

...Roaming

It's a perfect day in Manhattan. Not a cloud from east to west. It's one of those days where you can actually hear the color blue. But that's about all you can hear. It's just after two in the afternoon on a Wednesday and the silence is deafening. From Battery Park to Yankee Stadium, nothing. You may be able to pick up a few muted birds singing in the distance, a feral dog's howl, the wind coming down the Sixth Avenue Canyon, but not much else.

No diesel engines.

No horns.

No whistles, sirens or car alarms.

No people.

A wispy thin plume of grey smoke rises from uptown, splitting that perfect sapphire canvas in two. It's coming from 1133 5th Avenue. But not from one of its six turn-of-the-century fireplaces. Or the incinerator in the basement. It creeps out from the huge broken window fronting the street and fades into the atmosphere.

A slight African American man named Kokumuo sits on his heels in what was once the drawing room of the 9,000 square foot residence. It was once the crown jewel of the Hunt family. The Mayflower Hunts. Through five generations, bitter divorces and contested wills, it remained their pride and joy, a symbol of achievement and avarice. It's Kokumuo's now and squatter's rights rule.

Call it adverse possession.

Eminent domain.

Finder's keepers.

The floor-to-ceiling leaded glass window that faced east towards the park, lies in shards seven stories below on 5th sending a cool breeze into the living room.

Terns nest in the pantry's crumbling crown molding and a family of rats scurries across the white marble foyer.

The lingering smoke is the result of year's old issues of Architectural Digest and Elle magazines mottled from mold as they struggle to stay lit. They smolder in the middle of the room as Kokumuo cooks dinner, a small rabbit he caught in Central Park a few hours earlier. Not long after finishing his meal, the rest of 1133 5th will go up in flames. The fire will burn through the antique Kermanshaw rug, then spread to the 19th Century Louis Phillippe table and Chippendale sofa, and finally what's left of the drapes will go up in a brilliant conflagration, fueled by the broken window's oxygen supply. Kokumuo will make it out

just fine. Just like he did in 1131 5th Avenue a few days ago.

You can still smell the singed silk wallpaper from there, if the wind blows just right.

Quite a cost to pay for lunch. But Kokumuo doesn't seem to care; he's just trying to survive. And besides, there's a whole city block of places like this. Once the Northeast's premier residential real estate market, now it's just somewhere to seek shelter from the elements.

Similar scenes play out across the land as small bands of people make the best of what is left of this world.

Aboriginal tribes from outside Alice Springs Australia now conduct tribal rituals by torchlight in the Sydney Opera House.

The Yanomami eat and sleep in the beautiful buildings of Oscar Niemeyer in Brasilia.

In Los Angeles, Bengal tigers have repopulated in the upscale communities of the Palos Verdes peninsula, courtesy of an abandoned zoo.

Chicago's loop is now home to the world's largest population of king snakes.

And yet, even now, some of the greatest shrines of the modern era stand deserted and forgotten. The Louvre is a shell of its former self. A hollow labyrinth of moldy hallways and empty rooms. With every passing day, tendrils of ivy work their way further and further into the once great museum. Not too long ago, tourists waited in line for hours to see the works of the great masters. Now hyenas scavenge at will, and without waiting a single second.

The *Mona Lisa*? Up in smoke. It was used as kindling to warm a group of survivors clinging to life and heading south during a harsh Paris winter. They've been dead for years and Da Vinci's great work is forever a memory in the minds of the departed.

The *Venus de Milo* is rubble, scattered about like a jigsaw puzzle and, like the Colossus at Rhodes or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, a now forgotten Wonder of the World.

Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* is still there, crated in the basement, unguarded, but no one cares. The rest were either burned or lie tattered on the floor like newspaper in a birdcage. There are plenty of birds in the Louvre now. They come and go as they please.

Same with the Musée d'Orsay.

The Met.

The Rijksmuseum.

The Smithsonian.

In Washington D.C., the Declaration of Independence was eaten by rats and the Magna Carta now lies in the silty bottom of the Potomac River. A symbol of a country about to be born, it now is a vestige of the civilization that once was. Maybe in a thousand years it will be the archeological find of the millennium. Or maybe it will just rot there forever.

When you think of the end of the world, images of a smoldering wasteland come to mind. Charred ruins created in an instant, the result of a cataclysmic war or an astronomical extinction level event.

Hardly.

This is what the end of the world looks like.

An empty parking lot.

The remnants of life left to decay over time and flutter away in the wind like trash after the Superbowl or Mardis Gras. The difference this time around, was there was no one around to clean up the mess.

