

And All Through The House

Matthew Riley, 2017

The store all sold out of road atlases within the hour.

“Sold out” is maybe the wrong phrase for the frenzy that hit the big bookstore up the road. You could see the broken windows from the highway, if you were on the highway at all. I wouldn’t know. I heard from a neighbor.

I didn’t want to sit bumper-to-bumper on the interstate for days. I could understand the impulse. A few times, that first day, I opened the door to the garage, looking at the boxy shape of the old Dodge Omni, while I ran my thumb over the teeth of the ignition key. Maybe. Maybe.

Scattered noises filtered in from the woods all day, gunshots or yelling, sometimes one silencing the other. I didn’t want company. I plugged up all the hallways with mattresses from the guest room, blocking off the kitchen from the rest of the house. When the sun went down, I covered the kitchen windows with the tall bookshelves from Grandma’s old room, dense wood groaning against the tile.

I’d already put my dresser up against the back door to keep it from being pushed open, either by the wind or desperate neighbors.

Up in the cupboards, I could hear one of our usual winter mice getting into something, another skittering on the stovetop, crawling under the burners.

I piled up all the blankets and pillows from every room in the house, and I slept.

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I remember feeling empty when the news broadcast came through. One week, they’d said, until it would hit. Nothing anyone could do about it.

A week seemed like a long time to make us all wait. But that was just my feeling, and asteroids don’t take human feeling into account. I was a single human, on a big ball of water floating in a big empty space. I was small. Smaller than I’d ever imagined, clearly.

I explained all of this in the vague direction of the mouse-occupied cabinet, while I worked the can opener around a dented can of mandarin oranges. The lid resisted. I pried up one side with a fork, and sat by the sink eating the orange sections straight from the can.

Early sunrise filtered in through a stripe of uncovered window, just enough to let some light into the pitch black of the kitchen. They hadn’t cut off the power yet, but I imagined it would be soon. Grandpa kept a backup generator in the basement for snowstorms. I’d never checked on it, but I assumed it still worked.

I put the fork in the sink, and the can in the recycling bin. It felt good to do something normal.

“Are you sure?” Deborah asked, standing out on the back porch with her ancient little dog under one thick arm, and a duffel bag in her other hand. “They’ve been picking people up. We have room.”

“I’m good,” I said. I tried to shrug, to drive it home, but with my shoulder leaning against the doorframe, it didn’t really work. “I’m waiting for someone,” I lied, because it sounded better.

“Is it still just you here?” she asked, peering over my shoulder into the cluttered kitchen.

“Just me,” I said.

Deborah looked sad, taking in the back of the ranch house with a sweep of her eyes, squinting behind her glasses.

“You shouldn’t lean on the door there,” she said, “It’s probably full of bugs, where it’s falling apart, see?” I always told your grandfather... does it even lock anymore?”

“I have a system,” I said. I leaned off the doorframe anyway, feeling a tingle where an imagined bug might be on my shoulder, resisting the nervous urge to brush the feeling off.

Deborah tried for a few more minutes to convince me, until her husband yelled from their backyard, two doors down away. She set down her duffel bag and gave me a one-armed hug, while the dog patiently snuffled into my shoulder.

We hadn’t spoken much since I inherited the house; we didn’t know each other. It was just the situation. So it felt artificial, and yet, the way her hand pressed against the back of my jacket, I couldn’t help catching sight of something warm, and real.

She left.

They were going to die out there, either on the water, or wherever they landed. I had to be realistic. But I hoped wherever the visiting boats down at the dock were going, Deborah and her dog would at least get to feel all right, for a few days.

Our street’s water went out around three in the afternoon, and then the power at five.

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I didn’t strain the generator much. The kitchen lights stayed off. Candles, leftovers from the Christmas season, filled the kitchen with warm light and a mess of scents: pine trees, cinnamon cookies, vanilla.

