

At 1:30 pm on September 16, every phone in Dr. Poll's Introduction to Psychology class screamed at a volume so loud that you would have thought it meant the world was ending.

As it turned out, that was exactly what our phones were trying to tell us.

To be clear, you don't think that you will be in Psychology class when you find out the world is going to end. Come to think of it, you probably don't think about the world ending at all, but if the thought ever crosses your mind, you don't think of when or where or how. It's too nebulous a thought, too big for the mind to comprehend, too massive and tragic for the fragile grey goo in our heads to absorb.

I guess the beginning of the end of the world could only have begun with a noise so loud it sounded like a high-pitched explosion bouncing off the walls and reverberating around Poll's classroom. For a millisecond, I panicked, worrying that I had somehow left my ringer on and what I was experiencing was the Instagram notification from hell. But no, it was, in fact, everyone's phone.

The noise was different. Unfamiliar. It sounded like the alarm that wakes you out of bed, only deeper in tone and with the tempo of a strobe light. We found out later that the sound was buried deep within the code of every smartphone in the world, one that was to be released only if some techie in the basement of the Pentagon pushed a big red button that I imagined was labeled "Smash if the world is ending."

With trembling fingers, I'd pulled the phone out of the pocket of my school-mandated khakis, trying desperately to cancel the horrific noise, unaware that the other twelve kids in Poll's class were doing the same. As my fingers closed around my iPhone's action button – thankfully silencing the wailing – I caught the notification. It was a text box with a Presidential seal, one that blocked every other phone function until I hit the okay button. Below the Presidential seal – in a blocky font that reminded me of a wall - read the message. "STAY TUNED FOR PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATION."

Not speech. Not a press conference. "Communication."

My left eye spasmed, twitching once. Twice.

My gaze found Dr. Poll bent over his phone, which lay on a podium at the front of the class. For a moment, I wondered what he was doing, why he was hunched over his phone so intently. It was only after – in an Email he sent from his house, to the rest of us at our respective homes – that he confessed why it took him so long to meet our eyes again: He had absolutely no idea what to say.

After an eternity, one that I am sure felt even longer given the weight of our stares, Dr. Poll looked back up.

“Dr. Poll, what the hell?” snapped Megan Buchanan, a pale blonde girl in the front row. Her voice oozed entitled outrage, but I knew that every one of us in the class was feeling a similar spike of adrenaline and terror. The sharp bite of fear was cutting through every one of us.

Dr. Poll was normally gregarious and filled with enthusiasm that you would normally reserve for a toddler, not a Ph.D. in psychology who was teaching at one of the most elite boarding schools in the country. Right now, his face was frozen in a barely controlled grimace that radiated fear and confusion.

In this room of twelve students and one teacher, none of us knew what was going on. It was immediately apparent, and it terrified me.

Behind me, in a chalky whisper, Asher Maddox spoke next. “Is this about those rumors?”

I kept my voice silent, blinked, and remembered. *Those rumors*. Right. I had seen that on TikTok this morning while I was brushing my teeth. There was some bullshit story about “panic at the Pentagon,” how some scientific rumor was going to get posted on Wikileaks that had national security implications, and they were trying to figure out how to deal with it.

I had ignored it – sometimes weird crap bounced across my algorithm – but now the TikTok was leaping in front of my eyes again. It wasn’t so much the content. That was normal and stupid. It was the *fear*. The fear in the voice of the host, a twenty-something guy who played with cats at his local animal shelter. He wasn’t a conspiracy theorist... he was a palette cleanser. He was a guy I watched when I needed to be reminded that the world wasn’t so scary, that anyone could find belonging, even those who clearly didn’t know where they should go.

Poll’s hands were abruptly in front of his chest, palms extended outward. “We don’t know what this is about, and I would caution all of you to avoid jumping to conclusions before we have solid evidence.”

“So, it’s definitely the apocalypse,” snapped Buchanan. Her face was twisted, now, her lips practically turned upwards in a snarl. Megan was *not* used to not knowing what was going on. She looked as if she had taken the feeling of ignorance, marinated in it for twenty seconds, and allowed the sensation to turn the meat of her mind into a bitter stew.

Poll took a step forward and let his arms drop. “Folks, I am sure it is not the apocalypse.” The initial shock and fear had faded, and he had calibrated his voice to be soothing and authoritative. “Let’s get the speech on in here. That will get us some answers, and we’ll figure it out from there.”

