

excerpt from **WHEN EVERYBODY WAS UPSET**

WE NEVER EVEN GOT TO TALK about how good the food was. It was so hard to speak that I mostly didn't try to say anything, just looked out the window, and then back at them, trying to show by the expression on my face that I liked them, which was true, and that I was glad to be there, which was becoming less and less true.

I did my best to nod and to periodically make eye contact, in a way that I hope showed them that I at least partially heard what they were saying, and also that I understood, as they did, that people in restaurants as nice as this one can simultaneously feel sorry for the people in the news who are dead, and also have a good dinner, with a second bottle of wine and many smiling but unvoiced happy anniversary wishes.

Outside I could see small breakers rolling in from the darkness, becoming visible as they entered the soft envelope of light that spread from the restaurant's long window. I guess we must have had some periods of time when they weren't talking about the news, because I remember looking out the window at the lines of low foam moving toward the beach, and trying to imagine that those waves represented the same stories that were on the news tonight, but coming in slowly rather than fast—curved white lines, loaded with bundles of all the information that has been generated out there in the other time zones, and slowly rolling into the light and up onto the beach, on waves so small that in the daytime kids with air mattresses do not even try to play on them.

Back at my father's condo we had a conversation in which it was much easier to hear one another. All three of us had just read a short story in which the thoughts of a man and wife who are afraid that their daughter has been killed in an accident are interspersed with well-researched speculations of what it would be like if a giant meteor struck the earth.

I said that what struck me most was what a felicitous piece of timing it was that the author's visualization of the effects of a giant meteor should have occurred at the exact cultural moment when people are more ready than they have ever been to have such pictures flashed in their faces, the thought of it somehow less frightening

when the reader can see the shape of it so clearly, as it comes plunging out of the sky on a summer's day, its velocity and surface temperature estimated in advance—a picture so finely drawn that it can even be thought of as comforting, perhaps related to the way that Jehovah's Witnesses are able to keep from getting upset when they are thinking about watching all their children's friends die.

Whatever I said was something to that effect. What I didn't mention—in consideration of the fact that it was nice of them to have me there and that it would be wrong on their anniversary to start even a literary argument—was something that the woman in the office next to mine said, which we had a good laugh about. She had read the same story and her take on the giant meteor was that it sounded like Nostradamus for the Hamptons crowd.

It turned out to have been not their daughter but their daughter's best friend. In the morgue, in the middle of the night, the corpse's facial trauma is described with the kind of vivid detail that my friends in the creative writing program complain that their students don't even try for any more. She must have been in the hospital morgue, rather than the city morgue, but she was definitely in some kind of morgue—a location about which I have learned something that I don't quite understand. I have watched television for most of my life, and I have noticed that you never see a morgue in the daytime, though it must still be there.

When the sheet is lifted from the body, they see it is not their daughter, rather a friend of their daughter whom they knew only slightly. At that moment the husband can't help noticing that a patch of the girl's short hair has been draggled together with blood into something resembling a spiked hairdo, either neo-punk or gothic; the husband is old enough not to be sure what the difference is. Despite his sympathy for the dead girl, and for her family and friends, he allows himself to have a sad but privately amusing thought—that his daughter's friend has achieved in her early death a look that she had attempted with less success during her tragically short life.

Whether it's right to be talking about one place and then suddenly to be talking about someplace else entirely is a question I can't answer. Giant meteors and dead girls are such serious topics that

a person telling the story must follow the thread that pulls hardest at any given moment, and anybody listening can just sit back and let the bundle untwist. In the morgue the girl's face is covered back up; a giant meteor will or will not come plunging out of the sky; surf too small for boogie-boards rolls endlessly into the dimly lighted stretch of beach around the restaurant, and as we all know, the waves do not really carry any information about how sorry we should feel for the people who are dead.