Kokumuo occasionally hears muffled screams in the distance. A victim of a larger, stronger predator. He's even seen shadowy figures walk through the deserted streets once or twice, but for the most part, he keeps to himself. A wanderer. A nomad, like his ancestors.

He arrived in New York a boy of only around twelve years old. His father, a Samburu elder from Kenya, brought him here. When a wealthy Kenyan expatriate living the good life in New York City lay suffering on his deathbed, he felt the healing hands of a native shaman would sooth him in his dying days. It would be only a year later that Kokumuo's father would die, as so many others did that year. And the next. And the next. Since then, Kokumuo has had to fend for himself in the big city. Other children were orphaned and left to their own devices, but years of fast food, video games and television did not prepare them for survival in this new world. Kokumuo's youth spent on the savannahs of central Africa is served him well. He's made it about fifteen years so far.

There was a time, not too long ago, when the bodies laid in piles.

Everywhere.

In the populated inner cities and the sprawling expanses of the Midwest. Most of the dead were found in the places you would expect—hospitals, grocery stores, places of worship—those were huge. Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples... Some accepted their fate and made their way back

to God. Some prayed for help, some for a cure, and others knew death had cornered them and all they wanted was absolution.

In the heartland of America, communities gathered and the sick perished together, comforting each other in their death rattle. Others died alone, leaving this earth without sympathy or ceremony.

There were those that refused to accept their fate and fought it the whole way.

There were riots and there was looting.

There were displays of human kindness so grand and selfless you would weep.

And there were crimes more horrible than you could ever imagine.

Just what you'd expect when the big man upstairs tells you, "time's up."

The end of the world had come. But it wasn't suicide bombers. It wasn't mad cow disease. It wasn't the birdflu, ZICA, COVID-19, West Nile, Al Qaeda, North Korea, Iran, cholesterol or heart disease. It wasn't earthquakes, volcanoes, or holes in the ozone.

It could've been industrial pollution, climate change, or Ebola, but it wasn't. If you had to guess what did us in this time, you would certainly think of a nuclear accident, solar flares, tsunamis, pissed-off aliens, or a screaming comet with our name written on it. But you would just be guessing now.

The angry hand of a vengeful god? Possibly. He does work in mysterious ways. But nope, this was no mystery. We did this to ourselves. It was our fault. We never saw it coming until it was too late.

The first time the world came to an end, we were spared, but only because we weren't around to see it. In spectacular fashion, 65 million years ago, an asteroid smashed into the Yucatan peninsula, creating the first ice age and killing every living thing in the process.

But this time, the world didn't end with a bang.

It ended with just a phone call.

Just as Kokumuo is finishing his meal, clear on the other side of the country— an hours drive east of Albany, Oregon, Amos Litwiller is completing his morning chores. He's tended to the crops. Wheat and corn are to be planted later this spring and the soil needs to be ready. He's gathered the eggs and milk for the morning breakfast.

Amos, like Kokumuo, arrived at his new home at a young age. Most of the Alsatian Old Order Amish moved here to the

fertile banks of the Willamette River just before the turn of the century. Manifest Destiny for most, but Amos' grandparents weren't interested in gold, silver, or copper. They wanted to get away from the temptations and wickedness they saw in the east and make a new life for themselves. According to Romans 12:2, they didn't want to be "conformed to the world."

Mission accomplished. He works in mysterious ways.

And so, Amos' grandparents, parents, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters settled here. He and his wife, Rebecca, are all that's left of them. At one point they were a community of around two hundred and twenty. Some of the others' houses stand as a reminder of what was once a strong community. Over the years they either passed away or, succumbing to the temptations of the world, left the community. And although Amos and his wife tried to have a child, they would have no luck. Modern medicine threw around low sperm count and stunted motility, but to them it was His will. The two of them remained happy with their life together, even when they realized they were the last of Albany's Old Order.

Fifty miles from the nearest town, and with no radio or television, they knew nothing of the horrors that had fallen on the rest of the world. Sure, there were the strangers that occasionally came through and needed food or a place to sleep. They were still Christians and they always helped their fellow man, no matter how sick they appeared to be.

There was one time, where one young man, wearing jeans that were three sizes too large and a wool cap in summertime, came through and was so sick he couldn't even stand up for five seconds at a time. He passed out in their barn. In the morning, the stranger was covered in blood and wasn't breathing. Three days after he was found, he was lowered into the ground in a simple six-sided pine coffin. His grave marked just as the others around him— "in death, as in life, all are equal." One person is not elevated above another, their way. A traditional Amish burial.

The next morning it was business as usual for Amos and Rebecca. The cows, the chickens, the field. Their lives would go on.

Almost everyone else's didn't. And they never saw it coming.

The symptoms were fairly benign at first. You wake up one morning and think, "I really didn't need that last glass of wine."