Poll scurried back to his podium and switched over to the official White House website, clicking on the “Presidential Announcement” icon that had popped up. My eyes remained laser-focused on the screen in front of me, but in my peripheral vision, I could see my classmates having wildly different reactions. Jessica Good was frantically flipping through her phone, scrolling through X, her face contorted in concentration. Jason Schroeder was looking at his desk, hands covering his head.

I looked around the rest of the classroom, risking looking away from the screen for just a moment. Ryan Wild - like me, a scholarship kid – didn’t meet my gaze, too busy staring at the screen. The black-haired girl who always sat in the corner, never speaking, matched his intense stare.

A noise in front of me, and I spun around. Abruptly, the Presidential seal faded, first to black, and then to the Oval Office. There he sat, thin grey hair covering the top of his head in what looked like a more rushed comb-over in history. His mouth was slack, his usual make-up noticeably smeared around his eyes.

“Good afternoon, America,” he intoned. His voice was hoarse. His usual bravado was gone.

My eye twitched again.

“Today, I come to you with disturbing news, news that my Administration feels compelled to tell you.” He paused here, taking a beat. Then two. Then three. The silence was growing awkward, and I shifted uncomfortably, leaning forward so slightly, not even realizing until retelling the story weeks later that everyone else in the room was doing the same thing as me.

The President leaned forward, his form unsteady, and even his most diehard supporters wouldn’t be able to lie away the way the right side of his body seemed to list. “Our scientists – the best scientists in the world – have discovered an asteroid. This asteroid, which they have named Perses, is eight miles in diameter, the same size as the one that killed the dinosaurs. Our experts tell me that it is heading this way and that it will hit Earth on January 2, about four and a half months from now.”

A thin layer of ice – hard as a diamond – seemed to have encased the world. No one so much as moved or breathed as we all wondered the same thing: *What does that mean?*

Before us, the President's orange skin seemed to take on a pallor of grey. He couldn't even bring his eyes to meet the camera, as reality crashed upon him. "The scientists tell me that this is an Extinction Level Event."

The glass broke. The diamond covering that had hardened the world shattered around us. Screams, cries, and curses exploded around me.

My eyes went to Poll. His face remained locked on the television screen, his hands clasped tightly around the smart podium in front of him, and his fingers began to grip the side of that podium, tightly, tightly. Then, with a small, barely audible crack, a piece of the podium ripped off. Poll didn't notice, didn't notice that he had just broken school equipment, because his mind was too warped by the words just spoken by the President of the United States, who had just pronounced humanity dead.

"Now, we have a plan, my fellow Americans. We have an excellent plan, the best plan, one that—"

There was a shriek from Megan Buchanan, a wail, one of such intensity that it somehow found the power to cut over every other voice in the room. Despite our own individual pain, every head in the room *whipped* towards Megan, where her hands spasmodically clasped her face. For five solid, interminable seconds, her cries were louder than any sound in the room.

I didn't like Megan. Never had. But she screamed with a terror that I felt in the pit of my soul, one shared by the hundreds of millions of people – if not billions – who were hearing the President's words.

We were going to die. We were going to die the only way you could die - alone.

Huddled forms moved towards Megan, but I could barely comprehend who they were through the blur of tears. Shakily, my legs propelled me upwards, and I spun around, heart rate thrumming like a bass, violently colliding against the increasing pressure of my ribcage.

There were cries for quiet in the class, cries I barely understood. There was Megan and the two around her, huddled, a mass of hysterical bodies with trembling arms, wailing figures. There was the quiet black-haired girl who stared blankly at the screen, the only figure not in the midst of a complete emotional crack-up. She was sitting up straighter, as if something inside of her was just waking up to the words of the President.

Poll had recovered, and, with whatever authority he thought he had, was trying to get everyone in the room to quiet. I heard him and listened briefly, willing myself to be quieter than silent, as if that could stop all the noise in the world.

No one was listening to Poll anymore. No one needed to. Ever again.

I had to go.

With fumbling fingers and trembling arms, I pulled my backpack over my shoulder, barely remembering to grab my Augustus blazer that was required of every student during class time. I crumpled it into a ball, realizing with a sneer that keeping it wrinkle-free would probably be the least of my worries.

Stumbling, I moved towards the exit, opening the door without even the slightest hesitation and flinging myself into the lobby of Moyer Hall. I nearly bounced off an underclassman who – presumably thinking the same thing I was – was running out of the building. With renewed determination, I followed him, bursting into the sharp September sunlight.

The fresh outside air made my mind *clunk* into place, feeling as if the best chiropractor in the world had just aligned my spine. This was outside. The sun was warm. The blue sky was soft, friendly, cloudless. It was a day like heaven.

