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Redd Boggs'
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A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

News of the impending end of the world will appear, first of all, in a brief newsstory on the inside pages of the newspaper, and hardly anyone will pay much attention. The report won't rate big headlines, and it won't run more than an inch or two of column space. It will most likely appear obscurely in one of those catch-all sections such as the "World Report," as it's called in the San Francisco *Chronicle*. Only a small number of scientists at NASA or ESA will be concerned at the beginning, and they will say nothing for publication.

I can picture in my mind very clearly the typical scene that will follow upon the news' first appearance in the newspapers. Imagine a couple of scientists, a Physicist and a Seismologist, of the Lawrence Berkeley National laboratory taking a coffee break in a cafeteria up on the hill overlooking the campus, the town, and the bay on a sunny afternoon of the near future. The Physicist is scribbling endless equations on a paper coaster, as if he is trying to find a cure for black holes, while the Seismologist scans the morning *Chronicle*. The latter says, "Say, maybe you can tell me. As a seismologist I don't pay much attention to such things, but you should know about these flashes of energetic radiation they call gamma-ray bursts. Is there anything new in your damn professional journals about them?"

"They're mysterious," the Physicist says absently, still busily at work with his ballpoint. "No known origin, they radiate as much energy for a few seconds equal to about a billion suns and then disappear without a trace. But I know of nothing new. Since the launch of the HETE satellite, you mean?"

"This little piece in the newspaper does mention the High Energy Transient Experiment satellite," the Seismologist says, pointing to the newsstory on page 5 of the third section. "It says — well, it sounds like sheer nonsense to me, but —"

"If it's in the *Chron* you can believe it's nonsense. When did they get anything right about physics? Polywater, cold fusion. What harebrained theory are they into now? Anything to do with psychokinesis, ESP, or channeling? Listen, I just thought of a solution to your problem."

"Nothing like that. Stuff about the Oort cloud, quarks, and gamma-ray bursts." He puts down the newspaper and bemusedly lets his eyes wamble through the messages and pleasantries of the spacious Bay Area vista below, which show what Providence can achieve when freed from the narrow confines of Rhode Island. He feels reassured by the beaming sun and the estimates he has read that the sun is good for another four billion years or so, and on a lovely afternoon like this he is optimistic that it will be blazing away for at least ten billion years longer than that. Why worry about hypothetical gamma-ray bursts in the energy range of one million electronvolts? "But — what's this about my problem?" he says with a start. "You mean — Tippi...?"

"Your extracurricular troubles with that blonde are beyond repair, I'm afraid. No, I have the solution for the termites that are chewing up your wife's pencil sketches stored in the garage."

The Seismologist looks at the cascade of equations scribbled on the paper coaster. "Wow, have you invented a death ray?"

"No, it's something much simpler," the Physicist says. "My solution to your termite problem is: Hire an exterminator!"

Admittedly this scene, depicting the first soft knock on the door when doom has come to call, is pure science fiction so far. I am sure, however, that it will happen in much that way, here and there around the world, when the first news begins to trickle out of NASA headquarters, which will be at pains to hide the whole truth. I am sure of this because something similar once happened to me. The scene pictured below isn't fiction, but fact, solid, iron-grey, and irrefutable, although it has been lightly edited to omit a few "huhs?" and "duhs." It doesn't concern the end of the world, but something almost as momentous and overwhelming as that.

Fifty summers ago I was a GI standing in the chow-line of the Assembly Area Command sub-area at Sissonne, France. It was late in the afternoon of 17 or 18 July 1945. The war in Europe was over, but the war in the Pacific was still clashing on, and while I waited for dinner I read the latest reports from that theater of operations in the pages of the Paris edition of *The Stars and Stripes*, although that war seemed very dim and distant. Then I idly turned to an inside page to read of matters of lesser importance. As I read one minor newsstory I must have made a murmur of shock and dismay. ("*Whence is that knocking?*") The GI behind me in line peered over my shoulder.

"What's wrong, buddy? Does it say they figure the Japs will hold out for another ten years? That'll be our luck!"

"Nothing like that," I said. "It says here that the bomb dump on the Alamogordo bombing range in New Mexico blew up -- last night, it must have been -- and the flash of the explosion was seen over seven states. That must have been a tremendous blast!"

"Big! *Ka-BOOM!* Them's big states out there," the other GI agreed. "Some stupid Joe must have dropped his cigaret among those blockbusters and set off the whole shootin' match."

