

Blackhole Sun

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Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2018

Published: 2018/03/02

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

On a Tuesday that no one expected to be important, the world learned the sun was going to turn into a black hole.

The scientific community came together as one to announce that a gravitational anomaly was building within the sun. This would intensify until a cascade of events would lead the star to a total collapse and become a black hole. All matter in the sun would contract into a ball roughly the size of the head of a pin. Long before the rest of the solar system would be drawn in, though, the Earth would freeze completely from the lack of sunlight and energy.

What was worse, the timetable for this event was a matter of days.

The world leaders initially rejected the science, but their unanimous consensus was unprecedented. Even the most ardent deniers could look into the sky and see the first signs of dwindling light. There was no escaping the inevitable, and the inevitable was close at hand.

Faced with the impending doom, world leaders immediately began to distribute 'peace capsules'. Freely available and widely distributed, the capsules offered a painless alternative: suicide. The poison would allow the populace to slip into a peaceful sleep from which they would never wake up.

Not one day after the announcement, two-thirds of the world's population was dead.

--Three Days Until The End Of The World--

"It's a warm morning waiting for all you sleepy heads just waking up," said the broadcaster coming over the hand-cranked radio. "It's supposed to be clear all day, with a possible chance of some showers in the next couple of days. Hopefully it will help cool us down before the big blast."

There was the sound of shuffling papers and the broadcaster continued in a more casual tone. "You know, I was watching an episode of Stargate last night on one of the over-the-air channels. That's all I get now because my cable died and, let's be honest, good luck getting someone to come out and fix it. So, in this episode, they dealt with a black hole. And they were caught in it because of time dilation or something. So, I wonder if we'll experience anything like that. In the episode it was like—"

Sam Young clicked off the radio. It wasn't like he was listening to it anyway.

"Why'd you turn it off?" asked Beverly Easton. Walking next to him, she wasn't protesting so much as simply curious.

Sam shrugged, as much an answer as to adjust the way his backpack fell on his shoulders. "Whenever he talks about the black hole, he gets really depressing." The pair of teens didn't say anything else, only kept walking.

Around them spread the metropolis of downtown Birmingham Alabama. The air was hot, with vapor trails wafting through the distance. Car accidents dotted the city road, with more than a few having taken their toll on the local roads and buildings. A fire was burning itself out behind one storefront window. Confederate flags had been draped and spray-painted everywhere, as had Christian symbols and other doomsayer graffiti. Some windows were smashed but for the most part, downtown of the major southern city looked fairly normal, if unsettlingly still.

"It's nice not having to be in school," said Beverly, her thumbs stuck in her backpack straps. She looked up at the city around her with a bright smile, like an ordinary high school girl out on a field trip. "I always felt like I learned more being outside the classroom than inside."

Sam realized he was staring at the girl and averted his eyes. "Yeah," he agreed out of rote habit. He tugged on the collar of his shirt that had gotten turned over as it often did. The edges and hem were threadbare, which wasn't a recent development.

"Do you like school?" Beverly asked the sophomore.

Sam just shrugged again. "I guess I did." The contrast of tenses wasn't lost on either of them. Beverly turned away, her shoulder-length brown hair falling in front of her face. Sam regretted his answer that took away her eyes and her smile. Deprived of them, he looked ahead as they arrived at an intersection. "Beverly," he gasped. She looked and gasped as well.

Hanging from the traffic lights were five black men, all strung up from nooses. Two bodies showed the signs of weather and decomposition but the other three looked so fresh, they might still be alive. They twisted slowly in the slight urban breeze.

"I can't believe it," Beverly gasped, her hands in front of her mouth. She didn't look afraid but repulsed.

Sam came to a stop. He turned his head and listened. Beverly did the same and heard distant engines. High-pitched and growing louder, the din was soon joined by the clomp of horse hooves. The two teens looked frantically about for a place to hide. They dove into a local restaurant where the lights were off and the windows covered by curtains of southern charm.

Moments later, the Klan rode into town.

Two dozen men in white cloaks and hoods came trotting through the intersection. With big horses and loud motorbikes, they all wore or carried Confederate flags. They ambled through the intersection, not lingering and certainly not hurrying. One slowed as they passed through the intersection, decelerating just enough to reach up and slap the foot of one of the lynched men. He laughed with one of his riding buddies as they kept on.

Sam and Beverly shared relieved sighs that they hadn't been noticed. Their relief was short-lived when they were startled by a noise from the back of the restaurant. Out through the storage area, an old man with a double-barrel shotgun appeared. The instant he saw the kids, though, he lifted the gun barrel and smiled

a kindly grin. "Why hello," he told them. He put the gun to the side. "Come on out, Jackie. It's just some kids." Behind the old man appeared a silver-haired woman who looked cautiously into the restaurant. Seeing the two kids, she sighed with relief just as they'd done.

"Don't be afraid," the man said without approaching the two kids, like he was speaking to two fawns. "I'm Fred, this is Jackie. This is our place."

Sam glanced at Beverly, then took the lead. "I'm Sam," he said, moving between his traveling companion and these two. He glanced at the window and saw the bodies in the intersection. "When did that happen?"

Fred couldn't see out the window but knew what he meant. "Don't know," he said remorsefully. "The day of the announcement, I think. I didn't see it happen." He ventured, "I'm not sure they were alive when they got lynched. I think those bastards just lynched corpses out of spite."

"Freddie!" said Jackie, smacking her husband with a Penny Saver.

"What?" he exclaimed back. "These kids have heard worse." Their bickering comforted Beverly and Sam. "Public school kids, aren't you?" he asked, picking up his shotgun like he would a broom.

Sam and Beverly both looked at each other. "No," they collective answered.