There were no sirens. No flames, no smoke. Just birds chirping.

And a plaintive wailing from somewhere in the distance.

The shriek snapped my fingers into action, and seemingly of their own volition, they brought my phone out. Still stuck in front of the Moyer entrance, students began to stream out, each in various states of mental duress. One had his hands on his head. Another appeared to be sprinting towards a row of nearby bushes, a hand covering his mouth.

Mom. Where was she? Was she in Scranton today? Was she working remotely? It was Tuesday, did that mean...shit. Shit. I couldn't remember.

Mack. He had to be on patrol today, right? Robinette was quiet...ish...but hadn't Mack been talking about a fentanyl ring that they were trying to break up? That would accelerate, right? Would that accelerate right now?

Jill. Mack's wife. The hospital. Jesus. If things went badly, they would quickly get overloaded. Did they have that staffing arrangement? Would anyone come in if the world were truly ending?

The thoughts began to crash faster and harder, like the game of Tetris from hell, and I raced to slot them into different gaps, but they were stacking, stacking so fast that they reached the ceiling of my brain.

Mom. Back to Mom. Always, back to Mom. Her and me. Against the world.

My fingers stabbed the number one on my phone, and with trembling hands, I brought my phone to my ear, waiting for it to ring. Waiting. Waiting.

More students brushed by me. These seemed a little calmer. One was talking about how this was the greatest prank ever.

It wasn't a prank. I knew that because the call to my Mom wasn't going through.

"Shit. Shit." I could barely hear my own voice above the chaos in my mind, but there I was, cursing all the same, my Augustus blazer discarded in a now-dirty heap on the ground. "Shit. Mom."

I tried another time. Then one more. The phone was not ringing, and no amount of willpower could connect me to the one person who loved me more than anyone else.

I drew comfort from the realization that, if she had seen the speech – and she must have, she lived on the damn internet – she was trying to call me too.

Straining against the pain in my head, I forced myself to take in my surroundings. With a slow gaze, I turned my head to my right. There, on the sports fields, they practiced lacrosse and soccer. Puzzle pieces clicked into place. *Right. Sid has no class now.* I allowed my legs to carry me towards the fields, where I knew I would find my roommate.

As I stumbled the 200 yards to my right, a new emotion wrapped me in a toxic embrace: Jealousy. There they were, Augustus' venerable lacrosse and soccer teams, running laps, doing drills, passing balls, doing whatever it is that they did...and they lived in a different world. They lived in a Before. They didn't have their phones. They didn't know. They were among the privileged few that—

"COREY!" a bellowing, deep voice called, one that was so sharp and fearful that I spun and whipped towards my left, half expecting to see a man with a weapon. That was wrong, of course. The voice was coming from a big, muscular guy, one just three months younger than me, one of my only anchors at a place to which I had never quite belonged.

Sid was in his practice uniform, his face was beet red, and his phone was clutched tightly in his left hand. Sid was most definitely not trapped in Before.

I froze in place as Sid charged me, but there was no aggression in his run. He was running towards me just like I would have run towards him, desperate for a semblance of safety in a world that had, in an instant, been ruined forever.

Sid hit me like a wall of muscle, and I just had time to wrap my arms around him and slow his pace. There was no semblance of fake masculinity, no pretense of hiding emotions.

How many hugs were left? How many moments did we have like this?

The embrace only lasted moments. Sid held me at arm's length and looked at the phone in my hand. He knew I knew. Instead, he asked, "You get her?"

I sniffed. "Phone's dead."

"Figured." I didn't ask if Sid had gotten his parents. That question would have been as stupid as it was irrelevant.

From the soccer field, a whistle. Sid's coach was walking towards the center of the field, and players were slowly joining him. With a mirthless laugh, Sid said, "I picked a hell of a day to forget my shin guards."

"Do you need to—" I gestured towards the field with my head, and Sid arched his eyebrows.

"Do you think our Coach is gonna notice anything right now?" Sid tried to force a smile, but it didn't match the tremble in his hands, which gripped my shoulders, vibrating through my bones.

For a few moments, we stood, Sid holding onto my shoulders, and whether or not it was for his benefit or mine, I really couldn't tell. We watched Sid's soccer team circle around their coach, and I felt my earlier jealousy evaporate. Their Before was temporary. The After would consume us all.

I turned away, abruptly realizing I couldn't watch. "We...we have to—"

"Josh?" Sid said.