"The thing is," I explained with, I am sure, a bewildered look on my face, "I was stationed at the Alamogordo air base before I came overseas, and so far as I ever heard, all those practice bombs in the bomb dump were filled mostly with sand. How could the explosion of bombs like that make such an incredible explosion? Seven states! And parts of Mexico, too, I suppose, although they don't mention that. A huge blast like that sounds almost science-fictional."

"Well, they don't tell you everything," the other GI wisely pointed out. "What are you, a general? Who knows what happened? Forget about crap like that. Have you got the baseball scores there? How did Dem Bums do yesterday? Let's think about the important things."

RICH KID TELLS ALL

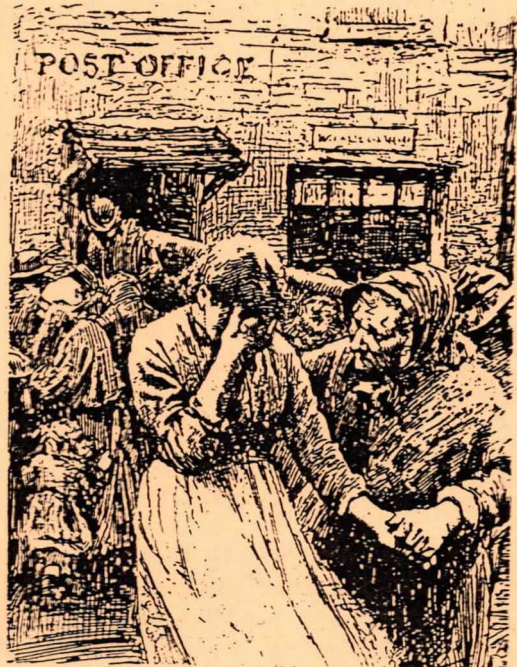
"It is time to explain myself -- let us stand up."

I shop at Tower Records for classical CDs more than five times a month, and buy from 16 to 20 every month. I rate a positive "10" (circled in red!) in my "willingness to speculate on new records...being very likely to try something new," and besides classical music I am enchanted by Rock/Pop/Hip-Hop, World/Reggae, and New Age/Contr. Instr. music. I own a CD-ROM player, and

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I am a home computer owner that subscribes to Prodigy, America Online, and Internet. More enlightening to people who don't know me is the added information that my age is "under 18," and my income is "\$200,001+". You may not have realized how young and affluent I am.

I need hardly explain, perhaps, that all this is completely false information. (You can sit down now.) The questions that I answered with blithe disregard for the truth were asked on a subscription blank from Tower Records. They want to know all these things about me, or you, when they deign to send a free subscription to *Classical Pulse!*, their slick-paper magazine-cum-advertisement. Another purveyor of CDs, the Columbia House Classical Club, in offering me a "6-month trial membership," inquires whether I have a phone, a VCR, and have bought by mail in the past. Of course they also want to know my age. To such nosey Parkers I say, send me the damn magazine or give me the membership, or don't, and stop asking me personal questions. I'm just a dumb teenager with too much money and a perverse interest in classical CDs. That's all you need to know. If I want to buy Rock/Pop/Hip-Hop records, I will buy them, without filling out a questionnaire. (I have no idea what "Hip-Hop" or "New Age/Cont. Instr." music is, and *please* don't enlighten me.)



"32 cents for one lousy stamp!"

A few months ago I was pestered on the phone by the Gallup poll, or someone representing himself to be a Gallup pollster (one is inclined to be suspicious these days). the first time I was ever approached by Mr Gallup or Mr Harris or Mr Nielsen. The query directed at me elicited one other fact about me that you may not know: I suffer from diabetes, and so does my wife. I have never seen the results of this poll; perhaps they have never been published, or they may still be forthcoming. In case you see the results, you had better disbelieve the figures just a little, for I lied. I don't have diabetes (or a wife). I am not unsympathetic toward those who suffer from diabetes. I have known a few such people, and the marvelous Mary Tyler Moore suffers from the ailment, but I don't necessarily tell the truth even to George Gallup and his minions. (Perhaps a lie like mine may be useful in encouraging research and treatment of the disease by giving a false notion of its prevalence.) Such poll results are always represented as scientifically accurate, down to the last decimal point, but I don't believe it. I am ready to accept gross results. I believe that "Seinfeld" was more popular in the 1994-95 season than "The Boys Are Back," but the exact Nielsen figures are suspect. So are the results of "a confidential survey" in a business magazine revealing that 49 percent of salesmen take customers to topless bars. Forty-nine percent? I am just a little suspicious of such exactitude. In the latter case, only 1200 salespersons were surveyed, a sample surely of dubious significance. And some of them, like I sometimes do, lied.

