

Praise for
we are the ants

★ “Bitterly funny, with a ray of hope amid bleakness.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Hutchinson has crafted an unflinching portrait of the pain and confusion of young love and loss, thoughtfully exploring topics like dementia, abuse, sexuality, and suicide as they entwine with the messy work of growing up.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ “Unfailingly dramatic and crackling with characters who become real upon the page.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

★ “Bracingly smart and unusual.”

—*Shelf Awareness*, starred review

★ “Effectively combines the best of elements of Nick Burd’s *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* (Dial, 2009) with hints of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. . . . Highly recommended.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“A beautiful, masterfully told story by someone who is at the top of his craft.”

—*Lambda Literary*

Also by SHAUN DAVID HUTCHINSON

At the Edge of the Universe

Violent Ends

The Five Stages of Andrew Brawley

fml

The Deathday Letter

we are the ants

shaun david hutchinson

Simon Pulse

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For Matt, my favorite alien

TWO POSSIBILITIES EXIST: EITHER WE ARE
ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE OR WE ARE NOT.
BOTH ARE EQUALLY TERRIFYING.

—*Arthur C. Clarke*



Chemistry: Extra Credit Project

Life is bullshit.

Consider your life for a moment. Think about all those little rituals that sustain you throughout your day—from the moment you wake up until that last, lonely midnight hour when you guzzle a gallon of NyQuil to drown out the persistent voice in your head. The one that whispers you should give up, give in, that tomorrow won't be better than today. Think about the absurdity of brushing your teeth, of arguing with your mother over the appropriateness of what you're wearing to school, of homework, of grade-point averages and boyfriends and hot school lunches.

And life.

Think about the absurdity of life.

When you break down the things we do every day to

their component pieces, you begin to understand how ridiculous they are. Like kissing, for instance. You wouldn't let a stranger off the street spit into your mouth, but you'll swap saliva with the boy or girl who makes your heart race and your pits sweat and gives you boners at the worst fucking times. You'll stick your tongue in his mouth or her mouth or their mouth, and let them reciprocate without stopping to consider where else their tongue has been, or whether they're giving you mouth herpes or mono or leftover morsels of their tuna-salad sandwich.

We shave our legs and pluck our eyebrows and slather our bodies with creams and lotions. We starve ourselves so we can fit into the perfect pair of jeans, we pollute our bodies with drugs to increase our muscles so we'll look ripped without a shirt. We drive fast and party hard and study for exams that don't mean dick in the grand scheme of the cosmos.

Physicists have theorized that we live in an infinite and infinitely expanding universe, and that everything in it will eventually repeat. There are infinite copies of your mom and your dad and your clothes-stealing little sister. There are infinite copies of you. Despite what you've spent your entire life believing, you are not a special snowflake. Somewhere out there, another you is living *your* life. Chances are, they're living it better. They're learning to speak French or screwing their brains

out instead of loafing on the couch in their boxers, stuffing their face with bowl after bowl of Fruity Oatholes while wondering why they're all alone on a Friday night. But that's not even the worst part. What's really going to send you running over the side of the nearest bridge is that none of it matters. I'll die, you'll die, we'll all die, and the things we've done, the choices we've made, will amount to nothing.

Out in the world, crawling in a field at the edge of some bullshit town with a name like Shoshoni or Medicine Bow, is an ant. You weren't aware of it. Didn't know whether it was a soldier, a drone, or the queen. Didn't care if it was scouting for food to drag back to the nest or building new tunnels for wriggly ant larvae. Until now that ant simply didn't exist for you. If I hadn't mentioned it, you would have continued on with your life, pinballing from one tedious task to the next—shoving your tongue into the bacterial minefield of your girlfriend's mouth, doodling the variations of your combined names on the cover of your notebook—waiting for electronic bits to zoom through the air and tell you that someone was thinking about you. That for one fleeting moment you were the most significant person in someone else's insignificant life. But whether you knew about it or not, that ant is still out there doing ant things while you wait for the next text message to prove that out of the seven billion self-centered

people on this planet, *you* are important. Your entire sense of self-worth is predicated upon your belief that you matter, that you matter to the universe.

But you don't.

Because we are the ants.

I didn't waste time thinking about the future until the night the sluggers abducted me and told me the world was going to end.

I'm not insane. When I tell you the human race is toast, I'm not speaking hyperbolically the way people do when they say we're all dying from the moment our mothers evict us from their bodies into a world where everything feels heavier and brighter and far too loud. I'm telling you that tomorrow—January 29, 2016—you can kiss your Chipotle-eating, Frappuccino-drinking, fat ass good-bye.

You probably don't believe me—I wouldn't in your place—but I've had 143 days to come to terms with our inevitable destruction, and I've spent most of those days thinking about the future. Wondering whether I have or want one, trying to decide if the end of existence is a tragedy, a comedy, or as inconsequential as that chem lab I forgot to turn in last week.

But the real joke isn't that the sluggers revealed to me the

date of Earth's demise; it's that they offered me the choice to prevent it.