"Twins," I added. Josh and the Twins – Mo and Mika – rounded out our social circle.

Sid unclasped my shoulders, and we began a slow walk to the dorm. We were silent. There was no need for words. Instead, the silence was filled by the symphony of the afternoon that was surrounding us, and I tried to contemplate what was happening. Just fifteen minutes ago, the idea of wandering down Academic Row in the middle of the day – in the middle of *class* – was as unimaginable as the idea of stripping naked and sprinting through the Valley Mall.

I gazed towards my left, towards the main road that cut through campus. A car was speeding through, touching what had to be 50 mph in a 25, flying over a speed bump and grinding the bottom of his car with an ear-splitting shatter, sending a blast of sparks across the road.

In the distance – off towards the left – I heard sirens.

My phone remained as dead as a stone in my pocket.

Sid and I warily marched towards Flo Hall, our dorm. We cast our eyes about as we walked, as if expecting asteroid shards to jump out from behind the trees and cut through our hearts. I glanced upwards – into a sky of infinite blue – and allowed my mind to wander. How far away was this asteroid? I wondered if I should have listened to the rest of the President’s speech. Hadn’t he said something about a plan?

As if reading my mind, Sid spoke, his voice a harsh croak. “What do you know?”

I filled him in on the little I had gleaned from the speech, admitting that I had run out of the room before I’d heard more. “Not that it would have made a difference,” I quickly added. “Not with all the screaming. Even Poll looked freaked out.”

Sid nodded, contemplating, rubbing a hand over the short stubble of his hair. “Yeah. All I had was a headline before the internet died.”

My eyes widened. “The internet died?” The campus was ridiculously wired for a generation that had never known any other world.

“Died. Dead. Not here anymore.”

“Oh.” I fished my phone out of my pocket, dropping my balled-up blazer on the ground. Sure enough, after clicking on the Internet – and TikTok, and Reddit, and Instagram – nothing loaded. “That’s not great.”

Sid wrapped a meaty hand around my shoulder and pushed me forward, moving smoothly to grab my blazer from the ground. “Not really sure I can take whatever terror the algorithm has to offer us today, buddy.”

“Fair enough.”

Augustus’ stately academic buildings seemed to peer down at us from above, ignorant to our plight. Sid and I stared, looking for other activity, but there was practically none. Augustus’ meager security force was present, and we passed two different cars on our way back to the dorms. In each instance, we could see the officers inside, speaking urgently into a radio as they drove.

Augustus wasn’t just a boarding school. It was *the* boarding school. It was the place where rich celebrities sent their kids to keep them away from the paparazzi, where politicians’ kids (including the President’s – not the orange one, the one before him, before him) attended. Sid and I were the few, the proud: The scholarship kids, the sentences in Augustus’ Annual Report that discussed their charity at saving poor kids from their shitty home school districts.

Okay. That wasn't fair. Regardless of the motivations, Augustus was amazing. But how we got here made it certain: We never felt at home.

At this moment, I wasn't sure anyone was even capable of feeling at home. The idea of *home* felt alien, foreign. Would any of us be able to enjoy that comfort again?

The dorm was in sight, now, and so were the people. Roughly two dozen upperclassmen milled about, but the crowd seemed to be growing by the minute, with all of us having apparently chosen this to be the place to mourn the loss of our collective futures.

A cluster of three of my classmates was wrapped tightly in a group hug, holding each other as if—uhh, as if the world was ending. Behind them was Timitha (Tim Zouma and Jennifer Leonard) – *the* couple of Augustus – and somehow they were making out?

Josh and the Twins were not hard to find. Josh had the longest hair of any guy on campus, blonde, scraggly hair that reached well past his neck when he didn't tie it up. The Twins were two of the only black kids at our school.

They spotted us getting closer. There was no hug, only the identical, taunt, worried expressions on Mo and Mika's faces.

"This is a fake!" Josh said, waving his hands too widely, his voice just off-kilter enough to give me pause.

"Josh...." Mo was usually the less serious twin, but his voice was so laden with fear that it was unrecognizable.

"It was AI! Come on! That was like a bad impression of the guy!"

"It was not AI," said Mika. "It was all over my phone. CNN. X. The whole thing, man. This is very, very real."

Josh's facial expression was incredulous as he shifted from Mo to Mika to Sid and me. Our faces remained frozen.

"Has to be a fake." Josh's voice was quiet, abrupt, and his face – normally sunny and bright – began to sink as if it was melting. His lower lip trembled, and you could practically see the waves of fear crash over him, waves so significant and painful that he physically crumbled in on himself. His left hand abruptly swung back, pulling his ponytail out, allowing his blonde hair to fall around his shoulders like a halo. "Has to be a fake," he repeated.

