

Burning Sky

I had an emotional reaction when I went outside and saw that the sky was on fire. I thought to myself, wow, what a thing... I would say the clouds looked like pink cotton candy, but that wouldn't do the thing justice, and would promote a positive connotation. Frankly, nothing good can come from the sky being on fire.

First, think of the poor birds lying all over the road, cooked to a crisp. Sparrows, Carrier Pigeons, Red-tail Hawks, Blue Jays, Robins. It was awful; they were singed completely black, and I accidentally stepped on one and it flaked apart under my shoe. You wouldn't believe the smell.

All the radios were out. All of the phones. All of the televisions. I'm sure the despair had to be overwhelming for some people—it certainly got me worked up.

Planes had been grounded, but a few had managed to take off before all the hoopla. There were no survivors. The heat cooked the occupants—the pilots, the pretty flight attendants, all of the passengers (even those fine folks in first class). I heard all of this from Gerry, who had been in the office when the televisions still worked; he was hysterical, with wide eyes and frayed hair. He had been tugging at his collar and his tie was completely undone. “We're going to die, Marv,” he said to me while shaking me by the shoulders. “It's them damn Koreans!”

I sat down at my desk and...well, I didn't do anything. All of the power was out, ostensibly because the fireballs falling out of the sky (because by now, of course, there were fireballs falling out of the sky) had knocked out all the transformers, or fried the circuit breakers, or ripped apart the vast web of cables and chords making up America. Since I wasn't able to work and Gerry's screaming made me nervous, I left.

There was a massive line outside of the Trust Bank. Great...no calamity is complete without a good old-fashioned run on the bank. After a few minutes, a storm of fireballs, each the size of a Volkswagen Beetle, destroyed the entire building, and the remaining crowd dispersed in a bankrupt frenzy. A disheveled Mennonite was screaming that the end had come.

The end had certainly arrived, so without much else to do I hailed a cab. Before it could get to me, a fireball destroyed it. I hailed another and got in.

“Where to?” He asked me with a yap.

“Just take me to that hill at the edge of town.”

“Not a bad spot,” he said, calmly. “When I get off work I’m going to watch from my rooftop.”

“Why don’t you just go now?”

“I’ve got bills to pay,” he said.

“But what good will bills be when the world is over?”

“Hey buddy, if you wanna pay my bills, then by my guest. Otherwise, I’m gonna do what I gotta do, got it chief?”

I acknowledged that this was his prerogative, and, in many ways, I reasoned that he was right. Man is the master of his own domain because he can pay for his own domain. I sat back in silence; outside, buildings were beginning to topple into their own smoldering ruins; burning shops were being looted of televisions and electronics that would never be turned on; an old lady waited at a bus-stop.

“So what do you do, chief?”

“I work in an office downtown.”

“Everyone works in an office downtown.”

I thought of all of the company disaster drills. Corporate had prepared us for tornados and active shooters and basic fires, the kind that start in a wastebasket, or because someone has too many cables knotted under their desk—but what does one do when the sky is on fire and there are fireballs falling out of the sky?

“It’s a hell of a sight, isn’t it?” I asked, watching as three cars met in an intersection (since all of the lights were out).

“Whatever you say, chief.” He didn’t seem to feel like talking anymore. Either that, or he was the type of man who didn’t like to listen. Most people are just waiting for their turn to speak. After a moment, a golf-ball sized fireball smashed through the windshield, igniting the front passenger seat.

“Hold on chief,” the cabby shouted as he started slapping at the seat. He weaved the car through traffic while smacking at the growing fire. “We’re gonna make it, chief. Give me a hand!”

I didn’t react right away. I thought that putting out the fire was an insignificant gesture. The end was inevitable. Still, I leaned into the front seat and started batting at the fire. Eventually, we stopped it from spreading.

“Whew, that was a close one, eh chief?”

“It really was.”

“You’re not half bad. Care for a smoke?” He pulled a pack out of his breast pocket and offered me one. I declined. “Of course you don’t smoke. You should take one anyway. Maybe save it for later.”

“For later?”

“Sure. Might come in handy.”

I took the cigarette.

“Be careful chief, those things’ll kill ya.” He let out a maniacal laugh, and I couldn’t help but join him. By now, we were coming clear of the city, and looking back I could see the carnage. Overturned cars. The exposed and blackened skeletons of buildings. A rising column of iron-gray smoke.

“This is fine right here,” I said, pointing to a hill. I got out and came to the window of the cab while reaching for my wallet.

“Don’t worry about it chief.”

“What about your bills?”

“I’ll worry about em’ later,” he said. He gave me a little salute and then he sped off, back toward the city.

I climbed up the face of the hill and took a seat at its crest. The red and brimstone hell clouds were spreading and the fireballs were pounding the flat plains outside the city. In some strange, morbid way, it was all so very beautiful, and it reminded me of Whistler’s painting *The Falling Rocket*. It was all sparks and chaos. I couldn’t help but admire the magical absurdity of realized apocalypse. The falling fireballs seemed to be getting bigger, and it occurred to me that one would eventually come that was big enough to obliterate all of everything simultaneously; and I thought, what would be left to destroy?

Everything was coming to its full stop, and I had a great view. The falling fireballs were getting closer and closer, so close that sparks and embers were starting to litter the grass around me. I retrieved the cigarette the cabby had given me and bent down and lit it with one of the smaller, still burning embers. I laid back on the hill. What a great view, I thought. The cigarette tasted great.