You asked for a story, so here it is. I'll begin with the night the sluggers told me the world was toast, and when I'm finished, we can wait for the end together.

7 September 2015

The biggest letdown about being abducted by aliens is the abundance of gravity on the spaceship. We spend our first nine months of life floating, weightless and blind, in an amniotic sac before we become gravity's bitch, and the seductive lure of space travel is the promise of returning to that perfect state of grace. But it's a sham. Gravity is jealous, sadistic, and infinite.

Sometimes I think gravity may be death in disguise. Other times I think gravity is love, which is why love's only demand is that we fall.

Sluggers aren't gray. They don't have saucer-wide eyes or thin lipless mouths. As far as I know, they don't have mouths at all. Their skin is rough like wet leather and is all the colors

of an algae bloom. Their black spherical eyes are mounted atop their heads on wobbly stalks. Instead of arms, they have appendages that grow from their bodies when required. If their UFO keys fall off the console—*boom!*—instant arm. If they need to restrain me or silence my terrified howls, they can sprout a dozen tentacles to accomplish the task. It's very efficient.

Oddly enough, sluggers do have nipples. Small brown buttons that appear to be as useless to them as most men's. It's comforting to know that regardless of our vast differences and the light-years that separate our worlds, we'll always have nipples in common.

I should slap that on a bumper sticker, © HENRY JEROME DENTON.

Before you ask: no, the sluggers have never probed my anus. I'm fairly certain they reserve that special treat for people who talk on their phones during movies, or text while driving.

Here's how it happens: abductions always begin with shadows. Even in a dark room, with the windows closed and the curtains drawn, the shadows descend, circling like buzzards over a reeking lunch.

Then a heaviness in my crotch like I have to pee, growing

painfully insistent regardless of how much I beg my brain to ignore it.

After that, helplessness. Paralysis. The inability to struggle. Fight. Breathe.

The inability to scream.

At some point the sluggers move me to the examination room. I've been abducted at least a dozen times, and I still don't know how they transport me from my bedroom to their spaceship. It happens in the dark space between blinks, in the void between breaths.

Once aboard, they begin the experiments.

That's what I assume they're doing. Trying to fathom the motives of an advanced alien race who possess the technological capacity to travel through the universe is like the frog I dissected in ninth grade trying to understand why I cut it open and pinned its guts to the table. The sluggers could be blasting me with deadly radiation or stuffing me full of slugger eggs just to see what happens. Hell, I could be some slugger kid's science fair project.

I doubt I'll ever know for certain.

Sluggers don't speak. During those long stretches where my body is beyond my control, I often wonder how they communicate with one another. Maybe they secrete chemicals the way insects do, or perhaps the movements of their

eyestalks is a form of language similar to the dance of a bee. They could also be like my mother and father, who communicated exclusively by slamming doors.

I was thirteen the first time the sluggers abducted me. My older brother, Charlie, was snoring his face off in the next room while I lay in bed, translating my parents' fight. You might believe all doors sound the same when slammed, but you'd be wrong.

My father was a classic slammer, maintaining contact with the door until it was totally and completely shut. This gave him control over the volume and pitch, and produced a deep, solid bang capable of shaking the door, the frame, and the wall.

Mom preferred variety. Sometimes she went for the dramatic fling; other times she favored the heel-kick slam. That night, she relied on the multismash, which was loud and effective but lacked subtlety.

The sluggers abducted me before I learned what my parents were arguing about. Police found me two days later, wandering the dirt roads west of Calypso, wearing a grocery bag for underwear and covered in hickies I couldn't explain. My father left three weeks after that, slamming the door behind him one final time. No translation necessary.

• • •

I've never grown comfortable being naked around the aliens. Jesse Franklin frequently saw me naked and claimed to enjoy it, but he was my boyfriend, so it doesn't count. I'm self-conscious about being too skinny, and I imagine the sluggers judge me for my flaws—the mole in the center of my chest shaped like Abraham Lincoln or the way my collarbone protrudes or my tragically flat ass. Once, while standing in the lunch line waiting for shepherd's pie, Elle Smith told me I had the flattest ass she'd ever seen. I wasn't sure how many asses a twelve-year-old girl from Calypso realistically could have been exposed to, but the comment infected me like a cold sore, bursting to the surface from time to time, ensuring I never forgot my place.

Part of me wonders if the sluggers send pervy pics back to their home planet for their alien buddies to mock. *Check out this mutant we caught. They call it a teenager. It's got five arms, but one is tiny and deformed.*

It's not really deformed, I swear.

When the sluggers had finished experimenting on me that night, the slab I was resting on transformed into a chair while I was still on it. During previous abductions, the aliens had locked me in a totally dark room, attempted to drown me, and once pumped a gas into the air that made me laugh until

I vomited, but they'd never given me a chair. I was immediately suspicious.

