

Impact Mitigation

"If that asteroid's as big as they say, and it actually does hit earth, I'd like to just watch it from this lawn chair, smoking a good cigar." Geoffrey puffed at a Honduran corona. From his darkened rear deck, he gazed at the starlit sky, and imagined a dazzling flash of light followed eventually by a pressure wave that would catch him in mid puff. "Maybe have Brahms' Second Piano Concerto going—Sviatoslav Richter."

"Wouldn't be much of a view from here," Conrad said. He fished the twist of lemon peel from his VO press, and rubbed it around the rim of the glass. "It would look like a giant flashbulb, then you're dead. You'd need a higher point of view—like maybe the top of Mt. Rogers."

"Mt. Rogers has trees at the summit. Besides, I'd rather confront the end in a more comfortable place." Geoffrey zipped up the neck of his red fleece pullover.

"How about a hot air balloon?" Conrad asked.

Geoffrey chuckled. "That might work. You got one handy?"

"On NPR, they said it would be a few more weeks before they know for sure. That's not enough time to really accomplish much. I mean, have you thought about the silliness of what the two of us been doing for the last two years?"

"Hey! Silliness? I make...things...fall and ricochet...and rotate. Of course, they're only *imaginary* things bouncing off *imaginary* walls and *imaginary* floors." As lead programmer for Dreamsplice Games, Geoffrey had devoted much of his attention to coding physics so that Conrad's 3D models would behave like real world objects. He knew that the current game, Combat Medic, would not even make it to beta

testing by the due date for the asteroid. "I guess it's good that I've never done anything meaningful," Geoffrey said. "I don't have to fret over it all coming to nothing."

"Interesting thought. It won't matter if there once was a Camelot." Conrad turned to face Geoffrey in the faint light. "What do you think will happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know...unrest? Do you think people will go crazy...rape and pillage...collapse of government...that kind of stuff?"

"I think good people will be good and bad people...well...bad. Yeah. I imagine things will get pretty dicey." Geoffrey's mind wandered to a chaotic game level he had been working in Combat Medic.

"Which will you be?"

"Which what?"

"Good or bad?"

"Oh. Neither. Would it really matter? I suppose I'll be completely selfish. I've been conditioned to feel better if I'm nice to people. So I guess I'll look like a good guy—like a good guy in a game. How about you?"

"I don't know. Do you wish you had kids, or glad you don't?"

Geoffrey sighed. "I'm taking the Fifth. The last time I was asked about that, Aimee didn't like my answer very much."

"Are the two of you, like, on hiatus, or is it more serious?"

"Well...I don't know yet."

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"So what is it I'm looking at?" Geoffrey sat at his desk, reading a directory of files on his computer. One hand shielded his LCD screen from the early morning sunlight that streamed through the bay windows of his office at Dreamsplice.

"Why don't you just close your blinds?" Conrad asked.

"That makes it feel too much like a demotion."

"Just grab all the files and load them into a blank world."

Geoffrey copied the files, opened his game development environment, then loaded a ground plane and all of Conrad's mystery files. When he started the code, two lawn chairs appeared on the

screen, lashed together. A cluster of a dozen red balloons rose on tethers from each of the four corners. Geoffrey laughed. "You were serious."

"See? That one has a holder for a drink..." Conrad pointed to an arm of the left lawn chair. "...and the other one has a cigar ashtray with one of those clips they use to hold a cigar on the golf course."

"For a higher point of view. And the balloons are helium?"

"Yeah. You carry extras and a little helium tank in case you need more lift while you're up."

Geoffrey laughed again. "And if you need less?"

"You carry a stick with a needle on the end." Conrad joined in the laughter.

"You think that would be better..." Another fit of laughter overtook Geoffrey. "...better than sitting on my deck?"

"We could add a half-bathroom and a wet bar, but I think that would blow the helium budget."

Aimee poked her head into the office. "Nothing like the sound of productivity."

Geoffrey closed the lawn chair world, leaving the game development environment open. "Just a little inside humor."

"I've got to get back to the...uh...demolished ambulance," Conrad said, slipping past Aimee.

"We really do need to regain some focus," Aimee said after Conrad had left. "Everybody's chattering about that asteroid."

