

When it happened, everyone knew at the same time.

The scientists received no warning, they found out when the rest of us did: when everything went dark and everyone felt that first premonitory chill.

Talking heads on the TV told us that the sun had frozen. A declaration without an explanation—because they themselves didn't have one. One day the sun just turned off. They could still see it, if they used the right kind of telescope, but it was dead, static. No heat or light emanated from its now still, smooth surface. The sun was declared to be—as it remains to this day—an immense marble, providing us with our gravitational centrepoint and nothing more. That old god which gave us life—that which our ancestors had worshipped before we dissected their faiths with rationalism, microscopes, and laserbeams—had finally died of old age.

The first major reaction was rioting. People so desperate to escape their terror that they smashed windows and stole all the creature comforts and technological luxuries they could never afford in their pre-apocalypse lifetimes, trying to smother their fear with consumption. Cruel Darwinism killed them off when the first snap of frozen wind ripped across England three days into the darkness, flash-freezing almost everyone outside in a matter of minutes.

By the end of the first week, global temperatures had dropped by thirty degrees, and deadly minus-twenty winds haunted city streets like vengeful wraiths desperate to add numbers to their ranks.

By the end of the first month, temperatures had dropped fifty degrees globally.

The electricity, telephone, and TV infrastructure, to everyone's surprise, maintained itself, and so we said goodbye to friends and family we would likely never see again, while talking heads on the radio told us everything would be ok, and celebrity-scientists on the TV tried to hold it together on chat-shows.

The water pipes, on the other hand, froze almost instantly and legions died of dehydration. My pathology preserved me: suffering since childhood from severe obsessive compulsive disorder, I always had a pathological fear of drinking unfiltered tap-water. I bought bottled water in bulk five or six times a year—rationed properly, my stocked storeroom could have easily lasted me six months. Still, when the sun went out, I decided to fill my bathtub just in case.

Unfortunately, even many with the forethought to fill bathtubs, cups, jugs, and mixing bowls still died: their houses just weren't well insulated enough for them to survive the perpetually dropping temperatures. Even those of us with well insulated houses struggled to keep our bedrooms above freezing—we spent most of the weeks and months following the sun's death huddled in corners, wrapped blue-lipped in blankets, burning our skins with the surrogate sunlight of cheap halogen-bulb electric-fireplaces which had been sitting unused in our attics for years.

For those who could brave walking across their frozen bedrooms to look outside, rising plumes of smoke were often visible off in the distance: in their desperation, many had set fires in their own homes for warmth, and many had lost control of those fires and burned down their houses with themselves and their families inside. I sometimes wonder how many chose to die gloriously in the searing pain of their reckless infernos, and how many attempted to escape the fires only to die a protracted, shivering death on the streets outside.

Eventually, the army started going door-to-door. They had insulated vans and state-of-the-art thermal uniforms, and used them to collect those who'd survived the past two months of freezing, starvation, and water shortage. Few had.

Survivors were taken to local military compounds—where the sick were tended to, and the dying allowed to die—before being transferred to one of the many underground bases secretly dug-out beneath the country at the behest of people whose names we don't know but who we now thank for their paranoia.

Long whispered about in conspiracy-theory circles, these subterranean labyrinths—Deep Underground Military Base (or D.U.M.B.) units, in the parlance of the old-world conspiracy theorists—were designed as vast, cavernous life-support machines for the human race.

D.U.M.B. units were built as the ultimate contingency. Entirely self-sufficient, multileveled underground cities; an apartment complex for a pocket of survivor-humans to live, die, and reproduce in—forever, if need be.

Nobody rescued was ever denied entry to one of these subterranean arks. The end of the world was not a temporary situation that could be exploited by the wealthy and powerful; this was a racial rescue mission, humanity itself was at stake.

Despite the openness of the admissions, the D.U.M.B.s made no further attempts at radical egalitarianism.