One of the sluggers remained behind after the others disappeared into the shadows. The exam room was the only section of the ship I'd ever seen, and its true shape and size were obscured by the darkness at the edges. The room itself was plain—a gray floor with swirls that gave it the impression of movement and that was illuminated by four or five lights beaming from the shadows. The slab, which had become a chair, was obsidian black.

My limbs tingled, and that was how I realized I could move again. I shook them to work out the pins and needles, but I couldn't shake the impotence that rattled in my skull, reminding me that the aliens could flay me alive and peel back my muscles to see how I functioned, and there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do to stop them. As human beings, we're born believing that we are the apex of creation, that we are invincible, that no problem exists that we cannot solve. But we inevitably die with all our beliefs broken.

My throat was scratchy. Even caged rats are given water bottles and food pellets.

"If you're testing my patience, I should warn you that I once spent three weeks in a roach-infested RV with my family on the antiquing trip from hell. Twenty-one days of Dad

getting lost, Mom losing her temper, and my brother finding any excuse to punch me, all set to the glorious song of Nana's deviated septum."

Nothing. No reaction. The slugger beside me wagged its eyestalks, the glassy marbles taking in a 360-degree view. They were like one of those security cameras hidden under a shaded dome; it was impossible to know where they were tracking at any given moment.

"Seriously, it was the worst trip of my life. Every night we all had to lie still and pretend we couldn't hear Charlie polishing his rifle in the overhead bunk. I'm pretty confident he broke the world record for the most number of times a kid's masturbated while sharing breathing space with his parents, brother, and grandmother."

A beam of light shot over my shoulder, projecting a three-dimensional image of Earth in the air a few feet in front of me. I turned to find the source, but the slugger sprouted an appendage and slapped me in the neck.

"I really hope that was an arm," I said, rubbing the fresh welt.

The picture of the planet was meticulously detailed. Feathery clouds drifted across the surface as the image rotated leisurely. Tight clusters of defiant lights sparkled from every city, as bright as any star. A few moments later, a smooth pillar approximately one meter tall rose from the floor beside

the image of the earth. Atop it was a bright red button.

“Do you want me to press it?” The aliens had never given me the impression that they understood anything I said or did, but I figured they wouldn’t have presented me with a big shiny button if they hadn’t intended for me to press it.

The moment I stood, electricity surged up my feet and into my body. I collapsed to the floor, twitching. A strangled squeal escaped my throat. The slugger didn’t offer to help me, despite its ability to grow arms at will, and I waited for the spasms to recede before climbing back into the chair. “Fine, I won’t touch the button.”

The projection of the earth exploded, showering me with sparks and light. I threw up my arm to protect my face, but I felt no pain. When I opened my eyes, the image was restored.

“So, you definitely *don’t* want me to press the button?”

Under the watchful eyes of my alien overlord, I witnessed the planet explode seven more times, but I refused to budge from my seat. On the eighth explosion, the sluggers shocked me again. I lost control of my bladder and flopped onto the floor in a puddle of my own urine. My jaw was sore from clenching, and I wasn’t sure how much more I could take.

“You know, if you just told me what you wanted me to do, we could skip the excruciating pain portion of this experiment.”

They restored the planet again; only when I tried to sit, they shocked me and blew it up. The next time the image was whole, I scrambled to the button and slammed it with my hand. I was rewarded with an intense burst of euphoria that began in my feet and surged up my legs, spreading to my fingers and the tips of my ears. It was pure bliss, like I'd ejaculated a chorus of baby angels from every pore of my body.

"That didn't suck."

I lost track of how many times I pressed the button. Sometimes they shocked me, sometimes they dosed me with pure rapture, but I never knew which to expect. Not until I saw the pattern. It was so simple, I felt like an imbecile for not seeing it sooner. Being shocked until I pissed myself probably hadn't helped my problem-solving abilities.

Those shocks and bursts of euphoria weren't punishments and rewards, nor were they random. They were simply meant to force me to see that there was a causal relationship between whether I pressed the button and whether the planet exploded. The sluggers were trying to communicate with me. It would have been a much more exciting moment in human history if I hadn't been wearing soggy underwear.

I decided to test my theory.

"Are you going to blow up the planet?"

SHOCK.

“Am I going to blow it up?”

SHOCK.

I finally gave up and stayed on the floor. “Is *something* going to destroy the earth?”

EUPHORIA.

“Can you stop it?”

HALLELUJAH!

My eyes rolled back as a shiver of bliss rippled through me. “How do we stop it?” I looked to the slugger for a clue, but it hadn’t moved since slapping me. What I knew was this: when I pressed the button, Earth didn’t explode. When I didn’t, it did. It couldn’t be that simple, though. “Pressing the button will prevent the destruction of the planet?”

UNADULTERATED RAPTURE.

“So, what? All those other times I pressed it were just practice?”

BABY ANGELS EVERYWHERE.

