the power out and tried to go out and fix it himself. It will at least be interesting.

“You know how the Bible has a lot of symbolic stuff, things that shouldn’t be taken literally? Like how the Garden of Eden represents man’s evolution up until becoming conscious, because it was easier for people to be told that than accept that their grandparents are apes or whatever?”

People have died over less contentious statements, but I nod.

“Well, think about it. The end of the world, right? It starts with the Rapture, where all the good people just disappear from Earth and wake up in Heaven. Then some other things happens, the leftovers are judged, et cetera, et cetera. But what I’m thinking is, what if the Rapture isn’t as neat and clean as people thought it was going to be? What if instead of disappearing, people get ‘called home to God’ - in the sense that they say in funerals? Millions of precision-strike tactical coincidences.”

I nod again. I had never figured Mr. Peters as strongly religious. I guess that’s because I’ve never seen him talk to anyone about religion. I still have this picture of the stereotypical condescending missionary in my mind, always trying to enlighten the horrible savages who might believe different things. Sure, I know people who are different, who try to spread their word by example, just living a good clean life. There were just altogether too many people who used religion as a blunt instrument of moral superiority. I really don’t want to be like that when I grow older. Back in college, I quit my summer job at the video store because I hated having to bug people about joining the Frequent Renters Special Discount Program for only

five dollars extra. I guess that's why I avoid calling myself religious. As for whether I actually am religious, I don't really know. Or rather, I'd never really known. Apparently the answer is "not enough to get struck by lightning."

I don't know how to reply to Mr. Peters. He seems to genuinely want me to say something. I don't want to feign enthusiasm. This doesn't seem like the time or place for enthusiasm anyhow. I decide to tell him the truth. "Mr. Peters, that's the best idea I've heard about this mess."

"Idea? That's the whole damned truth." He frowns. "Of course, it still doesn't explain some things. For example, could God miss? What if somebody decided to go on a walk an hour earlier today than on most days?"

There are tears starting to form in his eyes. "Whoa, hey," I say hastily, "Don't... don't get down on yourself. I mean, we can all still ascend to Heaven, right? If we help people and prove that we're good? That's why it's called Judgment Day, and not Send the Bastards to Hell day, right?" I try my best to smile.

"Johnny," he sighs, "At my age, I don't think I'm much of a help to anybody. All I can do is just wait around, and I'm quite frankly tired of waiting around."

"That's not true. You helped me. You helped me a lot. If it wasn't for you, I have no idea what I'd be doing right now. I'd be lost. So we could go and help other people, right? Help them find out what's going on."

"No, Johnny, I'd just slow you down. I can take care of myself, but I... I just want to sit here and enjoy the view, okay?"

Damn it. I know self-pity when I see it. I've felt sorry for myself enough to know when people just want to be the center of a perfect idyllic tragedy. "No, Mr. Peters. I can't let you just sit here and waste away. You're still alive. Life is precious, don't you want to do something with it? Help people, prove your point, whatever you want? You can't just sit here looking at a pile of rubble. Please, do something. We can take my car, you won't be a burden. Please?"

His expression at once clears and darkens, returning to nearly neutral. "Johnny, some things just aren't your damned decision," he states. "I've made my decision, and it's not the same as yours. You've made yours, and it's not the same as mine. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to get back to watching the sunset."

I have done all that I can do. "Mr. Peters, thanks. Thanks for everything."

"Yeah." He isn't paying attention. He's staring into space, and seeing the sun set.

Sighing, I turn around. I climb back down the ladder, wondering what I should do now. Wondering what I should think now. As I reach the edge of my lawn, I hear a noise behind me.

Mr. Peters has stood up. He has taken a few steps back from his chair. I start to walk back towards him, smiling, but he doesn't see me. With more focus in his eyes than I have ever seen in anyone, he begins running towards the edge of the roof facing the crater. I try to yell up to him, but it gets caught in my throat. With an agility belying his age, Mr. Peters throws himself off the roof, landing perfectly in the burning lake that covers the road.

My yell turns into a cough. I fall to the ground, coughing. From this angle, the mirage from the flames makes the sunset appear to hang over the entire sky.

I should cry. I should be crying, but I'm not. I feel like I've been punched in the stomach, and I suspect that feeling will never go away, but I'm not crying. Just coughing.

I try to remember everything I can about Mr. Peters, to eulogize him in my thoughts. He was strong willed, successful, and had a sense of humor. There should be some anecdotes to sum up his life, or at least take my mind off his death. Every time I picture him, he is standing on the roof. When I try to hear his voice, it is drown out by the hissing of the fire. At least I remember his words. His theory seems as true as anything else is right now. I remember another thing he said. He said that I had made my decision. I guess he knew more than I did, then.

Eventually I force myself to stand up. The sun is no longer visible, but there is still some light in the sky. I make my way to the car. I do not know where I am going, but it seems imperative to go somewhere. To get away from here. To see what there is left for me.

There was only one road out of town. The other direction was blocked by the fire, and each other intersection has been blocked by rubble or destroyed cars. I am on the highway now, the town's arbitrary ruin fading into regularly spaced trees and lampposts. Many of the lampposts are bent, and many have small clusters of smashed cars crowding around them. Every second I expect to lose control and add my vehicle to one of those grim congregations, but I cannot bring myself to do anything other than stay on the road. I am driving much too fast, yet my path remains straight as an arrow.

I do not know how long I have been driving, but it's darker outside now. The sky is not

black, but rather a deep crimson. I think that when the sky broke today, it broke for good. I'm in no danger of falling asleep, but I feel that I should put on some music, if just to keep from thinking. I reach down into the space between the seats and pull out a few CDs. They look like mixes that I made back in college. One is called, "Music for an Apocalypse or Other Cataclysmic Scenarios." I used to give all my CDs wordy titles like that in an attempt at absurdist humor. I slide the disc into the car's player. If this were a movie, some sort of ironic classic rock or pop anthem would start playing. I hope that doesn't happen. I am very sick of irony. Fortunately, the opening guitar is mirrored by a cello. I remember the compilation as some songs that I thought were beautiful or poignant when I was in college. I have since heard them too many times to think anything of them at all.

I listen to the entire album twice over, trying to absorb all the beauty or meaning that I can. It isn't much, but it was worth a try. The monotony of the drive is briefly broken up by a flash of light out the driver's side window. I see illuminated smoke rising from somewhere in the horizon. Maybe there's some sort of battle going on between survivors. Or between angels and demons, if I were to believe Mr. Peters. I don't think it matters much whether I do. Because they are off in the distance, and I am over here driving past. There is an exit up ahead, but it is blocked by the wreckage of an airplane. I seem to have passed the forks in the road dividing good from evil long ago. Now all that's left is the completely insignificant. The ones who can't know what to believe. The ones who couldn't scream to save a man's life.

I wish that I could turn offroad, but the guardrails are too high. I envy those in the distance. Both the ones fighting to justify their place in the world, and those who get to do

something to justify their wailing and gnashing of teeth. I have already justified my place, as a merely passing through the world. I try to close my eyes, but I still remain on the path. I try to slam my head against the dashboard, but the seatbelt catches and I choke, coughing. I try to wildly swerve the steering wheel, but the part of me that mandates the importance of survival is too strong. It has taken over because it is frightened. But if I put all my effort behind it, I can manage to defy everything and laugh. It is a pathetic barking laugh, but a laugh nevertheless. Maybe if I keep at it someday I'll be able to cry.