

MY THREE CATS AND THE APOCALYPSE

Kevin Cook

So, anyway, I'm sitting here in a little public library on 46th and Sunset, looking over a copy of *Fugal Analysis*, by some guy named Ebenezer Prout (if you don't believe me, look under 781.4 in your neighborhood bookmobile). Looked like maybe it was some kind of Freudian stuff about people with weird hangups, but it's not. It's all music. Boy, my general knowledge has sure improved since the world got killed off. That's because I spend a lot of my time in libraries.

Toward the end, everybody was running off to a hospital or driving off the side of a big hill or something. They were all going wild and yelling, clutching at their heads, so there was nobody in the libraries. I still don't like running into old corpses everywhere I go, so I spend a lot of time in places like this, but I stay away from churches and hospitals and bowling alleys. Lots of people went to churches to die, and the rest went crawling to hospitals . . . don't go to bowling alleys because I never did like to bowl.

In case this document or whatever-you-want-to-call-it ever gets to anybody, maybe I should say something diplomatic. Like, "Hello on behalf of mankind," or "We got tired of waiting so we went on without you," or "Where were you when we needed you?" The last one's the best.

There goes the one o'clock Friday air-raid siren. It sounds like a last lonely trumpet wailing at the fate of humanity.

Actually, it sounds like a cat that got his tail stepped on, but I just said that so you'd know that all poetry wasn't gone from the world. In fact, I'm the best poet in the whole world. I'm really the best everything in the whole world, you understand. Well, not the best lover.

Time for my one o'clock run around the block. Be back in a minute.

I'm back (skipped a line so you'd know I was back). I'll tell you, that's a long way, but I've got to keep myself in shape. I was Mr. Universe last year. Five-nine and hundred fifty-five pounds- I was the

smallest and lightest Mr. Universe in history. Guess I scared all the other entrants off.

But enough about me. Let's talk about you. How are you? How's the family? How are the job and the dog? Seen any good movies lately?

You've got to say all that in a letter, and it feels better if I pretend this is a letter and not a last will and testament for the whole planet (good metaphor, huh?).

"I, the human race, being of sound mind and body (according to the best doctor in the world), do hereby leave my entire estate to anybody, or anything, that happens to come along, but Disney World shall be forever preserved as a monument to my memory."

Anyway, guess if I'm going to write this, I might as well pretend somebody's going to find it. So you'll want to know how things got this way. Well, I don't know everything about it, so I'll just tell you what I remember.

It was in the middle of February, but it wasn't too cold, about sixty. It was warm enough to play golf for the first time of the year, and that's what I was doing when whatever it was started happening. I was out in 37 at good old Pleasant Run Municipal G.C., and that's only one shot off the best I've ever had for nine holes, and great considering there were at least three holes in every green, two of them gopher.

So, on number twelve, I tried to go up over the big hill to try to hit the green in two. The ball managed to pick out the only tree branch within ten miles of the line of the shot and whacked it. It came down right next to the base of the tree, which was halfway up the hill at about a forty-five degree angle. I had to stand with one foot on a big root and the other one on a rock, on this awful slope, so I choked up on an eight-iron and punched at it. Nicklaus, *maybe*, could have pulled off that shot.

So that's when I slipped and fell over backwards, until I fell into this pretty deep dried-up creek bed and hit my head, hard.

I woke up real suddenly a while later, decided not to play out the round, picked up my clubs, and started back across the first fairway to the car.

That's where the old man was. He must have been the only other one on the course at the time. It was almost dark.

He was lying there on the grass just off the first tee, sort of rolling around, holding onto his head, with his clubs all thrown around him. He was making an awful kind of gurgling noise, like a broken one of those things you blow at your fireplace, and there was blood and

foam coming out of his mouth.

There was grass torn out of the dirt in patches all around him, and he was just crawling in a circle and gurgling.

I picked him up to take him to the car, which is when he scratched four big cuts in my face. I didn't mean to drop him but he startled me and I did. Then he rolled over, bit off the end of his tongue, and died.

Never saw anybody die before that. I ran to my car, was sick a couple of times on the way, but made it and took off for the hospital to get an ambulance.

The hospital parking lot was already filled up, so I dumped the car on the side of the street and ran into the emergency ward. The room had about two hundred people in it, most of them screaming and gurgling. A doctor ran up with a hypodermic needle and started to poke me with it, but I grabbed his arm and yelled for him to tell me what was going on. He broke the needle against the side of his head, screamed at me, and collapsed into my lap.

I pushed him off onto the floor, a little panicky, then ran out of the building knocking over people with foamy bloody mouths.

I fell down in the grass by the parking lot, and listened to all kinds of noises that had never happened all at once before. People yelling, air-raid sirens, police sirens, fire truck sirens, and cars crashing. Mostly, you could hear cars crashing. I think I finally stumbled out to my car and just sat in it in a daze.

