

There is a man downtown who swears he's seen the end of the world.

And where he lives - downtown - being a naysayer, prophet of one god or another or a doombriinger with a sign proclaiming 'The end is nigh!' is about as common an occupation as a plumber or shopkeeper. But the man downtown is different.

For one thing, he sits in a café all day, reading the newspaper, only getting up to relieve his bladder or tip the waitress enough they don't kick him out.

For another, he won't say a word about it - not even a hint unless he has to. You sit opposite him. He welcomes visitors especially. He puts up two fingers at the waitress he smiles so sincerely to, and then makes a 'T' shape with his palm resting horizontally across his fingertips. '2 T'.

You talk. About the weather, the rain and the fog, how this football team or that is destined to win one league or another, what his friends used to say during the 'olden days'. It doesn't matter. And when the conversation lulls - when neither you nor he has anything else to say - he leans backwards, takes a drag on his cuppa and whispers:

"I've seen the end, you know."

You lean forward too. His breath stinks but is not rank - leafy and milky, exotic yet homely. The man downtown wears a tweed jacket every day. The sewed-on brown patches over his elbows are genuine.

"How does it go?" you ask.

He pauses. The tea returns to his coaster. At first, he ducks the question.

"Heat and energy and light. In some corner, beyond the touch of light, hidden among clouds of ash and in a deep and mineral stew, a spark ignites. A cell smaller than a single strand of DNA replicates and divides. Rising, gaining consciousness. This is dust. The dust was formed and made. The dust awakened. And the dust began to think."

Then the man's eyes glaze over, as they have so many times before. This is just an iteration - a phase, something passing. The traveler to whom he departs the most blessed and beatifying knowledge is different, yet so much is the same. You read this from the w-crease on his forehead.

"First the stars go out. Light—traveling millions of light years across existence to reach our blue marble will be gone. Suns and stars will supernova, and the matter that gave them birth will be gone. Then the planets follow suit. Galaxies and nebulae and brilliant, bright things will vanish. All that was, all that is, all there has ever been. This they call the dying of Light, friend.

"And slowly, everything will recede to a single point, and when we are alone in the void, when the sky is black, unsullied velvet, unmarked with anything we ever saw before, there will be anarchy and discord.

People slaying other people - breaking up instead of uniting. Some will be hurt. Many will die.

"Eventually, we will be like a bubble on the edge of a lake, heaving ourselves further into the briny depths of the bygone. It will be gone. All the teetering works of art and culture and all that came before and after. Kings fail, dynasties rise and fall, and men die. And, perhaps, come of those men will climb the slipping sandy shore, and look out into the depths. They will think, they will question and, eventually, protest. "I am important," this wise one might scream. "I matter. It's not fair!" It

doesn't matter.
The page turns."

He sips, and you want to copy except you cannot because you are full of sound and fury. Anger builds within you, like the burning bricks of a wall. You shout at him: "Then why? Why tell me this? Why bother when everything's going anyway?"

The man downtown doesn't answer. You storm out of the café.

"Wait," he says. "Wait."

You slink back in. "What?"

"An answer, sir. I'll give you one to any question."


"Fine," you say. Nothing can be worse. "What happens after everything recedes? What happens to the point?"

He stops. Breathe out.

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Dedicated to Leo.

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