

A Liminal Anxiety

By Michael Buckley

I awoke on the first morning to find that I was not dead. When the full impact of this realization hit me, I scrambled out of my bed, shucking my sheets onto the floor, and knocking the open bottle of Zolpidem off my nightstand. Trembling, I pulled back the curtain covering my window. My eyes were drawn not to the rampant destruction below me, but towards the sky above me.

I did not see the familiar celestial bodies staring back at me, but instead a giant Cheronian face looking down upon humanity's last battlefield. The sky had been cleaved, medially, in a perfectly straight line. One side was black, the other white. I stood there, mouth slightly ajar, and watched as the division between the two halves drifted slowly westward, mimicking the path of the Sun's light over the Earth.

In my half-asleep stupor I somehow found this very funny. It was only ten hours earlier that I had seen the Sun, and now I would never see it again. No one would ever see the Sun again. Yesterday, in the early afternoon, the Sun suddenly dimmed. Within an hour, top men and women appeared on television to confirm what many already feared to be true: The Sun was in its death throes. No one knew what had caused it or why it was happening now, only that in a few hours we would all be dead. As the afternoon progressed, the Sun continued to dim until all that remained in the sky was a faint, malevolent glow. The temperature began to drop. Humanity's red hour was upon us. From my apartment, I could hear the screams coming from the city below as more and more people, realizing there was no escape from their fates, flocked to the streets for a giant festival of debauchery and violence. It was then that I had swallowed my sleeping meds, expecting never to awake again.

After some time, my mind began to wander to other subjects. Some people can dwell upon traumatic events, forcing out all other thoughts. I am not one of those people. With what little information I had, I found that, in thinking about the events of the last 24 hours, I could not come up with an idea which I had not yet considered. It was at this point that my thoughts turned to other subjects. I had no loved ones to worry about, not even a pet. I did, however, have a scented lunar flower. It sat in a small pot on another window. For the past three days, it had stayed closed up, but this morning I found it in half bloom. One petal had fallen off. It lay face up in the pot, its dark purple surface contrasted by its green reflective sheen. I gave the flower some water even though I doubted that it would survive without Sunlight.

Curious to find out what had happened, I decided to go have a look around. I approached my closet, but found myself strangely unmotivated to get dressed. I had no idea if we had been granted a temporary reprieve from certain death, or if we had really been saved. If it was the former, I didn't want to spend any of my remaining time doing something as dull as getting dressed. I slipped on a robe (it was damp), doubting that anyone would bother to make a big deal about it, snagged a bottle of Ibuprofen on my way out, and began to descend the staircase to the city streets.

I wandered for a while without any clear destination in mind. Strolling down the street, stepping carefully over bits of broken glass and human body parts, I occasionally came across people who were just as confused as I was. Some were eager to talk, others tried their best to avoid conversation. I appreciated the latter more: Those who wanted to talk had nothing to talk about, but still felt the need to talk. Some of them had come up with technobabble theories so elaborate and misguided that even LeVar Burton would be embarrassed if he spouted such nonsense.

Eventually I found myself in front of a Catholic church. I recognized the

building. I passed it on my drive to work every weekday. The building had always been a bit run down, but it was very much the worse for the previous night's activities. The walls were covered with spray paint, the stained glass windows had been smashed in, and the cross had been forcibly removed from the steeple. Through the broken windows I could see a large group of people, and hoping that perhaps someone inside knew something, I breached the door and stepped into the church's interior. To my slight dismay, I found that all was quiet.

The silence was broken by a small voice behind me. "Don't move." I slowly turned to see an old man leaning against the back wall of the church, next to the door. He was pointing what looked like an antique pistol in my direction. "You don't look right. 'You baptized?'" he inquired. I sized up the man. Everyone I met so far seemed to be suffering from the same general malaise which had prevented me from dressing properly, yet this old codger had enough motivation to bring that gun down to the church to defend it from the unbaptized.

"Well well," I chided. "Is this how the Roman Catholic Church treats its flock these days?"

"I asked you a question. 'You baptized, or ain't ya?'" he demanded in a slightly louder voice. I looked up at the preacher for help. He looked back with sympathetic eyes, but did nothing.

"Of course I'm baptized," I lied. "My baptismal name is... uh... Thomas."