"Oh, well, then maybe they haven't heard 'bastard' before," Fred acknowledged. Beverly hit him again, grinning at him like he did her. "You two hungry?" he asked the kids. "We got plenty of food." With giant smiles, Sam and Beverly followed them into the back.

"Seems a shame," said Fred as he sliced some turkey. Using a long knife, he cut through the delectable meat as easily as a conductor might swish a wand through the air. "I feel like I was just getting the hang of being an adult."

Sam and Beverly sat at a small table in the back of what was part kitchen and part storage room. After the southern heat of the morning, they enjoyed their backs being to the freezer. The door was slightly frosted and the air coming off it was invigorating. Jackie explained, "When the news told us the sun was going nova or black hole or whatever it is it's doing..."

"Black hole," Beverly interjected quietly, unable to let an inaccurate statement stand. She averted her eyes immediately afterwards.

"Yeah, that," Jackie smirked at the girl's impulse. "When they announced that, we thought...well, I guess we don't need to open the deli today. But then, after about ten minutes of doing nothing, Fred and me, we just decided this was our life." She looked at the deli, in all its banality. She smiled with parental pride. "Yeah," she agreed with her husband, a tear in her eye. "Seems a shame."

"You know much about science?" asked Fred as he brought over the overstuffed sandwiches.

"Yeah," said Beverly. "I went to the state science camp two summers in a row." Fred and Jackie both looked at Sam and he just shook his head.

"Well, what's this black hole business?" asked Fred, like he was discussing an odd movie coming out that weekend.

"A black hole is a super-dense astronomical object," Beverly explained between gentle and measured bites of the generous sandwich. "They're incredibly tiny, but they have the mass of, of everything in our solar system. Or the mass of like ten, twenty, a hundred suns. All slammed down into a tiny dot about as big as a sandwich." She held up the artisanal lunch Fred had fixed for her. "The process has already started in our sun. Astronomers have found this tiny black spot on the sun. That's it." She just sort of gestured at the finality of it all. "The rest of the sun is getting sucked into the black hole, and the more of the sun that goes, the faster it will happen."

"Wouldn't we go spinning into space or something?" asked Jackie, her wrinkled face on her hand as she listened intently.

"No, because the mass has stayed the same," Beverly told her. "So the gravity will stay the same...sort of," she allowed, knowing the details were too complicated to bother with. "But whether we go spinning into space or not, the sun's light is what will go first and once it goes..." She let it linger.

"What about, like, the earth's core or something?" asked Fred.

"Geo-thermal," Sam piped up, excited he could contribute something to the discussion.

"Yeah, geo-thermometer," Fred said. "Why can't we live on that?"

"It won't last," Beverly said. "And we don't have the infrastructure to access it, either wide-spread or really even at all. It would take weeks at least to construct a single power station with the adequate insulation and life-support." Her hands in her lap and her appetite dampened, Beverly smiled sadly. "There just isn't time."

A pessimistic cloud fell over the lunch. The rattle of the air conditioning vents overhead filled in the space as the four ate and chewed.

"Do you guys listen to Raymond Silver?" asked Sam. Fred and Jackie looked at each other, then shook their heads. "He's the meteorologist for Channel 9? He's on the radio now, and online. He's still broadcasting."

"We were listening to him as we came into town," said Beverly.

"Came into town?" asked Fred. "You're not from here?"

"Tuscaloosa," said Sam with a grin. He added a little weakly, "Roll Tide."

Fred smiled, proudly. "War eagles."

Sam grinned. "Oh so that's how it's going to be?" Fred smiled as well.

"What brings you two to Birmingham?" asked Jackie. "Why are you both away from your families?"

The children fell silent. Beverly looked down at her sandwich and said nothing. She turned over her pickle spear with her fingers. "We wanted to see Vulcan," Sam chimed up, trying to give a convincing smile. "I remember coming to

see it as a kid, you know?" He shrugged. "I just, just wanted to go see it again." He shrugged yet again. "Seemed like as good a time as any."

"Yeah, but what about—" Jackie pushed but Fred put his hand on her knee, subtly silencing her. Both kids kept eating in silence, neither wanting to discuss the matter further.

"Well, I'm honestly relieved," Fred said after some time. "I liked this place, but...it's not like it had turned a profit. The bank seized it last month. Some kind of imminent domain or something."

"That's not..." Beverly started to argue but it was Sam's turn to silence her with a look that reminded her it didn't matter.

"The city did it, or the bank did it on behalf of the city, I don't remember. I didn't understand it," Fred said. He laughed a stoic, melancholy rattle. "I was honestly relieved when the news announced the whole sun thing." He looked at the ceiling as the air conditioning rattled on. "I had no idea how to spend retirement." His eyes glazed over. "I spent my adulthood thinking I was still a teenager. I finally get to retirement and I feel like I'm finally an adult. I been a step behind my whole life."

Jackie took his hand and squeezed it lovingly. Sam and Beverly both stared at their held hands. Sam put his hand on the table, right between them. Beverly looked at it and smiled lightly. She looked at him and he at her. She smiled, apologetically, and didn't take his hand.

"I think we're going to take the pills soon," Fred remarked distantly. He was still facing up, like he was seeing passed the ceiling. He stroked Jackie's hand as she held his. "I don't feel like I'm in a hurry. I don't think either of us do, but I don't want to be here right at the end, you know?" Jackie nodded at her husband, proud of his acceptance. "We've got plenty if you want some." Only polite, quiet refusals followed.

A bird flew overhead, shaking the phone line from which it took flight. A single whistle followed it as it soared through the urban air. Down the empty street, the two kids walked with unhurried, meandering steps. Beverly slowed, falling behind Sam. He turned back to her. "What is it?"

