

Storm of a Century

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Specks of light decorate the earth below. Some are still, some flash, some move steadily from one point to the next. On the outskirts of cities, there are patches of darkness, ominous and impenetrable, ready to swallow what lands in their midst. Scattered amongst these patches is the occasional beacon of light, piercing and defying this darkness.

The pilot coasts above. At one time, he piloted passenger jets, but now he flies solo in his Cessna craft. On clear nights like these, he races to the heavens, finding peace above the chaos of the world.

[8:23 A.M. Friday, March 7, 2025, Washington]

“Christ! Will you look at that?!”

Spitting his tobacco into the ashtray, Rich shook his head at his junior colleague’s dramatics.

“What?” He grunted, reaching for his coffee mug.

Transfixed by the screen, Tom did not respond. He peered at the monitor, frowning slightly.

Rich sighed, convinced Tom was jesting once more. “What is it?” He repeated as he strode over to Tom’s station.

Pulling Tom back with a hand clapped to his shoulder, Rich squinted at the screen...but this was rather unnecessary. He did not need to squint to see what had transfixed Tom. “Christ!” he shouted, almost pushing his colleague onto the keyboard.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Unless our eyes are lying, yes....” Tom muttered, lifting his chin slightly to peer at the monitor rather than the keyboard.

Cursing, Rich guzzled the rest of his coffee.

“We need to alert, Chief.”

[12:03 A.M. Saturday, March 8, 2025, Florida]

“Good lord, will you look at that?” Maria cried, gazing up at a sky transformed into a dazzling display of ruby, sapphire, turquoise, and amber.

“It’s beautiful. I’ve never seen anything like this....” Her friend, Cara, replied in hushed tones.

The two friends gazed upwards, lost in the kaleidoscope of color, drawn into the vast expanse of the world above.

Cara sighed. "If this is the end of the world, I'm happy we had the chance to see something so beautiful...so out of this world."

"Don't be foolish. It's not the end of the world." Maria squeezed her hand reassuringly. "We'll be fine."

Cara bit her lip uncertainly. "There is so much talk about this being the apocalypse."

Maria shook her head as the two gazed up at the sky from the balcony of their apartment. "That's just Internet nonsense. You will find all sorts of far-fetched theories on the Internet."

Cara shrugged, still unconvinced.

90 seconds. This was all it took for the Internet to fail.

[6:47 P.M. Tuesday, March 11, 2025, North Dakota]

"Mama, why is it so dark?"

"Because there was a big storm, honey. It's okay, things will be back to normal soon."

I flopped onto the couch, pouting. Bundled in my favorite blue sweater, I gently rocked my doll, Poppy, cooing, "it's okay Poppy, things will be back to normal soon."

I glanced at Mama, struggling with the match as she attempted to light a vanilla candle Nana had made.

"Mama, are things back to normal yet?"

Mama sighed, closing her eyes briefly. "Not yet, honey, but *soon*."

Pouting, I padded through the dim living room searching for Poppy's brush as Mama continued to struggle with the match. Turning my back on Mama, I brushed out Poppy's hair. My tummy grumbled. For supper, I wanted hot dogs, but Mama made tuna sandwiches. We had tuna sandwiches *yesterday*. I wasn't even allowed to take a bath. Mama says there's no water. This isn't fair and I've had enough....

[7:20 P.M. Tuesday, March 11, 2025, Washington]

"Two years?!!" Tom gaped at his colleague, aghast. "They think it will take at least TWO YEARS to restore the Internet?!"

Rich nodded, flicking another cigarette into the ashtray. Due to the dire circumstances, he felt justified in disregarding the building's smoking prohibition.

“That’s what they tell me”

“How long will it take to restore the communications satellites?”

Rich shrugged, passing a hand over his head. “Probably a couple months at least...quite a few satellites were destroyed. Should have shut more down earlier.... That was a storm of a century! They say it was probably bigger than the Carrington one all those years ago.”

“Christ!” Tom was astonished. Both men were disheveled and badly in need of a shower. The two had been living at NASA headquarters over the past few days, supporting the ongoing response.

“People must be going mad! No Internet, no communications, no GPS, no power in some areas! Christ! Some people can’t even call 911!”

“Yeah, better hope you’re not caught in the dark with a murderer....” Rich remarked darkly.

“Better hope you’re not having a heart attack or some other medical emergency....”

[9:47 P.M. Tuesday, March 11, 2025, Florida]

“It’s strange to be so disconnected.” Cara remarked, staring out at the city.