II

The radio in my car didn't work, so I went straight for home when things looked a little clearer, to find out what was going on. Had to go around a bunch of side roads to avoid car crashes. There were a few people milling around and few crawling or lying right in the road. I sure couldn't just run over them, so I had to get out and pull them over to the side. The hospital had gone crazy, and I didn't even know what was happening, so it seemed like the only thing to do was to leave them there, although I really wasn't even thinking then.

The car did hit one of them, though. It was dark and she was lying right on the side of the crest of this hill, so there was no way to stop in time. She had been dead anyway, though, I think. I hope.

Nobody but my three cats and me lived in my little apartment on Kenneth Avenue, so I wasn't afraid to go in. The first thing to do was to get the news on TV. The regular eleven o'clock anchorman wasn't there, and the guy they had was having trouble reading his copy. His face was all sweaty, dripping makeup, and his glasses kept falling off his nose.

He said that there was a national emergency, that a worldwide plague had hit between five and six p.m. EST, that nobody was immune, that an estimated half the world's population was dead already, and to stay off the streets, there was no cause for panic.

He said the station was going off the air, but it would go on automated network feed, and to stay tuned to emergency radio stations.

I about died right then. I'd thought it was maybe something real wrong with the city. But it was the whole world!

Then it hit me that my cats may have gotten it, too, and checking them out showed that they did. Not quite as badly as most of the people, but bad enough. Maybe it was a little strange, but that made me feel worse than seeing all those hundreds of people die, because my cats were the only family I had. They looked bad.

It seemed like only I didn't have the plague. Even the newsman had been rubbing a headache, and there hadn't been anybody without it on my way home. They'd said that no one was immune.

The local TV station went off, there was some raucous music, and by the time I was paying any attention, Johnny Carson had come out to do his monologue. He made a joke about the President, then one about how cold it was in Buffalo, then a minute later he took his golf swing and led into a commercial. But I was going wild. Everything was okay in L.A.! Nobody in the audience was screaming in pain, there was no mention of any worldwide disaster. At least somebody else was still alive!

But Johnny never came back. The screen went straight to static, just as I remembered that the Tonight Show is taped earlier in the day. Used to be, anyway.

I tried calling my folks, friends, the operator, anybody, but all I could get was the weather. Cloudy. Don't mind telling you, I cried myself into a lousy, rolling-over sleep that night.

The next morning I let the cats back out of the bedroom, fed them, and went out to meet what was left of the world.

There were dead people all around, most of them curled up like animals hit by cars, which a lot of them had been. Nothing was moving in the whole town but the lights at the Steak 'n Shake, which kept going back and forth between the "In Sight it Must be Right" sign on top to the front door, where a guy in an apron and a white hat was lying with red stuff all over him. Maybe it was chili.

There was nobody alive at the mayor's office, at any of the TV stations, or in the Statehouse, and I was beginning to get the feeling that there was no need to hurry. None of the phones anywhere could get anything but a weird kind of busy signal that sounded sort of asthmatic.

It was scary the way I was getting used to seeing dead people all over, like after a war, only nobody was dressed right for a war. So then I got up the nerve to go check on my next-door neighbor Bill Bowman and his family, hoping they were just hiding or something, although I was prepared to see them dead at the dinner table. It had started a cold drizzle.

The door was locked, but it didn't take too much to kick it open. Nobody came to see who was kicking in the door, but I thought maybe they were sick, so I went on in. It was all gloomy and cold inside. I don't know how I'm going to write this down.

I edged into the kitchen and saw that the glass door to the patio had been broken out and what was left in the door was stained. I looked around the end of the hallway into the living room,. There was a mattress in the room with a cover over it and a big bulge in it and God there was a hole in it where a shotgun had blasted into people all huddled up and I could just see bone and dry blood before I backed away and got sick again, and again and again.

It was Bill's wife Joan and their two kids. They must all have been suffering something awful for him to do that to them. I could never have done a thing like that. Maybe Bill had been in so much pain himself that he could't tell what he was doing. Yeah. Because the ceiling and even the refrigerator were shot up, so it looked like there had been a gunfight in their little apartment.

I just crawled into the bathroom to try to clean myself up. Hadn't remembered about Bill. He was halfway down in the tub where he'd killed himself with the shotgun we used to go hunting with, and he never shot up an animal like what he did to himself. We'd been best friends since we were twelve.

I either screamed or just whimpered on my way out of there. I got my own gun, let my howling, still-alive cats go out the front door, which they'd wanted to do for five years, and decided to get the car and drive east. Didn't even say goodbye to the three of them.

Their names were Sam, Flanner, and Buchanan.

Nothing happened between Indianapolis and Washington. Nothing. It took three stops along the way at gas stations off the highway, and then it took some driving around to find the White House once. I got to Washington. The funny thing was that there were no people around it. You'd think they would have been climbing the fences.

It's sort of a sad thought - the President all alone in the Oval Office while the whole country was dying. But then, he must have been dying, too.

