

Try to Remain Calm

It was supposed to be the longest day of the year, and yet it was dark. It was black before dinner: dark, dark, dark. Sophie tucked her head under her pillow and groaned. She didn't want to get up until the sun came out again.

"It's just the fog," Robert said, pointing into the blackness. "It's just rain. It's just a storm coming through." But Sophie kept her hands on the pillowcase, holding it tight.

"Mngrch," she said from under the pillow. Robert sat on the edge of the bed and sighed.

It had been like this for days. May had started out so promising, so full of long and lazy afternoons. Sophie and Robert had taken walks in the village at eight o'clock and felt the air grow cool as the sun set. They'd held hands and listened to the evening birds twitter as the shadows of the trees grew long across the sidewalk. Then suddenly, inexplicably, the days had gone as short as winter, dark by six o'clock.

"It's pollution," Robert said, more nervous. "Too many people in their cars. Congestion. Smog." He turned on the television and propped himself against the headboard.

The governor was waving at cameras, lights blaring on him from every direction. “Just an unusual weather pattern,” he was saying, waving and smiling. “It will all clear up soon.”

“Mnrhhh,” Sophie said, and she rolled over, still under the pillow. “Whrrr.”

The governor took no questions, waving and smiling as he got into the back of a Town Car that blended quickly into the darkness as it pulled away. The station cut to the weather reporter, her long hair swishing as she pointed to some storms over the ocean, suggesting they may have brought the darkness. “Swirling patterns,” she said. “Severe winds, dark clouds.” Robert shut the TV off and gave in to sleep.

By the next week, the darkness was affecting a greater area up the coast. The governor was asking the president to declare a state of emergency as panicked people bought all of the bottled water off the shelves, the toilet paper, the batteries. The mayor and the chief of police appeared in 30-second public service messages, asking people not to panic. The president held a news conference to say that, while it appeared that there was nothing to fear, he was sending in the National Guard. “Thorough investigation,” he promised. “Expert scientists studying, NASA gathering data. Anti-terrorism task force at the ready.”

Sophie and Robert got up early, at the crack of dawn, and sat out on their porch, soaking up the sun before work. “Ahh,” Sophie said, and she leaned back to let the sun stream across her face and neck.

“We could go on vacation,” Robert suggested. “Get away.” But the roads and highways and bridges had been packed with carloads of people getting away, crowds of people trapped in long lines of traffic. Reports were airing on the evening news of people who had left in haste and whose houses were then robbed, though it was unclear who had reported things missing if the people were away.

At Sophie’s work, people had begun to wear gas masks, fearing a chemical agent or toxin might cause the darkness. “Bioterrorishhhmm,” they would whisper through their frogman faces at the water cooler. Sophie touched her cheek where the sun had warmed it that morning, concerned. The CEO sent out an email urging people to remain calm and continue coming to work. “The competition is hoping we will give under this pressure, but we will not be swayed,” he urged, though half of the desks were empty. Sophie didn’t care much about the competition, but she didn’t want to give in to the hysteria. It would be just what whomever or whatever was behind this darkness would want. Plus, she didn’t want to look silly if it turned out to be nothing but weather patterns. She decided not to wear a gas mask. But she felt afraid—uneasy when the darkness came so early every night. She got her doctor to write her a prescription for Xanax so she could relax and go to work each day and smile at the people wearing gas masks in the hall, showing them how brave she was, how unaffected by it all.

By week four the darkness had spread along the coast and inland some three hundred miles. The national news was dominated by reports on climate change one night, NASA photos of sunspots the next. The president was photographed

surveying the affected areas at dusk, checking his watch and nodding. “Not quite six,” he said, his mouth drawn with concern. “Early.” He promised that measures were being taken to prevent the spread of the early darkness, and urged people to remain calm. “We will fight this enemy, and win,” he vowed, as his aides helped him into a yellow anti-radiation suit. As he pulled a gas mask over his face, he gave the camera a “thumbs up.”