Hot water from the electric kettle filtered down through the coffee grounds. Grandpa and I both liked Café Bustelo, the strong stuff in the yellow and red cans. Grandma had gotten him into drinking it, but she took it plain, and he needed sugar and cream. I remember making a lot of “yuck” faces at grandma’s coffee. She’d be thrilled to see me now, chugging the stuff black.

I unplugged the kettle from the line floor-level outlet, and plugged in the stereo.

I’d had plans to get out and see this band, sometimes. They started small in the 80’s and stayed small, out in southern California, worlds away. The lead singer was a small guy, like me, with a soft, wandering voice. He had his heart replaced a few years ago. His brother played guitar, and sang with a clearer, straight tone.

I felt fine. I was fine.

I thought of how other people must feel, three days into the end of the world, sitting with someone they’d already seen through a brush with death. I wondered if it made it harder, or easier.

Their voices alternated on the verse, a soft piano accompaniment underneath.

I was fine, until their voices blended in together on the chorus, angelic. Two people who had been inseparable their whole lives, making something beautiful together for thirty-odd years. I was fine. I was fine.

I was fine.

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I stayed in the blankets the whole fourth day. I had half a bottle of whiskey left, cheap stuff, and I stayed unconscious for as long as I could. I threw up in the corner of the kitchen once, and then later, successfully in the sink. I don’t remember anything else.

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The rolling, rumbling sound of the garage door woke me in a panic.

I crawled into the big cabinet under the sink, three plastic bags full of other plastic bags rustling and cushioning me. I closed the cabinet door with my hands shaking and my head pounding.

I could smell something sour and rotten in the room, and gradually recalled how I'd spend the previous day. I felt stupid. My temples throbbed, my stomach raw. My hands hurt, where I'd dug my fingernails in at some point, I didn't know when.

I heard low voices echoing in the garage. Heavy things scraped on grandpa's old metal shelves, glass shattered. I heard a loud thumping against the inside door to the house, but I'd barricaded that days ago. The thumping got louder.

It subsided.

There was no other sound.

I stayed under the sink for another twenty minutes, frozen still, breathing so hard my throat stung.

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I took a flashlight with me to the garage, and a kitchen knife: an empty threat. Whoever had tried to break in, they'd smashed the windows out of the car, no big loss. Upturned paint cans splattered taupe and eggshell white across the cement floor.

Outside the wide open garage door, past the driveway, the bare winter trees stretched out down the hill, towards the wetland bordering town.

I closed the garage door slowly, as quietly as I possibly could. Part of me had almost hoped some wildlife had come in overnight, but even after scanning every crevice, there were no signs of life.

Back in the kitchen, I emptied the crumbs from the cracker box on the floor, hoping the mice might come out where I could see them. I didn't mind them. I always wanted pet rats, but I kept putting it off. I'd always fingered I'd have plenty of time, later. Eventually.

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A small company provided internet access in our area. They'd cut it off on day one. I got out my laptop anyway, and ventured back out into the living room for the comically oversized disc wallet we'd all kept our DVDs in.

I sat on the kitchen floor watching movies. Old ones I liked; grandma's favorite musicals, untouched since her death; stuff I'd been putting off for ages; odds and ends, like romcom and a B-movie both featuring a no0name actor I liked in high school. I napped or dozed off as needed, unstuck.

It seemed like an easy exercise, and it was, mostly, until I tried to watch one kids' movie. Five minutes in, I thought of the last time I watched it.

He had come down from Rhode Island, fresh off a horrible breakup. We'd made the best of a weekend: silly movies, the botanical garden over the state line, the farmer's market, the beach out east. He'd gone home smiling, which was all I needed. It would be an understatement to say I loved him; then, and three years before, and in a way even now.

I got the news about him two years after that visit. His emails stopped, and then his mother reached out to me. She stopped short of inviting me to the funeral. I understood. I was no one.

Back then, I'd asked grandpa if it would get easier. He'd looked at me, across the kitchen table I was now using to block the house's front door, and said: "Sweetheart. Of course it doesn't."

He was right.

I turned off the movie. I closed the laptop.