I closed my eyes. We'd seen this before. Bad sign. I reached up and wrapped an arm around Josh. Sid did the same, and Mo and Mika crowded in around us as well. Across the

quad, similar rituals of comfort were taking place, friends and couples holding onto each other for dear life. We were just blending in, holding Josh. I wondered, briefly, if everyone else felt like I did – like my mind was leaving my body and seeking safer places.

After ten seconds, Josh nodded slightly, and we released him, Sid slapping his shoulder once as he did so. “It’s alright.” Sid’s voice lacked any semblance of conviction.

I sighed. “Do we know anything?”

“I just saw the headline before my phone pretty much exploded,” Mika said, miming an explosion with his hands, then wincing. “Alright, explosion might be the wrong word for the circumstances.”

“Before a massive object hit your phone?” Mo said, a slight twisted smile appearing on his face, and we all groaned, even Josh.

“Awful. Awful, awful,” Mika said, but Josh was laughing, and I went with it, taking out my phone and waving it in the air.

“Look at it this way, at least we don’t have to worry about paying the phone bill!” Sid laughed, but the other three seemed confused, as if I’d spoken in a foreign language.

A wet sniffle broke through the air. Josh was crying. I bit my lip to stuff my tears back into my eyes.

“Senior year, man.” Josh swatted at his face, running his fingers harshly down his cheeks. “Our year.”

The four of us – Sid, Mo, Mika, and I – all looked at each other, trying to find the words to bring some normalcy to this situation...and failing miserably. Somehow, I felt inadequate at this moment. It was a ridiculous sensation I knew--

At once, my phone trembled as if it were on fire. Like a dam bursting, a cascade of overlapping vibrations washed over the device. I stared at it as messages crashed across my screen. I tried to look at them all, but they were coming in too fast – news notifications, notifications from TikTokers that I followed, texts – ohh, there went one from Mom! – something from the official Augustus number—

Before I could skim through the notifications, my phone rang, the screen turning to a familiar picture from happier moments, when I was seven, when we were in our backyard, when we had just been freed of Jim. In the picture, my seven-year-old face had the slightest hint of a smile, one coaxed out of me by what Mom had just whispered into my ear: *Smile like everything new. Because it is, Cor. It is.*

Her face glowed, despite the fading bruises. It was a happiness that radiated from the possibilities of a life that wouldn't be as hard.

Despite myself, despite my near-desperate desire to talk to Mom, the picture caught me. Even given the circumstances in which the picture had just been taken, I would have given anything at that moment – anything – to fall into that innocence again.

The twins had gathered around Mo's phone, talking into the speaker. Their faces were pure pain. Sid had an arm around Josh, the two with their heads close together, their phones silent.

I smashed the green button to accept the call. "Mom!?"

"Oh, Corey, thank God. Jesus. I thought Mack and I were going to drive there right now. Are you alright? Is everything—"

"No!" I screamed, allowing myself to let go. "No, nothing is alright!"

"Alright, alright, that was a very stupid question, I admit it." Mom took a deep breath.

"Are you—"

"Home today."

I exhaled. "Okay. Good. That's good. That's very good."

"Yeah. I don't think I'd want to be on the roads right now."

Suddenly, silence. A loaded, laden, heavy silence. Mom and I probably knew everything that there was to know right now – and what lay ahead of us was almost certainly worse than we could contemplate. I'd seen enough disaster films. The riots were going to follow, right? Maybe the plague?

A sensation of panic grabbed my legs, tearing at my flesh with ragged claws and burying me alive. My chest constricted. My ribs crackled.

"Hey. Stay with me." Mom's voice was soothing, an anchor in the storm. I swallowed and let it pull me back, trying to ignore the panic that had wrapped its tendrils around me.

More screams and cries from the pulsating mass of my classmates. The crowd of seniors congregating in the courtyard – now in the dozens and in varying states of emotional distress – was amplifying each other's worst fears, weeping and wailing as if set on fire. Slowly, I steered away from the crowd, nearly bumping into the black-haired girl from my psychology class. Her face was placid, calm. Her red blazer was long forgotten, white Augustus polo making her look practically naked, despite her clear sense of peace.

How?

Mom's voice cut through my useless musings. "Is it bad there?"

"Not yet." The word "yet" was doing a lot of work.