In each D.U.M.B. there existed luxury suites on the lower floors, and boxier, more brutalist—though, it must be said, far from uncomfortable—mass-housing on top. More psychological than cynical, it was thought by the D.U.M.B.'s original design teams that this inequality would improve the stability of the compound in the long run. The hypothesis was that even a bleak, artificial parody of traditional society was a better long-term option than ultra-egalitarian experimentation or militaristic rule. And so, a slight social stratification was designed and built into the D.U.M.B.s; haves and have-lesses, but few, if any, have-nots.

In the end, so few of us made it into the bunkers that this concern was rendered irrelevant. Anyone who wanted one got a luxury or sub-luxury room, and the upper floors were mainly used for storage, extramarital affairs, children playing, and anything people tended to want to do in secret.

In total, five-hundred-and-forty-eight of us (civilians) made it to our bunker by the time rescue missions were abandoned, accompanied by sixty-seven military staff.

The gender split is skewed slightly more female than male—fifty-three percent of the D.U.M.B.'s population is female—and the population's median age is forty-four.

The base's racial demographic is overwhelmingly white-British—the outliers being five Chinese, one Japanese, and a morose Nigerian couple who lost their son just a few days before their military evacuation.

Designed with a capacity of sixteen-hundred each, England's one-hundred-and-thirty-eight bunkers were designed to preserve a collective point-five percent of the total English population in a very worst case apocalypse scenario.

It's clear now that we were over-optimistic about how many of us would make it past the end of the world.

Despite our small numbers, life in the D.U.M.B. has been comfortable—the base is mostly self-sufficient, in all the ways that matter—and many of us have found our niches as cleaners, babysitters, therapists, researchers, teachers, and agriculturists (for the base's

vast underground pastures of livestock, and its hydroponic jungles of crops and English wildlife).

Much of this is unnecessary. The bunker, designed to be operable by just one man, could do most of our more physical work automatically—the artificial beaches can tend themselves, robot cages on the floor of the vast saltwater pond can catch fish and shellfish for food, the wildlife preservation units (glorified zoos) feed the animals and clean themselves automatically—and even much of our intellectual work could be outsourced to computers. We all know this. We do it ourselves anyway.

It's not that we need to keep ourselves busy, we just don't want to relinquish our passions to machines.

If life has not been truly perfect at the end of the world, it's only due to the stifling tropical humidity that characterises life in the D.U.M.B. .

But, we are told, this sole uncomfortable aspect of our underground sanctuary is also one of the most vital aspects of our life-support system. The damp air traps and circulates excess thermal pollution created by the two small nuclear reactors that power the base—our compound's twin hearts—staving off the freezing outside cold like veins pumping warm blood through an immense stone body. Nothing goes to waste.

By now the first two-hundred metres deep of the world's oceans have frozen over. According to the scientists, this is a good thing. The ocean's thick surface-skin of salted ice traps heat in the sea below, and the sea is unlikely to freeze much further for at least a few millennia—the semi-transparent fish and deep sea insects living on the ocean floor will likely never even realise the world has ended.

A pipe directly from our base runs into these unfrozen depths and provides us with a perpetual supply of saltwater—and thus, via electrolysis, oxygen and hydrogen: air to breathe and emergency reserve fuel should our descendant generations ever run out of nuclear material for the twin reactors.

A year to the day of the sun going out, the immense crashes began.

Each of these explosive earthquakes would cause the bunker to shake for hours, and the walls would pulse with a low, ominous droning long after the shaking had stopped. The rhythmic vibrations made the warm, wet stone of the tunnel walls feel like the inside of a great intestine.

After a few days, the military scientists monitoring the situation figured out what was happening and called us in to explain: in the absence of a nearby star, the Earth's temperature had reached such an extreme low that the atmosphere itself was freezing and crashing to the planet's surface as immense shards of frozen glass. Upon impact, these city-sized shards of crystallised nitrogen would ring like tuning forks for hours, and those vibrations would pass down into the Earth, shaking our refuge.