"You don't look right," he murmured, "This here is the end times. The faithful gather here for the rapturin'. But the sinners, they' condemned to eternal damnation. So I'm figurin' if we have sinners in this here house of God, well, maybe the Lord' pass us over." I looked around at the "faithful" gathered in the church. Crammed into the pews were the people who had run wild the night before. Their guilt drove them to church; their shame kept

them from the confessional. “You don’t look right,” the old man repeated. I’m sorry mister, but I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.” Turning to the open door, I saw no war, no famine, no conquest—only an uncertain death. I gladly left the old man to his end times.

I soon realized that I was subconsciously retracing the path I drive along every weekday to go to work. I suppose I’m just a creature of habit. I was about to head back, but I heard a loud voice just ahead. Turning a corner, I found a group of 20 or so people, all standing in the middle of the street. They were listening to the ramblings of John, a local homeless man.

“John” is actually just the name I know him by. Whenever anyone asks his name, he always gives a different answer. I doubt that he remembers his real name, if he even has one. On the few occasions I have had to talk with him, he has always responded to “John,” and that was good enough for me. He usually stands by the stoplight just before the on-ramp, holding a tattered cardboard sign which reads: “Lost my apendics in ‘Nam.” I drove past that sign every weekday for years, pretending I couldn’t see it or the man holding it. It was just too ridiculous. Ignoring the fact that the appendix is a vestigial organ, John was younger than I was. Although his voice cracked from years of alcohol abuse, and his skin had lost its elasticity from constant exposure to the elements, the color had not yet fully faded from his hair. He was not old enough to have been in Vietnam. Finally, after years of ignoring him, I had decided that enough was enough, and told him that he should at least have the decency to pretend to be an OIF vet, but it did no good: He swore up and down that he had been “face down in the shit” with his comrades in the 42nd Infantry Division in Vietnam.

“... And you have no one to blame but yourselves,” he bellowed to the group gathered around him. “What I witnessed last night—oh what I witnessed—was no party. I did not witness love, violence, tears, anger, or the loss of inhibitions: I witnessed fear.” John gesticulated wildly as he spoke,

flecks of spit flying from his mouth and landing on his white beard, which shone in contrast to the black sky behind him. “That’s right, fear! And not just a fear of dying, but a fear of living, too! Ask yourselves this: did you not feel the slightest bit of relief when you learned your lives would end? Did you not feel liberated from your obligations to society? The oppressive chains which had held you—your families, the economy, and even common courtesy—were lifted from you. It was with a mixture of joy and dread that you flocked to the streets last night, but as the end drew near, you felt only fear. You feared the end, but you also feared going back to your lives. After what you had seen, and what you had done, how could you go back to living as you had? How could society go back to the way it had been? Unless we punished each and every one of you, how could we hope to once again be a nation of laws?”

“He’s right!” yelled a man in a bloodstained shirt. “I... I still don’t want to die, but how can we go back to being a nation of laws? We all did things. I think... I think I may have killed a man!” A murmur broke out among the crowd as more people stepped forward to agree. But none of them contributed anything of substance: They all just parroted John’s words.

Watching them, my world became a wash of monochromatic red. “Idiots! They were all just idiots!” I remember thinking to myself. Here they were, listening to a man they had ignored their whole lives, and now they clung to his every word. Couldn’t they think for themselves? Was the world saved just so humanity could put its stupidity on display for the entire universe?

It was at that point that I realized how angry I was. I closed my eyes and attempted to shut it out. “I must not hate,” I mentally intoned. “Hate is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my hate. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And ... And ...” I struggled to remember the rest, as it had been many years since I had needed to work so hard to suppress my anger. My co-workers often cruelly joked that I

had achieved *Kolinahr*, but hate, more often than other emotions, would occasionally break my stoic attitude.

In my struggle to remember the litany, I had completely forgotten my hate. I opened my eyes to find the crowd once again silent, and John preaching to them: “And so your liminal anxiety grew stronger and stronger, and it began to psychically resonate with the anxieties of those around you until it became so strong that it manifested itself . . .” John paused for a second before pointing above him to the sky. “. . . as that! And until you commit yourselves fully to either life or death, you shall remain in this limbo which you have built for yourselves!”