She smiled and nodded ahead. Sam turned and looked. On the horizon, raising up behind the trees, was the first glimpse of Vulcan: the great iron statue of the Roman god that overlooked Birmingham. "There he is," Beverly smiled. Sam looked and nodded, not smiling but not displeased either. Beverly resumed walking. "Why'd you tell that old couple that you wanted to go see Vulcan?" she asked the sophomore next to her. "This was my idea."

Sam shrugged, his backpack jangling when he did. "I don't know. It seemed the thing to do."

Beverly exhaled heavily as the road began to rise just slightly. Their reflection in street windows of empty sidewalk shops kept them company. "Why didn't you take the pill?" she asked randomly.

"Why didn't you?" Sam countered. Beverly fell silent, and Sam remained silent. A crack in the sky startled both kids. They looked up and saw heavy clouds swirling in. "Holy crap, I didn't even notice!" Sam exclaimed as a torrent of hot rain began to fall. The two looked around for shelter, seeing only a few distant awnings. Sam started to run for one, but Beverly caught his hand. She tugged him in the opposite direction and threw open a car door. The two kids dove into the backseat together, hiding from the pounding rain that had come seemingly out of nowhere.

"Cripes, that hurt," Sam remarked, touching the back of his neck. It stung and he looked at his clothes, seeing wafting trails of gray coming off his overshirt and jeans. Terrified, both kids looked onto the street and saw vapor billowing up.

"That's not steam," Beverly realized. "It's acid rain."

"It's what?" Sam exclaimed. He turned to Beverly, only to realize how close she was, peering out the window with him. He swallowed and focused on the world outside, against his will. "That's real?" he stammered.

"Of course it's real," Beverly said. She sat down with a sigh. "I guess a nuclear reactor went meltdown in Japan or something. Maybe a coal facility in Virginia blew up." She waved at the sky. "This is environmental damage on a catastrophic scale. Alabama saw this kind of thing in the 1950s and 1960s when the steel mills were unregulated."

"A nuclear reactor," muttered Sam in fear, staring out the window, in awe of the smoke.

"Yeah," said Beverly. "Nobody's going to work. The big, giant power factories are going to start falling apart. Probably started already. If the world wasn't going to end in two or three days, it would be a big deal." A somber moment followed.

Stoicism gave way to boredom and Sam fished out his hand-cranked radio. He wound the handle a bit while Beverly watched the rain fall. With a click, Sam gave the car life. "It's a warm morning waiting for all the listeners out there," said the announcer. "It's supposed to be clear all day, with a possible chance of some showers in the next—"

Sam shut off the radio and griped, "It's a rerun."

"Why do you keep playing that thing?" Beverly asked. Realizing how that sounded, she recanted quickly. "I mean, it's fine. It doesn't bother me or anything. I just...I was curious."

Sam put the radio away. "I think it's cool. Dude knows he's going to die, but he's still going to work. He's doing more than his share. He's broadcasting all the time, just keeping the few of us still around in the know." Beverly looked smug. "Okay, maybe not ALL the time, but you know what I mean." Her amused smile made his heart skip a beat. He turned and looked out at the fierce torrent of rain slamming on the back window. "He's probably trying to figure out this rain, see what happened to cause it. Like what nuclear reactor went up or whatever."

"I guess," was all Beverly said. She stared distantly, then glanced into the rain. Something about the poison water gushing down the window made her feel

introspective. "My parents gave me the pill to take." Sam was taken by surprise by the statement, the confession. Looking at her fingers as she touched different tips together, Beverly shared, "We got everybody together the day the announcement was made. Aunts, uncles, cousins. Big family reunion." A streak of a tear came out. More than just sadness; relief to finally speak.

Beverly's chin quaked, but not from mere sadness. A complicated cocktail of emotions swirled inside her, feelings like she didn't know and had no vocabulary to express. "I was going to be a senator," she whispered. "Mom told me that since I was a baby. Senator. Maybe even governor. Maybe even preside—" She choked on the word. She grabbed her hands together, her knuckles whitening as she clinched her fists in a ball. "We'd been in the state government since, since before there was an Alabama. All the way back, and before. Mom said I would be the first to go federal."

Sam very carefully and quietly slipped his backpack off. He moved like he was afraid to make sound, afraid to disturb her. He laid the backpack on the floorboard, letting her have all the room to speak. "We all got together, like it was Christmas," Beverly remembered, relieved. "Dad tapped the glass - the good crystal - and told everyone that God had made his decision. He told everyone that..." Beverly closed her eyes tight rather than succumb. "I knew something was up when I first sat down and I saw that everybody had a butter dish in front of them, just past the plate. Dad told us to remove the lid and take the, uh, take the vitamin." Her chin quaked and her voice stammered. "He didn't want to scare the kids."

"I took the pill," Beverly sobbed. She looked at Sam. "I kept it under my tongue until..." Her face fell into her hands. "Oh god, I saw them. I just sat there while they all...while they all..." Her shoulders shook as she was bent over, crying.

Sam felt bad for noticing the back of her neck, the slight tender skin between her fallen hair and her collar. While she was crying, having bared her soul, all he could think about was her soft, vulnerable skin. Feeling like a cad, he faced away from Beverly. At a loss, he matched confession with confession. "Dad went to get my sister," he said quietly, staring into the rain. Beverly looked up, her cheeks red from her tears. "She's going to UNC. Dad took the car and told mom and me to stay put, that he'd be back." Sam looked at the floorboard. "I called him, but he...there hasn't been answer. Called Candace too but she hasn't..." He shook his head, his face a placid mask.

Beverly realized she had no monopoly on sorrow and sat up. Sniffing, she brushed her hair back and tried to make herself presentable. "What about your mom?"

Sam fixated on the floorboard. "She woke me up screaming. Throwing up. She'd taken the pill. She said she didn't mean to. She said it was just a momentary thing. She had vomit all over her fingers. She'd tried to throw it up but..." Sam shrugged defensively. "She apologized herself to sleep." He whispered with finality, "Didn't wake up."