You pop a couple of Advil and jump in the shower and head off to work, saying, "never again."

You couldn't have been more right.

To you it was a headache, but that is the hallmark of the primary intracranial tumor's initial symptoms— a glioma is born. It's a dull pain. Over a few hours you get used to it and you think it's going away. But you're just *getting used to it*.

This is called Stage One.

You continue to work and play and ignore the symptoms. You think something is going around. Soon, things seem to get worse. Your memory seems to fade. You forget stupid things like where the light switches are and how to get to the gas station around the corner. You forget the name of that thing you're holding in your hand.

It's called a pen. Remember?

Welcome to Stage Two.

Now, you're starting to get a little weirded out. But you don't go to the doctor. Studies have shown that most patients, upon recognizing symptoms of any serious illness or condition, usually wait three to six *months* before seeking treatment.

Bad choice.

You're getting dizzy every so often. Technically, it's called vertigo. And now you're knocking on the door to Stage Three.

If you haven't seen a doctor before Stage Three, you will, once those symptoms begin to surface. Your speech is affected. It's called dysphasia; you know it as mush mouth. And if you get it, you really freak out. You can't get to the doctor soon enough. Dementia is common in Stage Three. And this is where most people were fooled. They thought their loved ones were having nervous breakdowns. The physical symptoms were disguised as mental and dismissed as "stress." It also fooled most doctors.

The first cases were mainly professionals.

Lawyers, bankers, accountants.

They worked too hard.

Too many hours.

They hardly ever saw their families.

But they called their wives, "I can't make it to dinner..."

They called their husbands, "I'm stuck here at the office..."

They called their bosses, "What's the number of the Dallas office?"

They called and called and called.
Cellular calls.

Kokumuo lived near the Sowedotu game reserve in Kenya. The nearest city hours away by jeep, even farther by foot. Most of the time he and his tribe would stay in their little village and hunt and eat and raise their families. If you showed him a cellular phone, he wouldn't have the slightest idea what it was. Even today, at 1133 5th Avenue, as he works hard to get the magazine lit, the six burner Viking Range just sits there. And although there probably has no gas, it would be worth a shot. Ignorance is bliss.

In his case, ignorance saved his life.

The rest of the world wasn't so lucky. They motored down the road to destruction with the windows down and singing to the radio the whole way. In the end, over 99% of the world's population was wiped out in less than three years. Staggering. But buried in the statistics were personal tragedies that affected real lives of mothers, fathers, sons and daughters.

A brief history lesson.

Nancy Robinson, mother of four, sits in traffic chatting on her fully charged Huawei P40 Pro. Her free nights and weekend minutes and Gigabit WiFi silently killing her from the inside out. Headaches were keeping her awake at night. She felt like there was always water in her left ear. She started hearing voices, hallucinating. Her husband thought she was having another one of her 'episodes' like she had in college. What really happened was a meningioma formed in the dura mater of Nancy's brain, the lining, and grew larger with every passing second. In the end, the tumor literally cracked her skull from the inside and she bled to death at the dinner table.

She was patient zero.

Who knows why it metastasized so quickly with her? It could've been her genetics, her lack of leafy green vegetables in her diet, her previous bout with breast cancer softening her immune system up. Whatever it was, she was the first recorded case. And she only used about 100 minutes of talk time and 2 GB of data a month.

That asshole white collar criminal defense attorney in the C-4 Cabriolet talking on his Apple iPhone 12 Pro Max with the newest AirPods Pro in his ears morning, noon and night? Might as well have been an Uzzi with a chinstrap.
Dead.

The tumor ruptured the left anterior cerebral artery, resulting in a massive stroke on the 101 freeway. Before he

drew his last breath, he flipped that Porsche over three lanes and took out four high school seniors on their way home from cheerleading practice.

Cause of death: 1500 minutes a month and unlimited data.

Your "Friends and Family Plan?"

Acoustic neuroma.

Your "Spotify Unlimited Streaming?"

Hyper malignant pineal tumor.

Your "Face Time in network friends?"

Malignant astrocytoma.

Reach out and touch someone.

Even if you couldn't afford a phone, you were still a goner. The new 802.11ax WiFi protocols made sure of that. That Venti Dark Roast, no foam, soy latte from Starbucks you needed to get your day started was really just an opportunity for you to get cooked. That's what they called it. "Getting cooked." There were the offshoots, getting nuked, burned, WiFried, whatever. In airports and train stations, restaurants and dorm rooms, they were known as hotspots, and boy, were they right. You're drinking your coffee, waiting for your flight, studying your sociology and cooking your brain.

Stick a fork in you. You were done.