I didn’t take John’s ramblings seriously at first. There was no way that some sort of psychic resonance was the means of our salvation. And yet, without a reasonable explanation, I found myself dwelling on what he had said. I didn’t want to die, but as I examined my life for the first time in a long time, I realized that it had become routine and mundane. For the last 15 years, I had lived in this same apartment, gone to the same, useless job on every business day, and sat around playing video games, watching TV, and surfing the Internet on my days off. My family had all died; I had no real friends. There was nothing about my life really worth preserving.

Still, I wasn’t eager to end my life either. It was . . . comfortable. I didn’t dislike my situation, and it was devoid of pain, giving me no reason to want to end it. I wondered, if I was forced to make a choice between life and death, which I would choose. These thoughts weighed on my mind late into what would normally be night, keeping me from sleeping. I reached for the Zolpidem multiple times during the night, but could not bring myself to open the bottle. I thought about the state that the pills put me in. I certainly wasn’t awake, but I didn’t dream either, so I couldn’t call it sleep. After the fourth time, I threw the bottle across the room in frustration, but quickly got up and went after it. I eventually took the pills that night, and

not for the last time, either.

A few days later, most people had implicitly made their choice. Some returned to their jobs and worked hard to restore a sense of normalcy. The rest celebrated the collapse of society by engaging in activities which would be impossible to get away with before. Cars roamed the inner-city, blaring polka music from their speakers; people went into furniture stores and ripped the tags off of mattresses; and games of Red Light/Green Light erupted in the city streets.

Of course, there was some crossover. A prominent TV news anchor began wearing a zoot suit on camera, and dedicated an entire 30-minute segment to repeating words which were banned by the FCC. The LAPD got into the spirit as well. While most officers returned to duty, many replaced the text “to Protect and to serve” painted on the side of their cars. Most of these replacements were unoriginal, like: “to deflect and to swerve,” but I saw one which read: “In the name of the Moon, we shall punish you.”

I’m sorry to say that I initially fell into the latter group. After seeing a news segment about the old man who was defending the church, I decided it was time to get back at him. Years ago I had built a replica of Tom Servo, using special parts ordered off the Internet. Noticing that the cross on the Church’s steeple was still missing, I decided that Tom would be an appropriate replacement. His arms stuck straight out from his sides at just the right height. I was initially worried that he might get stolen, or that the old man might shoot him, but Tom had just sat on a shelf next to my closet for years, and besides, what good would it do to worry about material property if we were all going to die anyway?

I drove out to the church that afternoon. Walking around to side of the building, I found a ladder lying in the grass. At first it seemed too convenient, but I realized that whoever removed the original cross must have gotten up there somehow. Perhaps they had left the ladder there. I took the ladder

to the front of the church. It extended just far enough. Reaching up, I was able to place Tom at the tip. The hole in the bottom of his hoverskirt was big enough to allow him to balance while I secured him to the steeple. I had brought along a roll of duct tape, which I had been wearing as a bracelet while I climbed, for this purpose. As I affixed strip after strip to his hoverskirt, I felt a little guilty about abandoning him to an unknown fate, but consoled myself by thinking that the real Tom Servo would appreciate the humor of the situation.

That evening the church gunman opened fire. He killed two, including the preacher, and wounded two others before taking his own life. No one knows what prompted him to finally pull the trigger, but I couldn't help but feel that it was my fault. The TV news footage did not show Tom straddling the church's steeple, but I thought it would be best to retrieve him as soon as possible to avoid any suspicion.

When the sky was entirely black, I drove back to the church. From the ground I could not see Tom: His transparent head made him difficult to spot in the darkness. When I climbed up the ladder, however, I could easily make out his every feature. I hesitated before taking hold of Tom. His red paint gleamed in the darkness as if it were wet. For a moment I imagined that it was the blood of the victims dripping down his body. I grabbed his white shoulders, and asked him for forgiveness. Of course, no response came. It was silly to expect a response from an inanimate object, but I shook him violently, trying to force one out of him.

A catharsis swept over me, and I began to weep. I couldn't have picked a better place for it—perched on a ladder and gripping a plastic puppet. I could have easily fallen to my death. All the emotions that I had kept bottled up or medicated away during the last few days came to the surface. I primarily experienced a mixture of fear and hatred, but I also felt a number of more subtle emotions which I am unfamiliar with—emotions which I still

don't feel comfortable with.