Beverly stared at him, her heart breaking. She reached for the seat buckle, only to realize she'd never put her seatbelt on. She laughed sickly. "I've never been in a car without putting my belt on. It's always just an automatic thing."

"Yeah, me too," Sam agreed sadly.

Beverly slid across the backseat, sliding next to Sam. His heart stopped as she neared him, her face looming above his. She put an arm around his shoulders and he tilted his head up towards her, his lips moving to meet hers. Without acknowledgement or awareness, Sam didn't know which, Beverly guided his head onto her shoulder. She cradled him against her. Sam's disappointment lasted only a moment when he realized how soothing the affection was. Under the torrent of rain, they stayed close together into the night.

--Two Days Until The End Of The World--

Sam awoke atop Beverly.

His eyes went wide at the morning surprise, both that they'd shifted in their sleep and that they'd slept at all. Beverly lay on the backseat of the car, and Sam had ended up somehow mostly atop her, one leg thrown over her. He looked down at her, still asleep, and found his mind racing. He swallowed and felt compelled to lean down to her lips, needing to lean down to her. A kiss, however slight, was everything in his mind, but he stopped himself. He instead shifted off her as best he could in the cramped space.

"You know how to be quiet," Beverly said with her eyes still closed. She opened them, her lashes draping wide, and she smiled at Sam. She slid back against the door and stretched her arms. "Oh!" she groaned. Her stomach made a loud noise and she just patted it.

Sam fished out his radio and cranked it again. "I think we can find a grocery store on our way to the statue," he said. He clicked on the radio and let the announcer come through.

"—storm is clearing out, thankfully," Raymond Silver was saying. "Good thing too. As most of you probably noticed, it was acid rain. As near as I can tell, it was the result of a coal mine explosion in east Texas. Some of you on the western edge of our viewing radius may have even heard it. Details are sparse. As most of you know, the internet is largely down, but I'm trying to get what information I can. I'll certainly keep you posted. For now, though, I wanted to give you an update on the flooding in—"

"You were right," said Sam, clicking off the radio. "It was due to pollution, or whatever." He took out his cell phone and activated it. Beverly watched him hold the phone up and turn this way and that. He got enough connectivity to say, "It's 6:49." He shut off the screen. "We've got two days left."

Sam sat back down in the backseat of the car. He looked out the windows at the town outside. A morning moroseness came over him and he asked, mostly of himself, "Why are we doing this?" Confronted with the question, Beverly drew her

knees to her chest and looked into the distance. "The sun's going to turn into a black hole in, like, sixty hours or something." His eyes glazed over sadly. "We're all going to die."

Beverly sniffed a tear. She wiped her cheeks with her palm and refused to give in. "We were going to die anyway," she said with shaky stoicism. She shifted and sat properly on the wide seat of the car. She faced forward, opposite Sam, like the two were on their way to the saddest school dance ever. "If we're going to die, why do anything?" What Sam mistook for a nihilistic dismissal was actually a prompt. "Just because something is inevitable doesn't mean it should be sped along." Beverly spoke in disjointed words, like her reasoning was as revelatory to herself as to Sam. "And just because something won't last doesn't mean it isn't important."

Sam looked across the spacious car at Beverly, surprised at her stance on the matter. She seemed equally surprised. "The immortality of a thing, of an event, isn't the ultimate qualifier of something's importance. And impermanency doesn't automatically render a thing unimportant." Sam faced forward again, unsure about what she'd said and feeling guilty for his own questioning. "Just because nobody will exist in three days, just because everything and everyone will be smashed into a single atom or whatever, doesn't mean that the time before that happens isn't important."

Sam asked in a quiet, humbled voice, "So what makes something important? If it isn't the lasting legacy or whatever, if it isn't...if it isn't the, the permanency of it, then what is it?"

Beverly smiled and shrugged. "I don't know. I just know this is important to me." She hedged, swallowing nervously. "To us." Sam looked at her, their eyes meeting. Tension and nervousness swelled. But so did music.

With the same befuddled look, Sam and Beverly both sat up straight and looked out the windows. They turned simultaneously to each other, confirming the other heard the organ music. "What is that?" asked Sam as they both got out. Stiff legs stretched out onto the pavement, the street steaming. Not from the pollution but the moisture burning off the hot pavement as the day's heat built rapidly. The pair began to sweat almost immediately.

Following the enigmatic religious revival music, Sam and Beverly headed down the street, shouldering their backpacks as they went. The music that was distant at first, slowly grew as they followed it with bewildered looks. The road began to curve upwards, starting the ascent up towards Red Mountain.

As they reached the end of the line of buildings, the music of hymnals became louder. Sam peaked around the brick corner, Beverly above him. They saw a crowd behind a nearby building and could hear the organ music leaking into the air. They heard a man speaking but his words were lost into the music and the distance. Sam looked at Beverly and conveyed their mutual uncertainty but also their curiosity. They stepped out into the street, approaching cautiously.

A congregation had gathered on the outside of a church. Banners and streamers and signs dotted the few hundred people. 'Repent'. 'The end is here'.

'God's judgment is upon us'. Babies to the elderly made up the group. On a car, an older man spoke to the crowd. So skinny, he looked more like a skeleton with skin except for a pronounced gut that proceeded him. Circular glasses reflected the early morning light, hiding his eyes as he spoke in an accent thick even for natives.

"Our SINS have led the lord GOD to seal off the world!" screamed the evangelist into a cheap, static-crackling bullhorn. "It is because of our UNWORTHINESS that we must all be CLEANED in the FIRES of his glorious wrath!"