Initially in the nascent stages of cell phone era, there were concerns, but the medical research was thorough and showed no long-term effects. Case closed. That's what they said about smoking. Then Moore's Law worked its magic. Cell phones got smaller and smaller. WiFi more prevalent. RF and EMF radiation? Who cares? I've got to FaceTime my girlfriend from the Metro. Somewhere in the transition from analog to digital to GMRS to EV-DO 3G and NextGen Bluetooth Protocol Stacks, we became apathetic about the effects of putting a low dose radioactive device centimeters away from our brains for 60 minutes a day. Think about it, would you sit in a tanning bed an hour a day, every day? Even if it was free evenings and weekends? I didn't think so. But eight billion sheep basically sat in a microwave for the better part of their days.

Insane.

If there was a bright side, it was that the poor were spared. I'm not talking about the "I only have basic cable" poor. Or the "I'll never pay off this Visa balance" poor or "I'm working 80 hours a week to feed a family of six" poor. I'm talking about the families in Calcutta who've been wearing the same clothes for three years poor. The farming

families of the Andes poor. Inuit tribes whose blood is contaminated with so much mercury that their children will never see fifty poor. The nomadic tribes of central Africa poor. Samburu poor.

The rest?

They were toast.

The pious and the perverts. The good. The bad. The ugly. School teachers. Beltway lobbyists. Lifestyle reporters. Nobel Prize winners. Death Row inmates.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Not to mention the collateral damage. With all the doctors, paramedics, aide workers and the rest of the world's "educated" masses dead, there was no one to take care of the sick. Darwinism took hold of the human race. The few who were left fell victim to malaria, smallpox, appendicitis, influenza. The first wave took everyone, the weak, the strong, the young and old. Only the invincible would survive the second wave of destruction.

Your best bet, if you knew what was happening— and no one knew— was to get out of the city. Move to the country. Someplace safe. Someplace untouched by the hand of man.

Someplace temperate.

Someplace with water.

Someplace like the savannahs of Kenya.

Or like Albany, Oregon.

In the end, there was an equality in it all. Those who had everything in this world— food, water and shelter and four door cars with heated seats and satellite radios, were destroyed. And those who had nothing, those who lived a hand-to-mouth existence in the poorest reaches of the globe were spared.

Africa, a continent ravaged for decades by AIDS, war and ethnic cleansing, was spared.

India, Madagascar, Bolivia, the Amazon, the Outback, spared.

All the animals, spared.

God was playing Robin Hood and the meek inherited the earth.

He took the lives of the rich and gave the world to the poor.

Life is really just about choices. Sometimes they can be moral choices. Sometimes they can be choices made out of duty, or convenience. Or sometimes they just can be about luck.

Red or black.

Odd or even.

Life or death.

You choose to leave the house to go to the store, never thinking this could be the last drive you ever take. A teenager, high on PCP flies through an intersection in a stolen car and ends your life. All you wanted was milk and you end up dead.

You choose to talk on the phone with friends about work and vacations and soccer games and you end up dead.

One of the tenets of the Old Order Amish is that musical instruments are forbidden by the church. They are considered worldly and would stir up the emotions of those playing them. So when Amos came across a small Motorola 6900 in his field he almost threw it away. He had heard of the telephone and seen a few when he had to venture into town, but this one was different. It was left in a small area near the woods and had a funny looking plate attached to it by a small wire. There was no way he knew it was a solar panel, keeping it juiced for so many years. And just before he tossed it, he accidentally hit the number 2 key.

Beep.

He never heard such a strange sound. Kind of like a bird or a squirrel. He hit it another key.

Beep.

Although this time it was of a different pitch. He was so fascinated with the sounds that came from this little device that he didn't consider he was playing an instrument.

And unwittingly making a choice.

Kokumuo roams through what used to be Barney's flagship Madison Avenue store. There are still many things of use to him in the store. They're all on deep discount. In the wintertime, the furs have helped him endure the cold when looking for food, and in the summer the basement provides a cool respite from the city's humidity. But today, as he walks through the empty racks in women's formal wear, he jumps, startled by a strange sound. A sound he has heard before, but from so long ago he can't quite place it. He walks behind one of the smashed glass counters and sees a flashing light and the Nutcracker Suite gets louder. He picks up the ancient Kyocera KX1v and jumps when he feels it vibrate. Instinct tells him to drop it. It hits the floor and in the process the speakerphone clicks on. Although the music has now stopped, his curiosity hasn't.

He wonders out loud at the strange device.

Three thousand miles away, Amos hears the grunting Kokumuo on his new toy.

"Hello?"

Kokumuo picks up the phone.

"Jambo?" He replies, making his choice.