“Great. So, when is this apocalypse set to occur?” I wasn’t sure how the aliens were going to answer an open-ended question, especially since they’d never answered me before, but they were capable of interstellar travel; providing me with a date should have been cake. A moment later the projection of the earth morphed into a reality TV show called *Bunker*,

and a hammy announcer's voice boomed at me from everywhere at once.

"This group of fifteen strangers has been locked in a bunker for six months. With only one hundred and forty-four days remaining, you won't want to miss a single minute as they compete for food, water, toilet paper, and each other's hearts."

"You guys get the worst stations up here." The commercial faded and Earth returned. "So, one hundred and forty-four days?" It took me longer than I'll admit to do the math in my head. "That means the world is going to end January twenty-ninth, 2016?"

SWEET EUPHORIA.

I never got tired of being right.

When my head cleared, I came to the conclusion that the sluggers were screwing with me. It was the only logical explanation. I refused to believe that they had the power to prevent the world's end but had chosen to leave the decision up to a sixteen-year-old nobody.

But if it wasn't a joke, if the choice was mine, then I held the fate of the world in my sweaty hand. The aliens probably didn't care one way or another.

"Just to be clear: I have until January twenty-ninth to press the button?"

EUPHORIA.

“And if I do, I’ll prevent the planet’s destruction?”

EUPHORIA.

“And if I choose not to press it?”

The earth exploded, the projection disappeared, and the lights died.

8 September 2015

I darted across the dawn-drenched lawn in front of my duplex, gushing sweat in the muggy Florida heat and shielding my privates with a trash can lid I'd stolen from a house a couple of streets over, hoping Mr. Nabu—who sat on his patio, reading the newspaper every morning—was too busy scouring the obits for names of friends and enemies to notice my pasty white ass scramble past.

After my second abduction, I began hiding a duffel bag with spare clothes behind the AC unit under my bedroom window. The sluggers don't always return me totally naked, but when they do, I assume it's because it amuses them to watch me attempt to sneak from one end of Calypso to the other without being arrested for indecent exposure.

As I dressed, I tried to wrap my brain around the pos-

sibility that the world was going to end, and the absurd notion that aliens had chosen me to determine whether the apocalypse would happen as scheduled or be delayed. I simply wasn't important enough to make such a crucial decision. They should have abducted the president or the pope or Neil deGrasse Tyson.

I don't know why I didn't press the button for real when I had the chance other than that I don't think the aliens would have given me such a long lead time if they hadn't wanted me to consider my choice carefully. Most people probably believe they would have pressed the button in my situation—nobody *wants* the world to end, right?—but the truth is that nothing is as simple as it seems. Turn on the news; read some blogs. The world is a shit hole, and I have to consider whether it might be better to wipe the slate clean and give the civilization that evolves from the ashes of our bones a chance to get it right.

I used the spare key under the dead begonia by the front door to sneak into my house. The smell of cigarette smoke and fried eggs greeted me, and I sauntered into the kitchen like I'd come from my bedroom, still bleary-eyed and sleepy. Mom glanced up from reading her phone. A cigarette hung from the tips of her fingers, and her curly bleached hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail. "About time. I was calling

you, Henry. Didn't you hear me calling you?" My mom is shaped like an eggplant and often sports bags under her eyes of the same color.

I leaned against the door, not planning to stay. Alien abductions always make me feel like I need a boiling bleach shower. "Sorry."

Nana smiled at me from the stove. She slid a plate of pepper-flecked fried eggs onto the table and set the mayo beside it. "Eat. You're too skinny." Nana is gritty and hard; she wears her wrinkles and liver spots like battle scars from a war she'll never stop fighting. She's the gristle stuck between Time's teeth, and I love her for it.

Mom took a drag from her cigarette and jabbed it in my direction. "I called you a hundred times."

Before I could reply, Charlie stomped into the kitchen and swiped my plate. He ate one egg with his hands as he flopped into a chair, and then set to work on the rest of my breakfast. Sometimes it's difficult to believe Charlie and I come from the same parents. I'm tall, he's short; I'm skinny, he used to be muscular, though most of it turned to fat after high school; I can count to five without using my fingers. . . . Charlie has fingers.

"Henry didn't hear you because Henry wasn't home." Charlie smirked at me as he grabbed a fistful of bacon from

the plate in the middle of the table. He grimaced at Mom.
“Do you have to smoke while I’m eating?”

Mom ignored him. “Where were you, Henry?”

“Here.”

“Liar,” Charlie said. “Your bed was empty when I got home from Zooey’s last night.”

“What the hell were you doing in my room?”

Mom took a drag off her cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. Her mouth was pursed and tight like a bright pink sphincter, and her silence spoke louder than any slammed door. The only sounds in the kitchen belonged to the eggs frying on the stove and Nana whistling the *Bunker* theme song.

“I couldn’t sleep so I went for a walk. What’s the big deal?”

Charlie coughed “bullshit” under his breath; I replied with one finger.

“You’re not . . . sleepwalking . . . again, are you?”

“I was walking, Mom, but I was definitely awake.”