Grandpa had also said back then, that he'd only kept it together "because of this," and he'd gestured to me, and the old tape deck on the counter, the coffee can on the table, the general direction of the backyard, full and green in the swell of summer.

I felt wrong to wish he were here for this. He wouldn't be afraid, but I knew he would be unbearably sad, to know that I had no future. No "this" to encompass in a humble sweep of my hand. Just some mice, and bare trees that would die before they got to bud again.

My eyes wandered to the laptop clock, and instantly, relief flooded my body, warm and light. The impromptu movie marathon and fitful sleep had taken nearly a full 24 hours from my shoulders.

I looked at the barricaded door and then at the pile of cracker crumbs, untouched by my small, shy houseguests.

I started putting some things in a backpack.

There wasn't much that seemed important to bring. Batteries, CD Walkman, CDs, headphones, crackers, flashlight, the last of the whiskey.

I went down to the water.

The boats had left. No cars remained in the street or on the bridge out of town, no house lights at the edges of the morning dark.

Part of me wanted to look up at the sky, but I resisted the urge. I didn't need to know. I sat on the edge of the dock furthest out, with my headphones in, and looked at the cloudy water of the canal.

I changed the batteries in the Walkman as needed, the disc every so often. I made myself eat some crackers.

The sun warmed the cold air a little as the stillness of the day went on, unbroken.

Then, from beside me, a little rock skittered along the planks of the dock, down to the water.

I turned my head.

I felt like an alien, watching another human being wave at me from twenty paces away. Frenzy black hair, glasses, yellow leggings, hiking boots. I waved back at the stranger, feeling out of place in my body, on my planet. Her outstretched hand, jangling with bracelets, gestured toward me, the dock, the water, whatever. I shrugged.

I offered her one of my earbud headphones, and the whiskey bottle. She took both, and offered me a spoon and a jar of peanut butter from the side pocket of her backpack.

While I kept my eyes on the water, she looked up at the sky. Our legs dangled over the dock, me in old worn jeans, her knees two congruent angles of brighter yellow. I didn't ask where she'd walked here from, and she didn't know I lived up to the street. It didn't seem worth saying.

"I've been saving some battery" she eventually said, holding out her phone.

She put on a playlist, radio stuff, slow jams, EDM remixes. We lay on the dock, on our backs. I kept my eyes shut. The dim afternoon sunlight on my eyelids faded, slowly but surely.

"So, what's the best part for you?" she asked, over the low murmur of water against the docks and the music in our ears. "Mine's 'no more student loan debt'."

“Oh,” I said gradually, catching onto the question late. “No more job applications.”

“Nice,” she laughed.

I had to smile, a little.

I opened my eyes.

The moment seemed huge, important. But there was nothing to see up there, because of course there wasn't. I felt stupid for keeping my eyes down.

They'd said on the news a week ago, it wouldn't come at us like a baseball pitch. It would be a sonic boom, and then nothing. That was the blessing of being here, where they expected the impact.

I thought of the mice back in the house, probably gorging themselves on the cracker crumbs now that I was gone. That seemed fair. I felt all right.

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The battery on her phone ran out. I got my Walkman.

At some point, I don't know when, I felt her hand rest against mine. I wrapped my fingers around hers.

The batteries on the Walkman ran out, too, with no replacement left.

We pillowed our hands on our backpacks. There was nothing to say. She never got my name, and I never got hers. No one would know we were ever here, probably.

I thought about skeletons twined around each other at Pompeii, and about big dinosaur bones, and the fake dinosaur bones they let kids dig up in museum exhibits.

I closed my eyes again.

She squeezed my hand.

I spent a long moment wondering how she'd spent her week since the news, who she'd said goodbye to, what she'd used that student loan money on. I wanted to ask. It seemed like a good way to spend whatever time we had. We could be productive, at least. Maybe know something about the world we didn't know, before it all went away.

I breathed in, a shaky, wet gasp.

“I'm kinda scared, are you scare-