As the white half of the sky began to appear over the horizon, I took Tom and descended the ladder. I cradled him as I walked back to the car, his slinky arms hanging from his sides. I strapped him into the passenger seat and sped back home. When we got back, I placed him back on the shelf and plopped down on my bed, exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. I could feel Tom's accusatory stare on me. It was as if he was blaming me for the gunman's actions. I got up and turned him around, so his back was towards me, but his transparent head made it impossible to avoid his gaze. Too tired to deal with it at the moment, I escaped with the help of some sleeping pills.

The next day I returned to work. Well, physically anyway. Although both the state and federal governments were once again functioning, they were focusing their efforts on only those programs which were essential to semi-apocalyptic survival. While agencies like the DMV could continue to operate autonomously, agencies such as NASA required approval from higher levels of government for project funding. As an employee at JPL, that meant I had very little to do, so I mostly hung out and played video games.

I shared a large office with three other men. We were usually cordial, but I kept to myself. When I first began working there, the halation coming off of of the CRT computer monitors was sufficient to light the office, but ever since those monitors were replaced with more energy-efficient monitors, we've had to rely on the florescent lights in the ceiling. My office mates liked to listen to the radio at work, and although it bothered me, I never asked them to turn it off. Usually they would listen to music, but after I returned, they started listening to talk radio, and spent most of the day discussing the topics brought up by the hosts, which were always about how society should function in the new, semi-apocalyptic world. Occasionally they would invite me to offer my opinion, but I always declined.

I brought my scented lunar flower into work and placed it under a lamp

on my desk, figuring that it would have a better chance of surviving that way. Even though its environment changed, the flower stayed in half bloom, and eventually it died.

About a week after returning to work, the nation's major radio broadcasters decided to ban all music containing any references which would remind people of what the world had been like. They sent a list of these songs to their stations. The list contained songs like "Bad Moon Rising" and "Swinging on a Star." Of course, some college radio station had acquired a copy of the list, and spent all day playing the songs on the list, and my co-workers, probably tired of talk shows, left their radio tuned to that station.

The station had just finished playing "Dare" by Stan Bush when my boss entered the office with some news. I had been spending my time shinessparking through the depths of Norfair, but when I heard him enter I tapped down to store my charge, paused the game, removed my headphones, and swiveled to face him.

"We have an assignment!" he exclaimed. "We're going to design a probe to investigate the strange phenomenon in the sky."

"It's good to see that someone in Washington has their priorities straight," one of my co-workers responded.

"Well... We're doing this without approval." My boss stammered. I raised one eyebrow in fascination. "We just can't sit around forever and wait for something to happen. We—by which I mean myself and many other managers—have decided that it's high time we send up a probe to investigate. It just can't go on like this forever! We have to know what's happening up there, even if the big-wigs don't think it's that important. What's the point in rebuilding society if we have no idea how long it will last?" We all nodded our heads, not so much in agreement, but rather to show that we were listening. "Anyway," he continued, "Our team is going to be working on the propulsion mechanism for the probe. I'll send you all the details this afternoon. Our

first meeting will be tomorrow.”

He turned to leave, but one of my office mates asked, “So . . . which side of the sky are going to shoot for?” Our boss’s stopped in his tracks and turned back to face us. His face had turned slightly red.

“Well . . . we haven’t decided yet. ‘You guys have a preference or anything?’”

Unsurprisingly, no one answered. The office fell silent, save for the ominous beat coming from my headphones. The synthesized chorus which occasionally punctuated the music sounded metallic and distant. The volume was high enough that everyone else could hear the sound , and they all looked directly at the headphones to avoid having to look at each other.

For a brief moment, I felt like boldly taking a stance. I even imagined myself doing it: “We’ll shoot for the white side; for a new beginning!” I exclaimed, much to the surprise of those around me. But as I opened my mouth to speak, I found myself unable to make a decision. It wasn’t that I was afraid that my statement would be mistaken as racist, but rather that, even though I had already decided that I would work towards rebuilding society, and not towards ending it, I found it difficult to actually commit myself to that choice. I closed my mouth and looked down ay my headphones.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow then,” our boss mumbled as he left the room.