A splatter hit Beverly and she jerked away. She patted her face, thinking it was sweat, only to discover she'd been splattered with blood. She looked terrified at Sam and they both checked to see where it had come from. A shirtless man ahead of them held a flail with gore lodged deep. He periodically struck himself on the back, flaying skin and muscle, sprinkling blood and matter everywhere. In fearful silence, Sam guided the terrified Beverly away.

The pair watched the crowd as they would a pit of vipers, all while moving away. They saw similar sights of self-mutilation dotting the fanatics. Cutting on the forearms. Bruises and black eyes. Bloodied knuckles. The crowd of the faithful were living on violence, subsisting on it.

Sam and Beverly began to back out. Staying quiet, they slowly departed, trying not to draw attention. They hugged a line of recently-planted trees, hoping to go unseen by the evangelist and his flock. They paused, however, when the din shifted and the cheering began.

Atop a car next to the evangelist's were two young men. Barely older than Beverly, they were shackled, tied with ropes, stripped nude, and badly beaten. Black eyes were swollen shut. Blood poured from their noses, mouths, and wounds. Amid the inane howling of their accuser, 'sodomites' came spitting out. Howls of brimstone and hate followed as the evangelist charged the two men with every crime imaginable, most of which were only imaginable. In the crowd, the people readied stones, rocks, bricks, and other implements of mob death.

Beverly gasped and covered her mouth. Sam turned her, against her will but not against her strength. He guided her on, the two walking until out of sight, and then running when they heard the bombardment begin.

Holding a spear head aloft, Vulcan stood atop a pedestal overlooking the city of Birmingham. Sam and Beverly stared up at the giant statue, taking in the majesty of it, until Beverly remarked, "I always liked his butt." Sam suddenly erupted in giggles. "What?!" she laughed. "It's, it's like, all muscle, you know." She flexed her fingers like she wanted to grab the statue's rear. "He's got a great butt." Sam was nearly convulsing, trying to keep his laughter in. "I'm just saying," she insisted. "And he's not wearing pants, just that apron thing."

"Yeah, that's some Porn Hub business happening," Sam agreed as he regained some composure.

"Like, when I was a little girl, I thought it was funny," Beverly insisted. "Now, I'm all...Uh!" She again mimed grabbing the statue of the god's behind.

Giggling again, Sam wondered into the museum, saying, "I'm getting a Coke."

The automatic sliding doors still opened, allowing Sam into the air-conditioned lobby. The air felt stagnant in the room, and hot, although noticeably cooler than the air outside. Glass shelves of memorabilia and trinkets dotted the store, as did a reception area for tours. Sam picked out a tube of caramel-covered peanuts and tore it open. He spotted a security camera and toasted it with the tube.

Beverly entered a moment later, surveying the place. "Hello?" she called pointlessly. She looked around, asking herself, "Where's the bathroom?" Sam pointed towards the far back, secluded but not hidden.

Rather than go for it, Beverly's eyes went open. "Holy crap!" She rushed to a set of statues. Replicas of Vulcan in half a dozen assorted sizes covered reinforced glass shelves. "I always wanted one of these." Sam wondered over and picked up one of the smaller ones and balked at the price. "When we were here, my family, my parents wouldn't let me get one." Beverly selected a mid-sized statue and carried it to the counter.

"You're paying?" Sam asked in surprise. "Why?"

"Because I wanted to buy one," she said, fishing out her wallet from her backpack.

"We've been stealing food this whole time," he argued.

"Food we need," she said, laying down bills. "This is a want."

Sam didn't get it but let it drop. Instead he asked, "Why didn't you parents want you to have one? Because they knew you liked his butt?"

"Things have value because they are useful," she practically quoted to him as she set the statue down on the floor. It came up to her knee. "If it isn't useful, it isn't valuable."

"Yeah, that doesn't exactly jibe with the whole 'permanency doesn't dictate something's importance'," he half-quoted to her.

"When you're being groomed for a career in politics, it's important to understand from an early age when and what to let go," she laid out for him as she pulled cash from her wallet. "The more things you have that are important to you, the more they have control over you. He who can walk away from the deal controls the deal, and things being important keeps you from being able to walk away from deals."

"He?" remarked Sam.

"He," Beverly confirmed, underscoring the nature of her parents' expectations. "Being a girl didn't absolve me of their expectations. It was just a handicap that I was expected to overcome."

"Geez," Sam said, not sure how else to respond.

After a sad silence, Beverly asked, "Watch this for me. Make sure nobody takes it," she teased as she headed for the bathroom.

While she was gone, Sam looked at the statues and then around the museum lobby in general. For some reason, his eye turned to the register. Ignoring the money Beverly had put down on the counter, he hit the release and the draw came out. A fresh drawer was waiting inside, including stacks of ones and fives as well as unopen rolls of coins. He picked up the stack of fives and looked them over. What had once been valuable was now merely a trinket, a curiosity. He turned the bills over, then returned them to the register.

He glanced again towards the camera and watched it watching him. For some reason, he found it creepier to know the camera was watching him, but with no one watching its feed.

Hot wind blew in Beverly's hair as they stood atop the statue's walkway. Staring out into the daytime, the high school junior smiled, leaning forward just a bit on the railing. She lifted her toes off the walkway and stayed elevated on her palms. Her eyes closed, she smiled, her hair blowing behind her.

Sam watched her stand, unable to keep from smiling as well. The sight of her joy, her exuberance, was more than he could handle, though. He averted his eyes. His gaze slid down from her face, down her back, to her hips. His eyes lingered there for only an instant, but long enough for Beverly to notice. She looked at him, aware of where he'd been staring. Sam swallowed and looked away from her entirely.

Night had come.