Charlie whipped a toast wedge that struck me below my eye. “Two points!”

“Did you just try to blind me with toast? What the hell is wrong with you?” I grabbed the toast off the floor to throw it away, but Charlie held out his hand and said, “Don’t waste it, bro.”

Mom lit another cigarette. “No one would blame me if I smothered you both in your sleep.” I think my mom might have been pretty once, but the years devoured her youth, beauty, and enthusiasm for anything with an alcohol content of less than 12 percent.

Nana handed me a paper bag stained with grease. “Don’t forget your lunch, Charlie.”

I peeked inside the bag. Nana had dumped two fried eggs, three strips of bacon, and hash browns at the bottom. Broken yolk oozed over everything like sunny pus. “I’m Henry, Nana.” As soon as she turned her back, I tossed the sack lunch into the garbage can.

“Do you need a ride to school, Henry?” Mom asked.

I glanced at the clock on the microwave. If I hurried, I’d have enough time to shower and walk to school. “Tempting. I’ve read that beginning your day by doing something absolutely terrifying is good for you, but I’m going to pass.”

“Smartass.”

“Could you drop me off at Zooey’s?” Charlie mopped up the last of *my* eggs with the projectile floor toast and stuffed it into his fat mouth.

“Don’t you have class this morning?” I asked, knowing full well Charlie had withdrawn from all his classes but still hadn’t told Mom.

"I can swing you by the community college on my way to work," Mom said.

"Thanks. Great." Charlie faked a smile with gritted teeth, but I knew he was dreaming up a hundred ways to cause me excruciating pain, most of which likely involved his fists and my face—my brother isn't terribly creative, but he is consistent.

For the record: if the sluggers ever abduct Charlie, I'm certain he'll earn the anal probe.

"Henry, I need you home right after school today."

"Why?" I stopped my excruciatingly slow exit from the kitchen even though I needed to get out of there and take a shower if I didn't want to be late.

"I'm working a double at the restaurant, so you'll have to look after Mother tonight."

Charlie jeered at me behind Mom's back, and I wanted to punch that smug look off his face. "What if I have plans?" I didn't have plans, but the dismal state of my social life was none of her business.

Mom sucked on her cigarette; the cherry flared. "Just be home after school, all right? Can you do one fucking thing I ask without arguing?"

"Watch your mouth, young lady," Nana said from the stove, "or you can go straight to your room without supper."

"Sure," I said. "Whatever."

• • •

On the day I was born, photons from the star Gliese 832 began their journey toward Earth. I was little more than a squalling, wrinkled, shit-spewing monster when that light began its sixteen-year journey through the empty void of space to reach the empty void of Calypso, Florida, where I've spent my entire, empty void of a life. From Gliese 832's point of view, I am still a wrinkled, shit-spewing monster, only recently born. The farther we are from one another, the further we live in each other's pasts.

Five years in my past, my father used to take me and Charlie deep-sea fishing on the weekends. He'd wake us up hours before sunrise and treat us to breakfast at a greasy diner called Spooners. I'd stuff myself full of grits and cheesy eggs. Sometimes I'd really indulge and order a stack of chocolate-chip pancakes. After breakfast we'd head to the docks, where Dad's friend Dwight kept his boat, and we'd aim for carefree waters.

I always sat at the bow, dangling my feet over the side, letting the water tickle my toes as we sped through the intra-coastal toward the deep sea. I loved how the sun and salt spray perfused my skin, filling me with the memory of light. God surely meant for humans to live like that. He hadn't intended for us to wither into desiccated husks in front of

brightly lit screens that leached away our summer days one meme at a time.

The fishing trips began well enough. We'd swap dirty jokes that Mom would have killed us for hearing or telling; Dwight would find us a suitable place to drift; Dad would bait my hook, patiently explaining what he was doing as he worked the squid or bait fish onto the barbed end; and we'd cast our lines and wait for the fish to bite. Not even Charlie's unending nut punches and nipple twists ruined the mood. Those times were as perfect as any I ever had, but the good times never lasted.

My doctor once explained that it was an inner-ear problem. Something to do with balance and equilibrium affecting my spatial orientation. Honestly, I don't understand how my ears affected my stomach, but I took his word for it. There I was, laughing and smiling and enjoying the day—fishing pole gripped in my hands, bare feet propped on the railing—when the nausea would strike. The boat tilted, the deck melted under my feet and sloped toward the water. My skin burned, and my mouth watered. I'd try to breathe normally, but I could never get enough oxygen.

I was on a sinking ship in the middle of the expanding ocean, terrified, sick, and unable to do a goddamn thing about it. The boat would rock, dipping and swaying with the waves, and I'd fight the queasiness. I'd barter with God.

I'd pray for anyone, angel or demon, to keep me from being sick, but no one was listening or they didn't care. My puke splattered into the water—chunks of my breakfast still recognizable—someone, usually Charlie, would make a joke about chum, and I'd crawl into the cabin and curl up on the padded bench for the remainder of the fishing expedition.