Robert was stopped on his way to work by a group of people carrying signs and fliers. “Jesus saves,” they told him as they handed him a pamphlet. “Repent, and God will stop this punishment.” The flier claimed that the darkness was a sign of God’s displeasure with the people of the area. It said that the people should pray to be saved. “The darkness is a reflection of your soul,” one of the people said. She was carrying a sign that said “The End of the World is Near.” Robert thanked her for the pamphlet and looked up at the beautifully sunny, clear sky of nine in the morning.

“It’s not so bad,” he said to Sophie when he got home that evening in the black of night. “The days are sunny and warm.”

“They’re short,” Sophie said. She was still in her work clothes but her high-heeled shoes were resting beside the couch where she sat curled up, watching the news. There was a report on a church group that was forming a human chain at the edge of the area of darkness, chanting, “Jesus is love,” to fight to keep the darkness out. Robert found the pamphlet in his suit pocket and handed it to Sophie. “I got this, too,” he told her, and she flipped it over.

“Do you really think this darkness is from God?” she asked him, skeptical.

Robert shrugged. “No logic has explained it yet,” he said. He got a beer from the fridge. “But, really, it’s not so bad.” He sat beside Sophie on the couch and watched live coverage of people running from the already darkened areas into the arms of the minister and his followers in the area where the sun had not quite set. “Hmm,” he said. “Huh.” Outside the window, the streetlamps revealed National Guardsmen marching past on their rounds.

The next day, Robert bought a Bible on his lunch break from a man who was selling them for ten bucks a piece on the street corner. “Word of God, pray for it, brother,” the man had said, tipping his hat as he handed Robert a Bible with yellow sticky tabs marking relevant passages. “You, too, can be saved.” The man wore mirrored sunglasses that reflected the bright noonday sun.

Robert thanked him for the Bible. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?” he said as he looked at the sky. The man shook his head, as if Robert had said left was right.

Sophie had started leaving work at four to be sure she got some time out of her cubicle before the sun set. She bought a yoga mat and stretched on the living room floor as the sun went down each night, taking deep breaths and visualizing a bright blue sky. When Robert came home with the Bible, she was in a deep stretch over her right leg, breathing out slowly and picturing a big yellow sun. “What’s that for?” she asked him, and he sat on the couch and began to read one of the tabbed passages.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” he read aloud. “They that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.”

Sophie stood and got herself another Xanax and a Diet Coke from the fridge. “You’re nuts,” she told Robert. “Didn’t you see? The darkness has kept moving. It’s all the way into Kansas now. Soon it will cover the whole country, the whole continent. It doesn’t matter that those people prayed. It’s over them now, too.”

Robert hadn’t heard that the darkness had reached Kansas. He looked down at his Bible, disappointed. “Maybe we all need to pray harder,” he suggested.

“Or maybe it’s too late,” Sophie said, but just then the Xanax kicked in and she lay down on the couch beside him and nuzzled his neck.

“Hug your kids,” the reporter on TV was urging. He was standing in a cornfield in Nebraska, the sky dark around him. His microphone shook as he spoke. “Tell people that you love them. There is just no explanation for this, just none at all.” The camera cut away from him as his voice cracked with a sob.

“Thank you, Bob,” the woman anchor said, back in the studio. She shook her head and forced a smile. “Good advice for all of us tonight.”

“And we’ll have the latest developments and more reaction from around the world, after this,” the male anchor said, his mouth a thin line of a smile. A commercial for Mr. Clean came on. Sophie felt herself drifting into sleep, her eyes sliding closed as Mr. Clean got even the dirtiest kitchen floor sparkling like new. She dreamt that Mr. Clean was her husband instead of Robert, and that he

was reading to her from a Bible of kitchen advice. “Don’t hide your dust under a bushel,” he told her, and she ran to him and put her hands on his waxy bald head. “That’s just what I’ve been doing,” she said. “Yes.” When she woke, it was three in the morning and she and Robert were still on the couch, the TV running an infomercial for knives. She nudged Robert gently and he stirred, his new Bible slipping from his lap to the floor. She nudged him again and he stumbled to his feet, following her to the bedroom where they fell back asleep.

That weekend, there were protests and counter-protests across the country. Religious organizations held prayer vigils on the mall in Washington and at city halls around the country. Environmental groups held awareness rallies. The news showed clashes between the groups.