Under heavy clouds, the stars had been stolen from the pair. The car they had selected was parked under a bridge, beneath which was a sewage outlet. Water pumped by, the smell of waste and acid from the rain storm, creating a strangely sweet odor. Crickets chirped in a constant background din. Fireflies floated in the wooded distance, lighting up the night like a haunting party.

"Did you just come with me to have sex?" Beverly asked out of the blue. Sam was taken by surprise, more by a question than the question itself. In the silence of the night, her voice was quiet yet carried in the stillness like an evening breeze. Beverly tilted her head a little to see Sam's half-hidden expression, and asked further, "Are you just here hoping that I'll change my mind and sleep with you?" Sam shook his head but didn't expound. "I'm not going to have sex with you."

"I know," he nodded with a guarded expression as he fiddled with his radio. "You told me."

"And you're okay with that?" she asked, a little incredulously. He seemed surprised. She shrugged harmlessly, trying to disarm any offense her question might have caused. "You clearly want to have sex."

"Is there a reason you want to die a virgin?" he countered at her. Her eyebrow raised, challenging his assumption but he wasn't sure which one.

Rather than answer his question, she pondered her own, as if Sam was a puzzle she hadn't yet figured out. "It's just, if you want to have sex, I'm sure there are girls who would do it," she said, facing into the stream again. "Why not go find them?"

Sam faced the stream as well, listening for a moment to the coursing water and the chirp of nighttime insects. "I want to have sex," he said aloud, as if to himself. "But not just with anyone." He had to will himself to keep from looking at her. "With you."

"Why me?" she asked. He only shrugged. "Oh, gee, thanks," she teased. The second of levity made them both smile. "But I mean, really, why? Do you think I'm good at it? I know I'm pretty but there are hotter girls." Again, Sam only shrugged. "You don't know me that well, so don't tell me its love." He shrugged again, but differently, not so certain he agreed with her.

"Do I need a reason?" he asked, looking at her now. "I like you. I want to have sex with you. Does it really need to be more complicated than that?" He faced into the stream once again. Fireflies danced over the water, their flashes mirrored in the stream's surface, doubling their glow.

Beverly broached the scariest topic. "Why haven't you tried?" Her voice was lower, and courser. Fearful.

"I mean, I've asked," Sam admitted.

"You know what I mean," she ventured in a tense whisper. "While we were asleep together...or just..." She didn't move when she asked. Sam only shook his head and stayed silent. "Why not?" she asked, her voice a rasp, afraid of what his reasoning would be.

"Because that isn't sex," he told her certainly. "I mean, yeah, maybe I could cop a feel while we were asleep, but..." He again just shrugged. "I'm not sure I could take you," he told her with a complimenting smile. Even in the dark, she saw it and smiled in response. "But even if I could, that's not sex. That's rape." Saying the word felt wrong all on its own. "Even if that wasn't the worst – maybe worse than that church stoning those guys – it's still not what I want."

Silence behind a mask of flowing water and the night.

Sam's mouth curled into a smile. "Are you saying you want me to be all forceful—" Beverly smacked him on the arm, laughing at the suggestion. Sam chuckled as well.

"Shut up, perv," she teased. "No, I don't," she clarified, just for posterity's sake. With a tremble to her lip, she looked up rather than down. Despite the darkness, she could make out some texture of the sky. "Tomorrow's the day," she breathed. "I guess...I guess it's getting to me is all." Her eyes fell, as did her hope. "I don't want to die."

Sam took her hand and held it, offering all the comfort he had to give. Within the curtain of night, they fell into sleep together.

--THE FINAL DAY--

"Move, move, move!"

Beverly and Sam awoke with a start in the backseat of the sedan. They both sat up from where they'd slept to look out the rear windshield. On the street behind the small park, separating it from the low-rent neighborhood beyond, they saw three men running. Younger men, one not much older than they, they were running for their lives. Their frantic pace carried them out of insight through the tree line beyond.

"What's going on?" asked Beverly. Sam only cringed as a white-hooded figure on horseback came charging down the street. Carrying a torch and a machinegun strapped to his back, he led the charge as dozens of men ran after him. A few others on horseback, they chased after the black men, heading into the trees as well. All but one.

A solitary figure slowed and turned his horse around. The brown and white spotted horse reared its head and stomped its feet while the ghostly figure atop its saddle surveyed the parking lot. Sam knelt low, Beverly following his lead. They disappeared behind the headrests of the backseat and waited. Sam noticed the window nearest him fogging up and he covered his mouth, though it did no good.

Beverly peaked over the headrest, exposing as little as she could, and saw the rider gone. She let out a short exhale and whispered, "Let's go."

Sam checked as well and, seeing no one, grabbed up his backpack. Beverly did the same as Sam slipped out the far side of the car. Together, they rushed in the opposite direction.

The specter of inaction hung over the two kids as they walked. Periodically, Sam glanced behind them, his thumbs stuck in his backpack straps. Seeing only a lonely road, trees of a gentle neighborhood swaying in the morning breeze, he felt a sense of peace. But also unease. The movement and the noise of rustling leaves kept him on edge.

"I feel bad for not helping," Beverly regretted rhetorically.

Sam didn't engage the topic. He took out his phone and powered it on. Keeping an eye out on their surroundings, he checked the time. "We've got about eleven hours." He did some math in his head. "Last prediction I saw was that the effects would hit at, like, right at 6pm."

"The sun's turning into a black hole," said Beverly. "Why is there supposed to be this sharp end of it all? Wouldn't it take at least a minute or something? It seems like it'd take days. There'd be a lead-up. You know, the sun getting darker." As she spoke, she spotted the sun in the sky through the trees and could see the tiny black spot. "Well, I guess..."

"I don't think anybody knew-knew," Sam said as he put his phone away. "It's like Raymond Silver was saying. Maybe we won't notice. Maybe as we're pulled into the event horizon, time will slow and stuff until it's stopped entirely. We wouldn't even be aware of it. Not sure how that would work. I mean, I guess technically we could already be inside the black hole and we don't know it? And maybe never will? I don't know. That's some super-physics stuff."