Eventually, Dad gave up trying to include me and left me behind. One Saturday morning I woke up and discovered his car gone, Charlie's bed empty. Then Charlie started high school and was too cool to go fishing anymore. He was too cool for everything. He divided his time between watching porn, masturbating, and trying to figure out ways to score liquor to impress his mouth-breather friends. I was convinced that high school transformed boys into porn-addicted, chronic-masturbating alcoholics.

I was wrong. It turns them into something much worse.

Most of Calypso is paradise, and is home to some of the wealthiest families in South Florida. Rich teenage boys are also porn-addicted, chronic-masturbating alcoholics, but they have access to better porn and booze. They also have cars and money. I have neither, which means I started CHS with two strikes against me.

High school is like those fishing trips with my dad: I want to be there, I want to enjoy myself like everyone else,

but I always end up huddled on the floor, praying for the end.

Jesse once told me that if I focused on a fixed point on the horizon, I would be okay, but Jesse hanged himself in his bedroom last year, so the value of his advice is dubious at best.

Ms. Faraci stood at the Smart Board trying to explain covalent bonds, which we were supposed to have reviewed the previous night. Judging by the downcast eyes and bored expressions worn by most of the class, I was the only one who'd actually done it.

Ms. Faraci doesn't care about societal conventions. She rarely wears makeup, frequently shows up to class in mismatched shoes, and is obscenely passionate about science. Everything excites her: magnetism, Newtonian dynamics, strange particles. She's a pretty strange particle herself. And she never lets our apathy discourage her. She'd teach chemistry with jazz hands and finger puppets if she thought that would inspire us. Sometimes her enthusiasm makes me cringe, but she's still my favorite teacher. There are days when her chemistry class is the only reason I can stomach school at all.

"Hey, Space Boy." Marcus McCoy whispered at me from the back of the classroom. He has money and a car. I ignored him. "Yo, Space Boy. You do the chem worksheet?" Muffled laughter trailed the question. I ignored that, too.

I stared at the illustrations of molecules in my book, admiring the way they fit together. They had a purpose, a destiny to fulfill. I had a button. My mind wandered, and I fantasized about the end of everything. About watching all the Marcus McCoys of the world die horrible, bloody deaths. I'm not going to lie: it made me want to masturbate.

"Space Boy . . . Space Boy." Their sadistic giggling irritated me almost as much as the nickname.

On my left, Audrey Dorn sat at her desk, scrutinizing me. She has an easy Southern smile, calculating eyes, and usually dresses like she's on her way to a business meeting. She's the kind of girl who doesn't believe in "good enough." We were friends once. When she noticed I'd seen her staring, she shrugged and returned her attention to Faraci.

"Come on, Space Boy. I only need a couple of answers."

I glanced over my shoulder. Marcus McCoy was leaning forward on his elbows so that his biceps bulged in his tight polo for everyone to appreciate. He wore his thick brown hair parted neatly to the left, and he flashed me his entitled grin. No doesn't mean to Marcus what it means to those without money and a car.

"Do your own homework, Marcus."

Adrian Morse and Jay Oh, two of Marcus's buddies, snickered, but it was aimed at me, not him.

“I don’t have little green men to do it for me,” Marcus said, drawing even more attention.

“What’s so funny?” Ms. Faraci scowled at me and Marcus. She took the sharing of electron pairs seriously.

“Nothing,” I mumbled.

Marcus said, “Nothing, Ms. Faraci,” barely able to finish the sentence before cracking up.

I have Charlie to thank for outing me to the entire school. He was a senior when I was a freshman, and he considered telling everyone I’d been abducted by aliens and turning me into a social pariah his greatest achievement. I don’t know who thought up the nickname Space Boy, but it stuck. Most of the kids in my class don’t even know my real name, but they know Space Boy for sure.

When the bell finally rang for lunch, Ms. Faraci caught me at the door and pulled me aside. I stared at my shoes when Marcus passed. Adrian whispered, “Space Boy sucks alien dick,” on his way out. To the best of my knowledge, sluggers don’t have dicks, which probably makes it difficult to masturbate. People have a lot of theories about why boys fall behind in school when they become teenagers, but all I’m saying is that I’d probably get a lot more schoolwork done if I didn’t have a dick.

Ms. Faraci sat on the edge of her desk. “Rough day?”

“Not the roughest.”

Her concern made me uncomfortable. It was one thing to be ridiculed by my classmates, another to be pitied by a teacher. “You’re a smart kid, Henry, with a real knack for science. You’re going to show those boys one day.”

Maybe that’s true, but cliché platitudes rarely help. “Is it possible for the world to end suddenly?”

Ms. Faraci cocked her head to the side. “Well, sure. There are any number of scenarios that could lead to the extinction of all life on Earth.”

“Like what?”

“Asteroid impact, gamma radiation from a nearby supernova, nuclear holocaust.” She ticked the list off on her fingers before she stopped and narrowed her eyes. “I know high school is rough, Henry, but blowing up the planet is never the answer.”