Maria nodded. “I suppose we don’t realize how much we rely on the Internet until it’s no longer there.”

“It’s awful not knowing what is happening. Maybe this is what the apocalypse is—no Internet. How will we pay our bills? Pay our credit cards? How will we finish classes?”

“I don’t know.... We do everything on the Internet nowadays. We connect with people across the world, we bank, we shop, we attend classes, we work.... It feels as though life has screeched to a halt in some ways.”

“It’s the Stone Age now.” Cara remarked.

[7:42 P.M. Tuesday, March 11, 2025, North Dakota]

Just then, the lock turned, and I heard Papa’s steps in the entryway.

“Papa!” My heart lifted as I ran to meet him.

Papa entered the room, the weary look on his face replaced by a warm smile. He lifted me as though I was only a feather and affectionately kissed my forehead and ruffled my hair. Gently placing me on the couch, he approached Mama and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Here, I’ll take care of this. You rest.” Within a moment, the scent of vanilla tickled my nose as Papa lighted candles on the mantelpiece.

“What did you find out?” Mama asked.

Papa sighed. “Not much.... No one seems to know when power will be restored, which is understandable since no one has Internet. I spoke with James, and he thinks it will be at least another week. He said he stopped by Drayton this morning to pick up supplies and it’s like a ghost town. There was a break-in at Sam’s Grocer....” He shook his head angrily as he took a seat beside Mama. “Makes one lose faith in humanity sometimes when people simply don’t care for their fellow man....”

Mama placed a hand over Papa’s. “I know, honey, it’s truly terrible. I hope Sam’s doing alright....”

“I hope so too.” There was a long pause.

“Still no word about Ed. Took off a couple days ago, but no sign and, of course, no communication.” There was a longer pause. Mama squeezed his hand, and the two bent their heads as though in prayer.

“I’m sure he will be alright. He’s an experienced pilot, knows what needs to be done.” Papa nodded, sighing heavily.

“We should head to the city, get you to the hospital.”

I had nearly fallen asleep with Poppy in my arms when my attention was caught by the word ‘hospital’. The hospital was a place for sick people. A place of bright lights and strange beeps. Mama wasn’t sick, was she? The hospital was not a fun place.

“It’s okay, it’s not urgent...yet.”

“But you never know. Because of your blood pressure, the doctor said –”

“It’s okay.” Mama repeated, glancing at me. “I’m okay.... Besides, are the hospitals even operating? I would think with no power, they are in the same boat as our community.”

“I’m not sure...but we have no way of calling an ambulance if we need to.”

“We’ll be fine.” Hesitating, Mama said. “I’m feeling okay....”

“I think it’s for the best, though. I want you both to be okay, and I think we should head to the city sooner rather than later. All the stress from the storm isn’t helping, either.”

Mama sighed, closing her eyes briefly. “Alright, we can head over tomorrow.” She winced as she stood, passing a hand over her tummy. “I’ll be right back.”

As Mama left the room, I padded over to crawl onto Papa’s lap.

“Papa?”

“Yes, sweetie.”

“Are we going to the city tomorrow?”

“Yes sweetie, it’s for the best. Now, it’s almost your bedtime –”

Suddenly, we heard Mama cry out.

“Mama! Are you okay?” Both Papa and I leapt from the couch.

“You stay here, sweetie.” Papa said as he rushed down the hall to the bedroom. I waited in the living room, clutching Poppy tightly to my chest. I could only hear the soft murmur of their voices.

“Poppy, I hope Mama is okay....”

Sliding along the wall, Poppy and I crept towards the bedroom door. As I reached to grasp the handle, Papa stepped out. His forehead creased; his cheeks flushed.

“Papa, is Mama, okay?”

He hesitated briefly before saying, “Mama’s okay, sweetie. Can you promise me you will be good and listen?”

I nodded, my eyes wide, my heart fluttering in my chest.

“Sweetie, your baby brother’s coming.”

Two days earlier.

No orientation. No communication.

The dizzying array of lights had enveloped him. The heavens had swallowed him. He must land soon before the needle on the fuel gauge swung fully to the other end. An earth that moments ago glittered beneath him had been swallowed by the patches of darkness. The rural fields were indistinguishable from the city.

This would be a leap of faith, but he was ready. He had known a situation like this would arise one day. Even as the pilot, he knew he had never been in full control of the craft. He had to trust his instincts. Trust his training. Trust his years of experience. In the end, though, he was at the mercy of the heavens.