"But I mean, wouldn't the sun start to get cold at a point?" Beverly reasoned as they walked, looking at the neighborhood as it gentrified around them. "I thought if the sun lost some of its mass or, not lose its mass, but..." She let the specific details take care of themselves. "It just, it wouldn't burn as hot and that would affect how much heat we got or something."

"Yeah, but you said it's not losing any mass, the mass is just changing form," said Sam. "But yeah, the amount of heat it gives off should...I don't know, change. Maybe that's what's happening at 6pm. That's when the black hole will take noticeable effect."

Beverly again struggled with her intellectual frustration. "But it's not going to be, like, boom, end of the world. It'll get super-cold and dark and stuff."

"I don't know," Sam said with a shrug and an indistinct hand gesture. "I don't think anybody does."

"We will," Beverly lamented with pride. She started to reach towards Sam's hand, to once again feel what little reassurance there was in the world, but a thought hit her. She stopped in the middle of the street and stood stock still. She began to look around with confused scrutiny.

"What's up?" asked her companion.

"I know this place," she reasoned, her thumbs stuck in her backpack straps. "What street are we on?" She walked briskly towards the nearest intersection. "Yeah," she connected. "We're near the Elders Estate." The significance of that was clearly lost on Sam. "The Elders are, like, the first family of Birmingham." Beverly smirked cynically. "At least as far as political donations go."

"Think they're ali...still home?" asked Sam as he joined her at the intersection.

"I don't know," Beverly guessed. A mischievous smile appeared. "My dad said they had really good, really expensive wine."

"Ah, one of those families," Sam realized.

"Yeah," Beverly grinned. "You ever see Zombieland?"

It made sense to him immediately. "Bill Murray's house?" Beverly smiled wider.

"Come on," Sam groaned as he held Beverly's foot. "Got it?"

"Almost," she said as she tried to pull herself over the gate. With a kick, she knocked Sam down but managed to get a secure hold on the top of the rolling gate.

With surprising acrobatic flare, she pulled herself over the side of the gate and to the other side. "Beverly!" Sam exclaimed as he scrambled up. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she answered from the other side, a bit breathless. "I actually stuck the landing!" she relayed with a laugh. He heard steps and her voice growing distant. "Just hang on."

"Yeah," Sam said, checking his surroundings. In the nicest neighborhood he'd ever seen, he looked about. Worries of white-hooded men danced in his mind as he stood there. Fortunately, he wasn't standing there for long.

The gate began to hum and slid smoothly along the wall. Inside was a multi-acre estate with manicured grass, enough trees to constitute a grove, and a palatial three-story mansion. Beverly was walking away from the nearest of several extremely wealthy-looking cars, the gate remote in hand. "The Elders were oil barons for a while, and then kept with the times. Now they own the factories that make probably half the components on your phone." Sam inside, Beverly set the gate to closing.

"Cool," said Sam. Once the gate fell quiet, he felt a sense of safety but still more unease. He was less worried about hooded figures and more what awaited them at the end of the day. As they began towards the mansion, he asked, "Think the Elders are home?"

"I doubt it," said Beverly. "Their helicopter's gone."

Sam scoffed. "Helicopter. Geez."

"Yeah," agreed Beverly. "I thought my family was rich—"

"Your family IS rich," Sam corrected her.

"But the Elders are wealthy. Own-their-own-island wealthy. Probably where they are." She stopped before the mansion and looked up at it with growing disdain. "I never liked Mrs. Elder. I always thought she was kind of creepy." She looked at Sam with a sour expression. "She liked to buy me dresses and stuff, but always insisted I change in the room with her." Sam sneered as well. "Yeah," Beverly confirmed. "That was it, but that was enough."

"Pssh," Sam scoffed again. "Then let's go find her favorite thing and break it."

"Deal," concurred Beverly with total commitment.

The mansion was everything Sam expected a mansion to be. Polished, shiny floors. Grand stairwells. Rooms with solitary purposes that likely had been used a dozen times total. Signs of abject wealth everywhere, more reminders to the insecure than to provide the possessors any delight or even benefit.

As the pair of teens scoured the house like they were on a treasure hunt, Beverly led them into the kitchen. Here, she came to a stop as her eyes lit up. On the counter was an array of cakes, pastries, and muffins. Her eyes wide and her mouth open, she looked more pleased than she'd ever known. "I guess we're starting out looting here," Sam accepted.

"Oh my god," Beverly squealed. She grabbed a muffin off the rack and practically shoved the entire thing in her mouth. Before she'd even finished chewing it, she grabbed another and stuffed it into her mouth, moaning. "Oh my god," she groaned with delight. "This, right here," she said, pointing at her cheeks swollen with muffin. "This is probably more calories than I've ever eaten in a single day." She swallowed dryly and grabbed another muffin. She tossed it aside when she saw the apple turnovers. "Oh my god," she delighted again, eating one turnover in as few bites as humanly possible. "My mom," she told Sam who approached the food a bit more casually, "she was always worried about her little girl turning into a fattie. 'Won't look good to voters', she'd say to my dad when they thought I wasn't listening. Of course, I couldn't be too skinny. Or too muscular. I had to look like a really fit mom. That's what voters want." Another pastry disappeared down her mouth. "God, this is amazing."

Sam sliced a crude piece of cake and carried it in his hand as he headed on through the kitchen. "I think we've checked the whole house."

"We even checked the safe room," said Beverly with a full mouth and cream on her nose and lips.

"Yeah, I guess this is it," Sam realized. He checked the time on his phone and confirmed it was noon. "Six hours, give or take," he said to himself. He turned back to Beverly as she kept eating. "What do you want to do now?"