Inside the building, there were only a few bodies around, which were easy to step over. After nosing around a little, I found the Oval Office. The big white doors were closed. I was scared to death he was going to be in there, dead on the floor covered up by the Secretary of State or something, but I turned the hard gold doorknob.

The room was empty. There was nobody on the floor behind the desk, but there were reams of official-looking paper on top of it. The flag wasn't at half-mast.

The papers were all classified, all full of sentences that ended with periods that should have been exclamation points. Basically, I found out what I had come to find out- all about the end of everything in the whole world, except for one dumb damn grade school teacher in bluejeans crying in the Oval Office.

III

The plague really was worldwide, and wasn't caused by any kind of warfare known or thought possible before now. It had happened at the same time in every country, at 5:37 EST on February 19th.

In the middle of the afternoon on that Thursday, the brainwaves (alpha, beta, etc.) of every living creature in the world were somehow jumped in intensity about ten times. This killed some almost immediately, but kept others in awful pain for a number of hours. There

were a lot of statistics in the report, but no explanation of how it could have been done. I haven't explained it nearly completely, but that's the gist of it- that's how the world ended.

I must have been knocked out just as it happened, and it must have been what brought me around so fast. There must have been other people who were in comas or something when it happened, but they must have been killed in the hysteria in the hospitals. I saw a hospital in Philadelphia that looked like it had been bombed.

Used to think that some of them *must* have survived, though. But it's been two years, and I haven't found a single person or animal alive. I spend every day looking around the entire country, but I end up alone in some library.

One thing I remember about those papers on the President's desk- the scientists at Arecibo had gotten "emanations" from something on one of the asteroids out past Mars' orbit. Of course, nobody had time to do anything about it.

Now, you can say that I'm trying to make up a spectacular story about invaders from outer space, but I really think I've got an idea of what happened to us. I figure this: if we needed another planet to live on for some reason, a planet just like our own, we'd have to grab up the first one we could find. There can't be too many within any reasonable distance, and, like they used to say, beggars can't be choosers. So if we did find one, and there were some kind of primitive living things on it, what would we do? Not go to war if we could help it, and we might even try to be as merciful about clearing out the lower forms of life in the place.

Too far-fetched? Hell, *we've* done it already, on a smaller scale. Go ask an Indian about it, if you can find one.

I think that's what happened. I figure they'll wait for awhile for the smell to go away before they come to claim their prize. So I'm counting on a few more years before they get here, since they would've come by now if they were in a rush.

So there's a few things I can do with the rest of my life. I can roll over and die, and take the whole human race with me, but I'm not ready for that. Maybe there's still one person out there, still alive with me. I've put signs and signals nearly everywhere in the country by now, and maybe I'll get a response, Sometime.

Being alone is no good. Not if it's all the time. What I miss most of all is taking my first graders to the gym. I miss them.

Anyway, the other thing I can do is to get ready for when the people that did this come down to take over "their" planet.

I didn't mention it before, but I've learned a lot about the worldwide nearly-automatic defense systems of the two most powerful nations on Earth. You see, I can just walk into the Pentagon or the Kremlin any time I want to, since I've made a point to find out all about the systems that protect them and their countries. I've set up bases of my own in the Pentagon, at the White House, and at a bunch of military and SAC bases, and in about three months I'll be ready to start work on arming our whole weapons arsenal. It's a terrifically slow and tough process, but it's all I have left.

I can already operate a helicopter and a train, and I'm going to learn how to fly a small plane to get through Siberia west to Moscow, and to all the bases in between. I've got unlimited supplies, and I know the basic set-up over there from our intelligence reports. In five years, it will all be tied in together, if one man can do it.

And when the things that killed the whole human race get here, I'll be sitting in the White House, and I'll press a series of buttons that will blow up them and me and everything.

So I don't know who's going to find this. But writing it has made me feel better.

IV

A part of me says that revenge is not a noble motive, certainly not a good enough reason for blowing up our whole planet, and that bothers me.

But it's not only revenge. There's got to be justice, hasn't there? You can't just kill all the people there are and then just take over their home. I mean, even an Indian has to have a planet to live on, and it doesn't matter how powerful you are, you can't just make him crawl up in a ball and die and live on his land and get away with it, can you? Can you?

This planet is ours. And now it's mine. And if there was ever anything worthwhile in man, we can't just roll over and die like animals!

I'm sorry. I'm writing too excited and too fast. I'll slow down and try to say what I mean right.

I ran across a poem in the library the other day. It said that a man has to: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light!"

I guess that's why I have to fight these things that murdered everyone I ever loved or cared for, and everyone I never even got a chance to love or care for. Somebody has to rage against the dying of the light. Somebody does.

God, I'm crying again. I cry too damn much.

PRAYER

Ed Shacklee

the flower that
a
caterpillar loved was
crushed, left ravaged
by
mandibles.

spun in silence
my
new heart has no hunger.
let my wings do
no
injustice

let me touch you.
the
wind has no cradle if
your petals feel
the
angry frost.