“Repent and find God!” a woman with the church group yelled.

“This isn’t God, this is global warming! This is irresponsible energy policy!” a protester shot back. There was a lot of unintelligible screaming as the two sides leaned at each other, waving signs and shouting out Bible quotes and global warming statistics. As the National Guard came in and dispersed the crowd with tear gas, the camera angle swerved dramatically and the network cut to the governor of Arkansas, declaring martial law until rioting could be stopped. Soon, Sophie’s own governor came on.

“Keep the peace,” he said. “Imposing a curfew. Temporary, until order is restored.”

“Like hell,” Sophie said, though she was already home. Robert wasn’t watching the coverage; he was reading his Bible in the den. Sophie ran in to tell him what was happening.

“Curfews, National Guard. Police State!” she howled, and Robert nodded slowly.

“It’s safer that way,” he said. “Don’t you feel safer?”

Sophie wasn’t sure.

Things were quiet in town the next week. National Guard and police stood on corners, surveying crowds. Sophie walked by them nervously, wondering if they could read her thoughts against the curfew. Robert smiled at them as he walked by, carrying his Bible. “Thank you,” he said to the officer stationed outside his office building. “Thanks for being here.” He really did feel safer knowing the officer was there, if anything happened.

Sophie stayed in her cubicle at lunch. She didn’t want to see the officers on the street, to be reminded of how trapped she was. She wished she could go out and walk around without feeling like a suspect; that she could soak up some sunshine before it got dark again. She didn’t get much work done.

That night, she wanted to order a pizza but delivery drivers weren’t allowed on the streets after sundown. Robert boiled some hot dogs. “I’ve been thinking,” he said, pulling the hot dogs from the water with the kitchen tongs. “Maybe the darkness is a blessing.”

“A blessing?” Sophie asked. They didn’t have hot dog buns, so she got some slices of bread to wrap around their hot dogs.

“The days are shorter, but the weather’s mild, mostly sunny, not much rain.”

“Drought,” Sophie offered. “Skin cancer.”

Robert frowned and squirted ketchup on his hot dog. “Maybe.”

“Maybe it is global warming,” Sophie said, sitting at the kitchen table.

“Changes in currents. Maybe the planet tilted on its axis from the rising waters.”

“Maybe,” Robert said again. “But only in one area? Gradually expanding?”

“Nobody knows,” Sophie said, as a patrol car cruised slowly down their street. She watched its lights go by and took a bite of her hot dog. “No one has a clue. What good are they, any of them?”

After three months, the darkness stretched across the continental United States, into parts of Canada and Mexico, at which point it abruptly spread no further. The fall arrived, bringing cooler weather, and the rest of the world held its breath as days in other parts of the northern hemisphere began their normal shortening. The southern hemisphere cheered as its days got longer right on schedule. No explanation could be found for the change in North American daylight. Scientists were baffled, religious groups lost ground in their mass conversions as the world did not end. Curfews gradually were lifted, the National Guard sent home, with the promise both would return if needed.

Even the president stopped wearing a gas mask on his trips outside. At his news conference one October afternoon, he released the final report on the U.S. investigation into the darkness. Everyone at Sophie's work and Robert's stopped to watch it, people huddling around television sets in break rooms and videoconference centers. Sophie didn't want to appear too concerned, so she listened to it on the radio at her desk. The coverage was coming live from the enclosed HAZMAT tent that had been erected in the White House rose garden as a precaution. "No terrorist group has claimed responsibility," the president said. "No signs of any foul play, any hazardous effects of the darkness." Some papers shuffled. "Forces of nature beyond our understanding. At this time, cautiously follow policy of adaptation. Citizens urged to report any suspicious activity." The president waved as he left the tent and returned to the White House.

"Adaptation," Sophie mused. "Adapt." She felt cheated by the loss of daylight she was asked to adjust to, but she didn't think there was anything she could do about it. "Hmm," she sighed.

In Robert's office building, there were a few cheers and sighs of relief. "It's all okay," people said. "Just the way things go."

"Well, that's enough of that, then," Robert said, shaking his head with wonder. He looked out of the conference room window. It was getting dark.

End.