On the other end, I could practically hear Mom put her thumb and middle finger to the bridge of her nose, scrunching her forehead and pressing her pointer finger to its center, as if she were covering her eyes, trying to block out intruding thoughts. "Yeah. We will get you as soon as possible."

By we, she meant her and Mack. Mack – my surrogate father who had entered my life by saving it. The police officer we'd never wanted to see, and the man who had basically served as my Dad since I was seven. Abruptly, a familiar sensation when it came to Mack – worry – spiked. "Is he alright? Have you heard from him?" The words all ran together as I spoke.

"Yes. I think local calls are having more luck than long-distance ones."

"But what about the roads? How will you—"

"This is gonna take time, Cor," Mom said. I knew what she meant. By "it" she meant the fall of the world. If our time here was truly limited by days and weeks – if the odds of us dying in a blaze of flame and earth were staring us right in the face – how fast would the world fall?

From the cries of distress around me, I had a feeling it would be sooner, rather than later. "This is gonna be just like COVID."

"I don't think so, Cor." Mom's voice had acquired a faraway quality. "I think it's going to be better...and worse. Mostly worse."

A beep interrupted my spiraling. "Hang on, Mom." My phone had continued buzzing with backlogged notifications during the call – I thought I had seen another one from the school – but this was a call. I brought the phone away from my face and saw a comfortingly familiar picture: A weathered, broad, middle-aged man in a beige police officer's uniform.

I brought the phone back to my face. "Mom." The urgency in my voice left no doubt about who was on the other end.

"Take it. Do whatever the hell he tells you to do."

"That's the plan." I started to move the phone away from my face, but Mom spoke again.

“Cor?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you. I love you so much.” There was a *break* in Mom’s voice, a crack, one I hadn’t heard in years. Ten years, to be exact, when she was shoving me into a closet, with police lights appearing in the distance of our window, but still too far away, hiding me from a drunk with a fist like iron. I had been woozy at the time, thanks to the head injury from Jim, and memories of that moment came in flashes from behind the closet door. The wet crackle of Jim’s fist hitting my Mom’s ribs, the grunting and rustling of a struggle in a small room, the solid thwack of the baseball bat hitting Jim’s head a few minutes later.

The seriousness of the moment, in all its painful reality, collided with me then, crushing me to the ground.

“I love you too,” I choked out. Wiping away tears, I hung up on Mom and switched over to Mack.

I didn’t even get to say hello. “Are you safe?” Mack demanded. I could tell he was driving at the time, probably in his patrol car, either racing to an emergency or towards the police station.

My chest felt a little less burdened by the mere sound of urgency in his voice. “I’m fine. Things are okay here. Are you?”

“Don’t worry about me, Little Man, it’s my job to worry about you.” Another weight from my chest. “We don’t have a lot of time, so just listen.”

I said nothing.

“First, do not go on the roads tonight. Do not leave campus. Do not leave your dorm room. No offense to security there, but they do not get paid enough to endure what you and your classmates are about to go through, and they will not be adequate to protect. Only emergency services can do that, and they will be stretched thin until the Guard is mobilized. Do not put yourself in a situation where you may require assistance that isn’t available.”

The weight on my chest threatened to return until I realized something: Having a surrogate Dad as a cop and Army veteran was like having a cheat code. Who else had access to someone who knew what was going to happen?”

“Second, and related.” Mack paused, and I could hear emotion slip into his voice. “Tonight will be difficult. You and your classmates...and the rest of the world...have just

been exposed to a terrible shock. Ride it out. Help when you can. Be a rock to those who need it.”

I stared into the distance. Josh was leaning over on a bench, and even from far away, I could see his chest rise and fall at a rapid pace. Sid had a steadying hand on his back. “Yeah. Yeah, Mack.”

“Come hell or high water, I’m coming to get you tomorrow, once the roads are secured.”

“How are you gonna get away?” I snapped. Robinette may have been small and rural, but Mack was in charge of the Township’s four-man police force – and I knew that they weren’t exactly the most competent.

“It’s two hours away, Little Man. They will live without me for four hours. You will come home. And we will ride this out together.”

The silence held. Stretched. Metastasized. I felt my panic rise and fall in waves. Actually, no. My breath caught in my chest as I realized that I didn’t feel my panic rising. Instead, I felt myself *falling*. Sinking into a hole of terror, unlike anything I had ever experienced. I fell deeper and deeper into an inky blackness.

Mack heard it. “Little Man. This moment will not hold. It will not. What you are feeling will pass.”

“I’m scared, Mack.” My voice was tiny. Small. I was seven again...back in a closet, and with monsters at the door.