"I know," Geoffrey said. When Aimee seated her trim, marathon body in one of the two extra chairs and folded her hands, he swiveled to face her. She wore a steel blue pique polo shirt with a tiny Dreamsplice logo embroidered over the left breast. With her dark brown hair pulled into a ponytail, it tricked his eye into seeing a more self-confident person than he knew her to be. "How are you handling it, I mean personally?" The question felt awkward. Six months had passed since their relationship had shifted from intimate to strictly collegial.

"I don't know. My mom thinks I should quit and go up to Vermont." She ran her fingertip over her knee, following the permanent crease stitched into her dark charcoal slacks. "Last night

on the news, they said it was definitely going to come close. It's like half a mile wide. And they're thinking it might hit the moon or go really close to it. You probably understand the physics they're talking about. They don't know how much it weighs or the speed or something, so the moon might make it change its path. And they say that if it gets past the moon, then it's only like six hours 'til it hits earth."

"Are you really thinking about quitting?"

"Well, the stock market's gone bananas. Dreamsplice stock has tanked. My portfolio could buy me a couple of good meals, but only if I sell it all today. Geoffrey, I've got seven people asking for a leave of absence with advanced pay, and Marty wants to cash in his vacation and move to Alaska."

"Alaska." Geoffrey shook his head. "That's Marty. The way I see it, if it's a direct hit, it won't matter what we do. If it's a partial hit, I doubt anybody is going to be spending money on pretend mayhem for a while." Aimee opened her mouth to speak, but Geoffrey raised his finger. "But, if it misses, and we've thrown in the towel and gone to Tahiti, then we'll be among millions of clever fatalists out of a job."

"What are you planning to do, Geoffrey?" Her gray-green eyes held his gaze with an intensity that seemed to penetrate his cheery facade of pragmatism.

"This." He pointed to his computer. "I enjoy what I'm doing. I think we should close for a day or two before and after the impact date, so everybody can cater to their right-brains. I'm planning an impact party out at my place on I-day. Good music, good food, good friends and a nice view. Will you come?"

She looked away. "That's a good idea about closing for a few days." Aimee stood to leave. "I'll suggest it to the triumvirate. I'm not sure about the party. My mom's pretty scared. I might drive up there." She exited the door with a trailing wave of her fingers.

Geoffrey rose from his swivel chair and stepped to the door. He watched as Aimee padded down the plush green carpet to the end of the hall and vanished into her office. He felt, for the first time, that his planet and his life were about to do the same thing—give a quick wave, then take a stroll down the cosmic hallway.

He re-opened Conrad's flying lawn chairs during his lunch break. Geoffrey slurped his ramen while looking up helium lift and crunching the numbers. When he was done, he adjusted the balloon models to match his calculations, then called Conrad.

"My balloons got bigger," Conrad said when Geoffrey ran the world.

"They're each seven and a half feet in diameter. To lift two adults plus the lawn chairs and all the other doodads, it takes eight of those huge balloons on each corner. That's thirty two of them. And it takes about one large helium cylinder to fill one big balloon."

"Thirty two helium cylinders. Yeow! How high would it go?"

"I don't know. Some of those weather balloons go pretty high."

"I guess you didn't calculate the weight of parachutes."

"There was actually some truck driver in California back in the early eighties who was cited by the FAA for flying in a lawn chair tied to balloons."

"You're kidding."

"Failure to obtain a certificate of airworthiness. They said he went over 16,000 feet. When his arms and legs began to tingle, he shot out some of the balloons with a BB gun that he'd brought along."

"I guess my work is merely...derivative," Conrad said with exaggerated disappointment.

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Geoffrey directed the delivery guy from Acme Welding Supply to wheel the helium tank into his garage. Once it was standing by the wall, he looped a short length of safety chain around it. "So what's happening with your business?"

"Look at the truck," the man said. "That's a quarter what we usually deliver. Both my drivers quit, so I'm trying to take care of our customers—the ones that are still around. And I won't even go near downtown. It's too dangerous. Half the cops have left. The looting isn't too bad yet, but we still got two days to go." He climbed into the cab. "I think I'm going to close up after today." The Acme logo on the door triggered his memory of a giant boulder flattening a cartoon coyote. The truck pulled out of the driveway.

Geoffrey had stocked up on groceries and supplies shortly after the first announcement of the asteroid. By now, most of the stores that sold anything useful were nearly bare. The girl at the supermarket this afternoon complained that a lot of their deliveries had simply stopped coming.