“You’ve clearly forgotten what high school is like from my side of the desk.”

Marcus slammed me against the inside of the bathroom stall. The rickety partitions shook, their bolts rattled, and he invaded my personal space. The edge of the toilet-paper dispenser dug through my jeans and into the backs of my thighs, and he thrust his palm against my chest and leaned all his

weight onto me. His cologne filled my nostrils with the scent of freshly mown grass. Marcus McCoy always smelled like summer.

I thought I heard the door and tried to check it out, but Marcus grabbed my jaw, silencing me. He dug his thumb into my cheek and eliminated the remaining space between our bodies, his kiss impatient and rough. His scruff scraped my lips, he ran his hands up my back and across my cheeks and down the front of my pants so quickly, I could hardly react.

“Cold hands!” I ducked out of Marcus’s crushing hug to peek over the top of the stall door and make certain we were still alone. I buttoned my pants and adjusted myself.

Marcus was pissing into the toilet when I turned back around. He grinned at me over his shoulder as if I should be honored to watch him pee. “My parents are in Tokyo this weekend.”

“Again?”

“Awesome, right?” He zipped up and pulled me by the back of the neck into another kiss, but it felt like he was trying to excavate my face with his tongue. Anyway, I was paranoid someone was going to catch us, so I disengaged from his lips and stumbled out of the stall. “Where you going, Space Boy?”

“We agreed you weren’t going to call me that anymore.”

"It's cute. You're cute, Space Boy." We stood at the sinks and both admired Marcus's reflection in the mirror—his smooth olive skin and aquiline nose combine with his dimples and muscles to make him unbearably handsome. Worse still, he knows it. Then there's me. Round cheeks, big lips, and an angry zit on the side of my nose that resisted all attempts at eradication. I couldn't fathom why Marcus wanted to hook up with me, even if it was only in secret.

Marcus fished an oblong pill from his pocket and dry-swallowed it. "What do you say?"

"About what?"

"Staying at my house this weekend?"

"I don't know. My mom expects me to look after my grandma and—"

"Your loss, Space Boy." He smacked my ass so hard, I could already feel the welt rising.

I brushed my wavy hair out of my eyes and off my forehead. I hate my hair, but I let it grow long because I hate my ears more. "You could swing by my house. Nana will be there, but we'll tell her you're the pool boy."

Marcus wrinkled his nose like he'd accidentally wandered into a Walmart and found himself surrounded by poor people. "You don't have a pool."

I wonder how he'd react to the end of the world. To

finding out his charmed life is nearing its end. He'd been mauling me at every opportunity since we'd returned from summer break, but we only hung out at his house when his parents were gone. I wager his reluctance to being seen with me in public has less to do with his concern about his friends finding out he's hooking up with a boy and more to do with them finding out he's hooking up with Space Boy.

I was deluding myself. We would never be more than this—whatever *this* was.

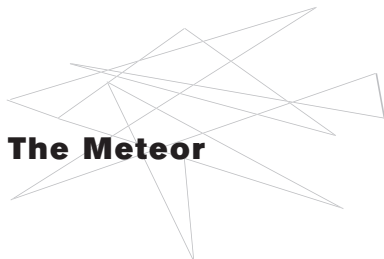
"If you knew the world was going to end but you could prevent it, would you?"

Marcus was busy gazing at his reflection. "What?" He'd probably clone and fuck himself if the technology existed.

"Would you—" The bathroom door swung inward to admit a beefy kid sporting a buzz cut. He nodded at us and stepped up to a urinal.

Marcus shoved me into the hand dryer. I yelped as the sharp metal jabbed into my shoulder, and he just waltzed out the door. "Catch you around, Space Boy."

The kid at the urinal laughed. "Fucking pansy."



The Meteor

It begins with excitement. The date is 24 January 2016. Frieda Eichman of Grünstadt is the first to identify the asteroid, using the telescope her father gave her for her thirteenth birthday. He's been dead these last twenty years, but he would have been proud. Though the asteroid is given the provisional designation 2016BA11 until its orbit can be confirmed, Frieda knows she will name it the Jürgen Eichman in honor of him.

Space agencies around the globe—NASA, UKSA, CSA, CNSA, ISRO, CRTS, ROSCOSMOS—release statements assuring citizens that though asteroid 2016BA11's trajectory will bring it near Earth, it does not pose a threat. At the top levels of every government, they know this is a lie.

On the night of the Jürgen Eichman event, families gather

outside to watch it streak across the night sky. They hold each other tightly and remark at its beauty, at how lucky they are to witness this once-in-a-lifetime cosmic marvel. Marshmallows are roasted, wine is consumed in heroic quantities, stories are shared. Some who know the truth dine on bullets.

As the Jürgen Eichman looms ever larger in the night sky, as big as the moon and then bigger, people around the world realize something is wrong. The asteroid isn't going to pass harmlessly by. It is going to become a meteor. Most are paralyzed with fear. What can they do? Where can they go? You cannot run from the hand of God.