Gretchen's staunch credo was "*Always tell the truth. Lie only when you have to.*" Unfortunately she lied all too seldom, and the truth sometimes got her into trouble. Sometimes she told the truth about *me*, even when it wasn't necessary, and I had to lie to get out of it. Even so, I try very hard to live up to her credo, highminded and unrealistic as it is, especially for a man. You could usually rely on Gretchen's word (remember her proviso!) and that of most women. Perhaps women may have a higher regard for the truth or perhaps they have less need to obscure the truth. "*Lie only when you have to,*" Gretchen said. I sometimes suggested to Gretchen that a better rule of thumb might be, "*Tell lies, and the truth only when you have to,*" but she never agreed with that, and I suppose I don't either. But I am likely to lie when I am asked impertinent questions, and all these inquisitive pollsters and survey-takers had better adjust their figures a smidgin whenever I'm part of the sample. Maybe it's stupid. Of course it is, but hell, I am just a punk kid with rich parents. Don't blame me!

IN THE PASTURE

"Q: If everyone goes vegetarian, what will happen to the animals?"

"A: Animals will stand more chance of being appreciated for the beautiful individuals they are."

The Animal Times: *Newsletter of
People for Ethical Treatment of Animals*

I like animals, but not passionately enough to think of them as "beautiful individuals." My favorite animal, I think, is the turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), at least at Thanksgiving time. I like animals to eat, and if turkeys weren't good eating, I don't think many would be raised as pets even by the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals. They would become an endangered species, indeed a lost species, and so would ducks, geese, chickens, hogs and cattle (except milch cows), animals not noted for their beauty or their personalities. Years ago, I remember it well, I was with Lee Hoffman in Chicago when she purchased a can of rattlesnake meat, and raising rattlers for food seems more useful than leaving them in the wild where perhaps (I offer this as a mild suggestion) they ought to be exterminated lest they sting your unwary heel. (I didn't get a chance to eat rattlesnake; I think Lee said it tasted like barbecued chicken.) Only when animals (those "beautiful individuals") agree to stop eating other animals will I become a vegetarian.

I don't think I want to read *The Souls of Animals* by Gary Kowalski, in which "a Unitarian minister argues that we underestimate the spiritual and emotional qualities of animals," and I suspect that even the excellent Elizabeth Marshall Thomas tends to overestimate their intellectual powers. Like Ms Thomas I am fond of cats and elephants and, oh yes, horses, which she doesn't mention, but aside from the succulence of a few other animals, properly flavored and fricasseed, I like animals less for their being animals than for their occasional characteristic of being human-like in their companionship and affection for one another. I like to see a heap of cats drowsing together on the sunporch, and elephants in a circus parading trunk to tail, seeming to exhibit a whimsical delight in the performance. (In *The Tribe of Tiger* Elizabeth Marshall Thomas comments on the evident pleasure big cats in a circus take in performing with their trainer.)

And today -- speaking of horses -- I glimpsed, as I passed by, a tableau even more to my pleasure: two horses standing together in a steeply pitched meadow in Sonoma, one with neck over the other. What were they thinking as they stood there in a corner of the field? Were they dreaming, or only dozing without dreaming? (Horses are lucky; they can sleep standing up.) The afternoon was more splendid than I can describe, and perhaps they were enjoying it more than I, for they were not vexed by the urge to mark down their impressions, or bothered by premonitions and gloomy speculations, but existed only in a half-conscious state without cogitation, distilling only the present hour. I suspect that animals, at least some animals, birds perhaps, waken each morning as if it were their birth day, possessed only of their programmed responses and little else except their wonder at the miracle of dawn and of existence. How lucky they are, I suppose, and saner than we are. "They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, / They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God."

The two horses stood quietly in a claustal silence, the afternoon heat overlapping them. Only the wind breathed, and that very gently, like a child asleep in his crib. The leaves of the tree that shaded them shifted only a little, making dapples of sunshine that wandered brightly over the pewter grey of their hides and flowed half-lost in their manes and tails, and the shadows of consciousness must have moved across their minds just as elusively. They merely accepted the simple pleasure of being and of being together. Out of such dumb animal affection our brutish ancestor mothers a million years ago invented the concept of love, and its lustres and tremolos of light in a world of savage darkness are the only thing, for human and nonhuman alike, that makes life worth living.

A good-tempered woman is a marvel indeed. So is a bad-tempered woman.