Without a specific place to avoid or any practical refuge, most people seemed to just hover in apprehension. The roads weren't crowded, but gas was scarce and expensive. Some news stories were now reporting power plant shutdowns due to lack of coal.

Today was Wednesday, two days to I-Day. Dreamsplice Games had closed for the rest of the week. If the world was still around on Monday, then Geoffrey planned to be back at his desk, shielding the early morning sunlight from his LCD screen.

He switched on his TV. Many smaller stations seemed to have gone off the air. The big news networks and talk shows interspersed planetary physicists with clergymen, some dour, others immovably content with the divine plan. The NASA folks had pinpointed the time of impact to 5:15 pm. It now looked like it would miss the moon, but not by much. They still hadn't been able to agree on how the asteroid would be affected by the moon's gravity as it passed. But it would definitely cross the orbits of many man-made satellites and space junk. The latest word was that it was more likely to hit earth than to miss.

His impact party was announced to begin at 2:00 pm Friday. He assumed that if it continued until 5:20 pm, then it would last all night. He had purchased party food and beverages to cover six people for a twenty-four hour period. As of the close of work today, he had five solid commitments. Aimee had said she would be driving to Vermont tonight.

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The weather for I-Day was as beautiful as anyone could hope for. Other than a few puffy clouds, the sky was clear with scarcely a breeze. It would be warm enough for shirtsleeves, he thought, well into the evening...if there was one.

Earlier, his older brother had managed to call. It had been a short conversation consisting mostly of lies that they would see each other soon. It could have been any one of the infrequent conversations

they had shared over the past decade. He wondered if Aimee had tried to call, and been unable to get through the overloaded lines. Their disagreements seemed laughable in the new reality. The realization that he might never see her again left a cold void in his chest.

Shortly after noon, Geoffrey dragged two lawn chair recliners out to the back lawn and tied them together. To each of the four corners, he attached three helium-filled party balloons on kite string. It was mostly for Conrad's benefit. He positioned the chairs to face away from the house.

In the kitchen, he stirred onion soup mix and minced clams into three pints of sour cream. It would need a couple of hours in the refrigerator to soften up the dried onion. He checked the ice maker. On the floor of the kitchen, beneath the window, he had placed ten gallons of spring water in plastic jugs. At the counter, he quickly stirred up some marinade—mostly Silvaner Riesling with a touch of rice vinegar and loads of black pepper and sliced garlic—and carefully laid six thick ribeye steaks into the mixture. This went into the fridge.

As he considered these simple, common things, a deep sadness overtook him. He sat in the middle of the kitchen floor and scanned his appliances. "You clever species," he said aloud. "Look at all the problems you can solve when you decide to." He thought about Larry Walters, the California truck driver, actually flying in his lawn chair to 16,000 feet. Eleven years after his flight, Walters had hiked alone to his favorite spot in a National Forest and shot himself in the heart.

The TV news announced that the asteroid had passed the moon, but experts still disagreed on whether it would strike the earth. More amazing than the lack of a prediction was his discovery that they continued to run TV ads for hemorrhoid cream, Cadillacs and discount hotel reservations. One entire military unit had gone AWOL, but most were still on duty supporting National Guard troops in the urban areas. The TV channel abruptly went dead. He cycled through more dead channels, then switched off the TV. He guessed that the cable provider had lost power.

Grateful that his own electricity was still working, Geoffrey set up some music, a mix of New Age and classical. He would save Richter for 5:10. With the music playing inside and out, he sat alone on the

deck with a cup of fragrant Ethiopian Yirgacheffe coffee and a Hoyo de Monterrey Excalibur cigar. Unlike the front of his house, which anchored him solidly in suburbia, the rear deck faced the one remaining pasture in the subdivision, granting him the illusion of nature and solitude.

When no one had arrived by 3:00, he tried to call Conrad. The trunk line was busy, reminding him of trying to call his mother on Mother's Day. Geoffrey walked into his backyard far enough to see beyond the hedges that separated his property from that of his immediate neighbors. He saw no movement—no smoke from barbecues, no kids playing. After three years in this same house, he had to admit that he knew the characters in his game world better than he knew his neighbors. Strolling around to the front of his house, he noticed for the first time that the usual array of cars and minivans were absent from the driveways up and down the street. He wondered if they were gone, or just parked in the garage, like his own, for safety in uncertain times. Geoffrey attributed the lack of looters here to the worldwide abundance of opportunities. The temptation to knock on some doors and perhaps invite someone over was not as strong as his worry that he would miss a phone call from Conrad or the others. He returned to his deck and waited, listening to the music, occasionally glancing up at the empty sky.