Mack said nothing, encouraging me with his silence. I placed one hand on my hip and looked at the sky...looked at the direction that my death would apparently come from.

And I let my mind race.

“What happens now, Mack? Cause you’re right, everything is about to become so utterly terrifying. I mean, yeah, there’s still police, but will they show up? I know you will, but will your guys? Will the National Guard? Will the troops? What happens when no one answers the phone?”

Mack held his tongue. He knew I had more to say, and the words started to pour out of my mouth faster, like a pitcher being tipped at a steeper and steeper angle. “The comet or asteroid or whatever will suck, but what about before? What happens when they stop making food or medicine? What happens when someone tries to break into our house when you are on patrol? Do we have a gun? Do we need a gun? Isn’t everyone going to get a gun now?”

I spun around and looked at the growing, writhing, nearly organic mass of Augustus students that were assembling on the lawn. No two students were experiencing the same emotions, yet we all were tied together as one, bound by this terrible moment...our 9/11, our JFK assassination...the last, great “Where were you when you got the news?” moment that I would never be able to forget.

“Mack, is this going to get bad? Really bad? These last four months or whatever...how worried do I need to be?”

Silence. Silence that extended like it was made of putty.

“Mack. That’s it. That’s all I got. Please say something to me before I go further down the rabbit hole here.”

Still nothing. Okay, Mack would sometimes let me talk, but usually he said something. “Mack?”

Nothing.

I moved the phone away from my face. A goofy picture of Sid, the Twins, Josh, and me stared back. The call had disconnected.

I cursed, but as I did so, a Direct Message notification popped up from Instagram. I gleefully navigated over to it – yup, a group chat between Mack, Mom, and me. Mack – “RobinetteChief” – never used Instagram, but said he liked having access to it so he could scan for information.

Really, I think he used it to keep an eye on me.

Mack’s message was all in caps. “PHONE CUT OFF. CAN’T TEXT BUT CAN USE THIS. GO FIGURE. COREY – STAY THERE. SEE YOU TOMORROW. STAY IN YOUR ROOM. DO NOT PUT YOURSELF IN A DANGEROUS SITUATION. RESCUE MAY NOT COME TONIGHT. STAY SAFE.”

Then Mom. “Mack, I didn’t think you knew how to use this! Is Jill okay!?!?”

Mack: “YES SHE IS FINE THANK YOU. NOT ON GRAM. SPOKE BEFORE. SENDS LOVE. SAYS HOSPITAL IS CALLING IN SHIFTS BUT HOPING TO AVOID THE WORST. MAY PATROL AROUND THERE TONIGHT.”

I blew out a lungful of air. *See, look at that. People are going to work in the hospitals. Police are gonna back them up. Maybe this isn’t going to be as bad as I worried.*

Another memory, this one from COVID: Didn’t it start that way, too? Before it got *bad?*

I shivered the thought away and pulled down my notifications. Two texts from the Augustus number informing us of a special campus-wide meeting at 8:00 pm. The second text moved that up to four and added that it was a MANDATORY campus-wide meeting.

Part of me thought that was stupid. No one would show up. Then I looked around, scanning the crowd, finding fear on everyone's face.

That first thought was wrong. People needed somewhere to go.

I relayed the meeting to Mom and Mack. Their responses came at the same time.

Mack: "THEY ARE GOING TO GIVE INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT WHAT TO DO. THEY ARE GOING TO TELL YOU TO BEHAVE. NO ONE IS GOING TO LISTEN. WE ARE GETTING YOU TOMORROW."

Mom: "Corey, do whatever the hell the damn teachers tell you! Even your Housemaster! I know you don't like the guy, but LISTEN TO HIM PLEASE."

Even in the circumstances, I laughed a little. The small giggle promptly died in my chest when I glanced up and saw the first booze bottle being passed around discreetly. It was clear, translucent.

A second bottle emerged from Daryl Daley's blazer. This one was filled with a brown liquor Daryl – a notorious asshole – didn't even bother hiding.

I turned back to my phone, holding onto it like the digital pacifier it was. "Okay. Okay, guys. I won't leave my dorm."

"GOOD."

"Okay, good Corey. Corey, I love you so much. And please give Sid my love as well. Take care of him. Take care of each other!"

"WE BOTH LOVE YOU, AND JILL LOVES YOU AS WELL. IF NEEDED, I WILL DRIVE SID HOME."

I sniffled again as I thumbed out my response. "Love you guys too. Let me see how my friends are doing."