Frieda Eichman stands alone in an empty field and watches the heavens burn. She whispers, *“Ich habe dich so sehr, Papa verpasst.”*

On 29 January 2016, at 1:39 UT, the Jürgen Eichman impacts the Mediterranean Sea. It is approximately the diameter of London. Those within three thousand kilometers of the impact witness a fireball larger than the sunrise over the horizon. Within a minute their clothes combust, grass is set ablaze. Everything is burning, including people. Seismic shocks follow. They radiate from the epicenter, shaking the ground like buried thunder, traveling the globe in less than twenty minutes. The earthquakes are shadowed by the air blast, which vaporizes nearly everything in its path. Houses

are demolished, people killed, ancient trees ripped from the ground. Hours later a tidal wave hundreds of kilometers tall washes the earth clean.

Ash and dust bedim the sky, blocking the sun's light. Those few who survive the initial impact die slowly, frozen and alone.

10 September 2015

Of the four fundamental forces, gravity is considered the weakest, despite its theoretically endless range. Gravitational forces attract physical bodies to one another. The greater their masses, the greater their attraction. We are pulled toward the ground by gravity, gravity keeps the moon in orbit around the earth, and our planet is held captive by the sun because of gravity. But gravity isn't limited to celestial bodies, it applies to people, too. Though rather than being determined by mass, its force is determined by popularity.

Popularity is teenage heroin. Kids who have tasted it crave more; those who have it in abundance are revered as gods; and even those who have never basked in the light of its glory secretly desire it, regardless of what they may say to the contrary. Popularity can transform an otherwise normal

kid into a narcissistic, ego-obsessed, materialistic asshole.

Not that I would know. I have never been, nor wanted to be, popular. Popularity is the reason Marcus ridicules me in public and makes out with me when we're alone. He texted me a couple of times, still trying to convince me to spend the weekend at his house, but I didn't respond.

He was pretending not to watch me from his locker as I dodged other students who were too busy staring at their phones to notice they were in my way. I wondered how Marcus would have reacted if I'd marched up to him and kissed him for the whole school to see. Not that I ever would.

Chemistry is my oasis, and I'm usually the first person to arrive, but today Audrey Dorn beat me and was at her desk, alternating between staring at her phone and watching the door.

I waved at Ms. Faraci when I entered, but she was busy drawing chemical structures on the board and didn't notice.

"You've got to watch this." Audrey faced her phone to me when I reached my desk. "It's one of those Japanese prank shows. They put this guy in a coffin with a bunch of dead squid and leave him there."

I slid into my seat. "Claustrophobia *is* hilarious."

"Maybe another time." Two girls walked in, and Audrey shrank reflexively, but they didn't even look at us. "Listen,

Henry . . .” She leaned across the aisle and spoke in a whisper. “I saw you coming out of the restroom yesterday.”

“Was my fly down? Did I forget to wear underwear again? I hate when I do that.”

“I know what you were doing in there.” Audrey’s eyes darted all over the room. “And I know *who* you were doing it with.”

More students trickled in as the two-minute bell rang. “Nice try, Veronica Mars, but I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“You bite your lip when you’re lying, Henry.”

“And yours move when you’re being a nosy fuckmuppet.”

“Did you just call me a fuckmuppet?”

“If the hand fits . . .”

Audrey stiffened. “Whatever. I was only trying to help.”

“Your concern for me is touching. Too bad it’s not sincere.”

The stragglers rushed in as the final bell rang, filling the empty seats. Ms. Faraci dove into a review for our upcoming exam, but I couldn’t concentrate on anything except Marcus. Unless Audrey had a secret spy camera in the boys’ toilets, all she could know was that we’d both been in the restroom at the same time. Anyway, she was the only person at CHS snoop enough to monitor when and where I took a whiz.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I jumped in my

seat, which distracted Ms. Faraci, causing her to lose her train of thought and launch into a tangent about the importance of understanding atomic structure. As soon as she turned her back, I checked my phone. It was from Marcus, though he came up as All-Star Plumbers. His idea.

ALL-STAR PLUMBERS: bleachers. lunch. i'll bring the footlong.

It was risky meeting him while Audrey was playing detective, but I wanted to see him, especially since I'd turned down his offer for the weekend. Even when I hate Marcus, I miss him when we aren't together. He doesn't fill the yawning hole left by Jesse, but sometimes he makes it hurt slightly less.

I texted a quick reply and then stowed my phone.

Faraci was reviewing the different types of chemical reactions when the door at the front of the class swung open to admit a guy I didn't recognize. He was tall and dangerous with spiky black hair and a fuck-you grin. Lean muscles danced under his crisp shirt. He stood in the doorway, his thumbs hooked through the belt loops of his gray shorts until the entire class was staring at him.

"Someone called for a nude model?"

Ms. Faraci sputtered as she tried to reply. Those students not gaping at the strange kid whispered to one another about