By 5:00 pm, nobody had shown up for his impact party. A gibbous moon cleared the horizon. He checked his phone for a dial tone, but heard only episodic clicking. There had been times in his life when he had felt lonely, but never had it felt so absolute. The isolation bit deeply—a realization that surprised him. Geoffrey switched the music to Brahms' Second Piano Concerto ahead of schedule. He wanted to hear more of it before he was vaporized. The end, he concluded, is a lonely place—whether a concerto or a world. He thought of his mother always worrying about his safety. "I'm glad you missed this one, Mom," he whispered.

For his final cigar, maybe the last cigar ever smoked on earth, he mused, Geoffrey brought out a forty-five cent Marsh Wheeling Deluxe Stogie, Dark. There would be no one around to call it floor sweepings. Rather than use a cutter to clip its pointed head, he sawed

it off with his incisors and spit the nub of tobacco into the back yard. His watch read 5:05. With a small glass of Creme de Cacao in his left hand, and his lit stogie in his right, he seated himself on one of the two flying lawn chairs. He carefully reclined the backs of the lashed chairs and looked up at a sky framed by clusters of gently waving party balloons at the corners. The empty chair beside him seemed apropos.

Only ten minutes to oblivion, he thought, and nothing but a clear blue sky and a dazzling moon. In the hollowness of his isolation, he asked himself a question. If he had longer to live, would he do something more than just create virtual worlds in which to avoid the real one? It seemed like a situation in which he should resolve to be a better person, but that felt contrived. His only regret, he realized with uncommon clarity, was that he hadn't insisted on driving up to Vermont with Aimee. And she deserved points, he decided, for telling him straight up that she was not coming to his impact party. Holding his cigar in his teeth and his small glass in one hand, he rose and rotated his flying lawn chairs to face his house...to face his neighbors...his community.

When Geoffrey turned, he saw Aimee standing two feet away. Her dark brown hair draped loosely over the front of an oversize black, Grateful Dead t-shirt. She held a six-pack of Negra Modelo beer.

"Is that chair taken?" she asked in a voice sweeter to his ears than a chorus of angels.

He returned to his seat and tapped the arm of the adjacent flying lawn chair. "I was holding it for you."

"You're a liar, but a nice liar." She dropped her canvas purse on the grass and served herself one of her beers, opening the bottle with a church key from the purse. "My mom heard people were running out of gas on the interstate. She insisted I stay put." Reclining in the lawn chair, she looked up at the late afternoon sky. "These balloons are blocking the view." Reaching again into her purse, she brought out two ten dollar bills. "Got a pen?"

Geoffrey pulled a fine point roller-ball pen from his pants pocket and handed it to her. She wrote a short sentence on each bill and returned the pen along with one of the bills to Geoffrey. With a yank, she freed the kite string tether of one cluster of party balloons

from the chair, tied her bill to it, then set it free. The three balloons rose rapidly and drifted eastward, toward the moon and the unseen asteroid. Geoffrey read the inscription on the remaining bill: Have a nice day, from Geoffrey and Aimee. It was followed by the date and time. Geoffrey sent his bill into the sky on another cluster of balloons.

"Look!" Aimee pointed directly overhead to a small, bright object.

"It's supposed to be nearly a half-mile across, but it just looks like a small pizza with extra cheese." He held Aimee's delicate hand.

"Yeah. From like half a football field away. I think I can see it moving. Will you marry me, Geoffrey?"

Geoffrey looked away from the asteroid to see tears in Aimee's eyes. "Yes. 'Til death do us part. But it may miss, then you're stuck with me."

"Luck of the draw."

From the flying lawn chairs they watched the small pizza with extra cheese glide westward. He saw no flames. It just passed out of view. Brahms' Second Piano Concerto ended. Geoffrey's watch showed 5:44. He kissed the palm of her hand.

"Listen," Aimee whispered.

Geoffrey heard a distant ringing of bells. It seemed to come from all directions.

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