"This," she said with another turnover disappearing. "I'm good. You go..." She waved at the house. "This is me."

Sam was beyond amused when a thought came to him. "You know what I've always wanted to do?"

"Besides me?" Beverly teased.

"Well, yeah," he felt no hesitation in admitting.

Her curiosity grew genuine. "What?"

Sam punched the computer monitor.

The glass cracked and the plastic warped as Sam drew back his fist, his knuckles wrapped in a towel. He leaned into the next punch, knocking out a giant hole in the screen. With a scream, he punched it again, this time so hard that it broke the entire screen. "UGH!" he yelled at it before throwing an array of obscene gestures at it. Panting, he took a second.

"Feel better?" asked Beverly as she continued to eat a cake she carried on its platter. She hadn't even sliced it. She ate directly from the platter with a fork.

"My computer at home is SUCH crap!" he groaned with cathartic relief. "Just running Word, nothing else. New document, nothing else, and it takes three minutes just to change the font. It took five minutes just to turn on Word. You want to surf the web? Forget about it." There was a hop in his soccer-kick to the tower.

"Hold on," said Beverly. She handed her cake to Sam and rushed out. Confused, Sam stood where he'd been told. He looked at the cake and, realizing it was probably the richest red velvet cake he'd ever seen, helped himself to a bite. He nodded in impressed approval.

Beverly returned, trading the cake for a ball peen hammer. "Get to it, John Henry," she told him as she stepped back. Sam grinned and worked out a decade of computer frustrations with berserker fury.

With a pop, Sam let the bottle of champagne fizz over, spilling into the kitchen sink. "Here we go," he said, pouring the bubbling crystal liquid into a pair of genuine German beer steins. Beverly entered the kitchen with an amused look, wearing sweat pants and a tank top. Sam saw her and looked astonished. "What's this?"

"Fat pants," she said. "The most casual thing I was allowed to wear was yoga pants," she said, accepting a stein from Sam. "You know this is supposed to go in flutes, right?"

"I don't play," he quipped as the toasted. The pair sipped the champagne. Beverly immediately convulsed, barely keeping from spraying it out. Sam didn't have the control and spewed the alcohol all over the kitchen sink. "Geez, adults like this stuff?"

"Ugh," groaned Beverly, pouring it down the drain. "That's crap. Do they have any orange juice?" She went looking for some. In the refrigerator, she found an array of drinks and selected an unopened bottle of orange juice. "Don't drink your calories," she quoted. "Go to hell," she told somebody in her past.

Sam came and snagged a soda. "This stuff is bad for you," he said, popping the top. "Mom never let me have any." He took a sip and nearly threw up. "Geez, man, everything adults drink is crap."

"I think a lot of being an adult is crap," said Beverly, walking away to get more cake.

As the afternoon wore on, the first signs of dusk appearing at the edge of the sky, Sam and Beverly sat together on the couch. They looked out through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the den at the wide orchard of trees on the back of the property. The wind swayed through the leaves, causing them to bend and dance in happy serenity.

"Think the trees know what's going on?" Sam asked. He discreetly checked the time. They were down to minutes.

"I doubt it," Beverly said sadly as she opened a bottle of water. She popped a pill and drowned it. After swallowing, she settled in. "Makes me sad. All the dogs and cats, all the lemurs and horses, all the animals, everything that isn't human. They're going to die and they don't know it." She had grown emotional over the last hour but now she was tearing up. "They don't have the chance to have one last meal, to do whatever they want." She was crying now. Not an ugly,

blubbering cry. Merely a stream of tears going down her placid face. "It's like, humans kind of deserve it. To be crushed in a cosmic anomaly, you know? But mice don't. Cats don't."

Desperate to change the subject, both for her sake and his own, Sam asked, "What'd you take just now? One of the suicide pills?"

"No," she said. "Some opioid my dad had at the party. I don't know what. I assume it was to help people calm down before they took the real pill." She looked at Sam and smiled. The way her eyes began to blink and her smile widened, he could tell the effects were already beginning to take effect. "You want one?" Sam only shook his head.

Beverly grew more quiet. "My tummy hurts," she whispered. Without any warning, she shifted and laid down, laying her head in Sam's lap. "I want to go to bed," she whispered. With tears, she added, "I don't want to wake up."

"I'll let you sleep," Sam promised her, stroking her hair from her face.

"Thank you," she whispered, already drifting off to sleep.

Sam was alone in the world. He looked out at the trees swaying and felt a kinship with them, just going with whatever was happening around them. No choice in the matter, and not sure they'd do something different if they had one. "Blackhole sun," he sang very quietly. "Won't you come...and wash away the rain. Blackhole sun...won't you come...won't you come..."

He laid his head back and accepted the end of the world.

His eyes closed, he waited until he heard the beep of his alarm. The time had come. The world was ended. It was all over.

Except after a moment, the alarm grew annoying.

Growing irritated that the moment of peaceful death was being ruined by the electronic din, Sam picked up his phone and hit the switch. The alarm went silent and he tossed the phone away. He leaned back and waited. Eyes closed, he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

After another few moments, he sat his head up and looked around. Everything looked the same. He looked at his hand and waved it in the air. He was surprised there were no strange effects caused by time dilation or gravity wells or some other scientific machination. He looked out at the sky beyond the mansion and it looked the same as ever. Maybe even a bit clearer. The trees were still swaying. The breeze was still blowing.

Shifting ever so carefully, Sam let Beverly sleep. He rose from the couch and walked to the window looking into the west. He saw the sun far in the sky, looking as normal as ever. No black spot. No unexplained change. It looked perfectly normal, as it had for millennia on end.

"Nothing happened," Sam realized. He glanced away. "Huh."

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