I pocketed the phone, put my hands in my pockets, and walked back over to Sid, who was alone. "Josh?"

"Twins have him." Sid's voice was rote, flat, containing a vocal intonation I had literally never heard out of him.

“Yeah.” Sid was sitting on a picnic table, hands folded together, staring at the crowd of Augustus students. We monitored the crowd from the outside, looking wistfully at the wailing mass of our classmates as they contemplated their fate.

I paused. Took a deep breath. “Did we hear anything about what the supposed plan is to save the world?”

Sid fished his phone out of his pocket and thumbed it on. “Not a damn thing. Can’t get through to anything on this right now.”

“Internet crashed,” I mumbled.

“Or they took it down.”

I stared at Sid, trying to gauge what exactly was going through his mind. A cloud of ash seemed to have formed over his face, and for a moment, I let my mind wander to the darkest place it had ever been.

What would the world be like when it ended? Would it be a monstrosity of land powering over us, crushing us in a mass of trees and land and smoke? Would it be a pressure wave? A fire?

Would we even make it that long?

Sid – seemingly unconsciously – leaned towards me. I reciprocated his gesture, and for just a moment, our shoulders touched, finding support in our collapsing frames.

“Ahh, Cor.” Sid’s voice was thick and wet, and I slung an arm around him. He did the same for me, and we held each other.

Screams in front of us. A near fight had broken out, immediately separated by a scrum of boys whose faces I couldn’t see. I closed my eyes.

“What do we do?” Sid asked. I looked over at him, finding his wet eyes meeting mine. “Four months is a hell of a long time, Corey.”

I dragged my hand across my face, resisting the urge to whip out my phone, to seek solace in its emptiness. Instead, I took a deep breath, forcing myself to find an equilibrium that had never seemed further away.

“It is.” I said the words, but they held no meaning. I was stalling for time.

My mind went, again, to my phone. This time, I was thinking of the device as the lifeline it was. For what I had at the other end...something Sid didn’t. “Mom and Mack—they’re worried about you, too.”

Sid twitched his head. “That’s nice.”

“They’re good people, Sid. Even if—” My words caught, and Sid kept staring forward, lifelessly. He knew what I was going to say about his “parents.” I didn’t need to say the words.

“Family isn’t always family,” Sid said.

“It is not. Our loved ones are.”

Sid, of course, knew my story.

“This world is so fucking dark,” I said, swatting at a blade of grass with my hand. “It is so deeply dark, and there is so much good in it, and for whatever time—” The words caught, and I let them go. “We’ve just got to…” And again, my voice trailed off. Got to what? Take care of our loved ones? Sid’s Mom was probably about to fall even more into oblivion, and his Dad would find an excuse to run. To parent a parent was a deeply unfair burden at our age. I was barely 17, and I knew that. And now? With an expiration date apparently on all of our lives?

That thought cut through the clouds of my mind like a melting sun. “If there’s not much time left, we can be whoever we want. I want to be me and take care of my Mom. What about you, Sid?”

Sid’s eyes flashed anger, and for a moment, I worried I had said the wrong thing. Then, he heaved a deep breath, broad shoulders rising and falling abruptly. “I just want to make sure no one gets killed on campus tonight.”

I laughed without humor. Professors were starting to appear, their shell-shocked faces melting as they saw students in need. I gestured towards the adults, watching them put their own grief and heaviness aside, embracing students, even as others moved away, not so discreetly drinking from open containers as they did so. “That. That’s what we need more of.”

“Not the booze?” Sid said. He didn’t drink. Neither did I. We were no fun, and I was so okay with that.

“No. The professors.” Among them was Dr. Poll, who was clinging to a hysterical girl whose face I couldn’t see. I knew Dr. Poll. Had for four years. He had a wife and two young kids. What was he thinking now? Why wasn’t he running home to them? “They believe in something bigger. We all have to, now.”

We sat silently for a few moments, watching. Waiting. There was a campus meeting coming up, but neither of us was in a rush to get there. The irony was palpable, of course. We were now in a rush to enjoy the last days of our lives.

“You know what I know, Cor?” Sid asked.

“Go for it.”

Sid stared forward, looking around, and I followed his gaze. The scenes were so disparate. Hugging students. Crying students. Our classmates, screaming into phones. Professors are trying desperately to make sense of it all.

Here and there, signs of something darker. The booze. The anger. The curled lips and disdainful faces of those who suddenly had nothing left to lose.

Those were the faces that scared me the most.

Sid sighed. “It will be a long four and a half months to never.”