An older scientist had requisitioned one of the many snow-globes from the D.U.M.B.'s Cultural Preservation Archive, and he carefully placed it on the table while his younger colleague explained this to us, only to take off his shoe and dramatically smash the ornament's brittle plastic dome as the younger scientist reached his explanatory crescendo.

The visual aid struck everyone watching as strange at the time, but it seems quaint now in view of how stir-crazy we all ended up going in the years after the sky fell down.

My own personal tunnel-psychosis was minor.

My obsessive compulsive disorder found a home in the sterile stone and steel hallways of the D.U.M.B. . I spent most of my evenings indulging my compulsive desire for orderliness by decorating empty luxury rooms with reproduction old-world artefacts from the Cultural Preservation Archive.

Despite its name, the Archive preserves no originals. It is an immense fraud's-library of perfect recreations of priceless artifacts and works of art. At one end, a dozen hand-painted reproductions of Monet's 'Impression, Sunrise'; at the other, a dozen reproduction Shrouds of Turin. Between them, all the jewellery, coins, furniture, art, and cultural artefacts one could ever dream of, all perfect fakes.

I would shop for objects from this supermarket of simulacra and arrange them around a room for weeks until I found a perfect object harmony in my already buried time-capsule. At which point, I would lock the door, break the lock, requisition a new room, and start fresh.

I am told by the D.U.M.B.s psychologist that this is an attempt to recreate the world we left behind, but the world we left was far from orderly or harmonious.

Others found different ways of coping.

For some, relationships broke down as one or both partners retreated into sullen isolation. Those connected most strongly with their material lives on the surface have found their underworld lives to be a disconnected, meaningless null. Without accreditation, affirmation, and accumulation, they have nothing to live for.

These people stave off their suicidality via experience consumption. They engage freely in sex and violence—and sexual violence—drugs and food and leisure... completely neglecting their spiritual needs. They roam the upper levels of the tunnels in loose packs—not as friends but perpetual acquaintances—doing nothing in particular. Some are frail and others obese, but none are healthy or sane.

By contrast, those of us who didn't have strong connections to our material lives on the surface found ourselves rejuvenated by life in the D.U.M.B..

The apocalypse provides us with a degree of freedom and true autonomy which many of us longed for our entire lives.

Take, for example, one of the D.U.M.B.'s most notable cliques: the Sisters of Mercy—a group made up primarily of lesbian survivors who identified themselves on the surface as 'radical feminists' and claimed to want sexual separatism. Outcasts and maniacs in the previous world, they were stifled by political activism and social critique, lost in theory and the weeds of ideology.

In the D.U.M.B. there is no theory. No discussion of politics. Deep in the hydroponic jungles, these women hunt and forage, living in commune with nature as an ascetic order of pseudo religious gynaecologists, following a throwback tree-worshipping matriarchal paganism and providing health services to the women of the base. Most women now wear the small heart shaped pendants that signal their allegiance to the sect, even if they are not full-blooded members themselves.

And the Sisters are far from outliers. Religion has flourished at the end of the world.

The base's handful of Chinese, mercantile and atheistic on the surface, now live their lives in strict adherence to the Tao and the divinations of the I-Ching.

And in the darkest depths of the Cultural Preservation Archive there exists an all male death cult—bloodshot yellow eyes from perpetual drunkenness, always naked, painted head to toe in cracked black bodypaint. It is rumoured that they're cannibals, though I've met them often and they have never done me harm.

Today—two years after the sky stopped falling—I asked to go outside. It was mostly just curiosity. I wanted to see what it looked like out there after the end of everything.

Apparently, I'm the only inhabitant of the D.U.M.B. to have ever asked. Most of the civilians seem to have settled into their strange routines, the D.U.M.B. now the only world they can conceive of. The military scientists keep themselves occupied with communications—long since failed after the collapsing atmosphere destroyed most of the world's radio-towers—and have no desire to experience the world outside beyond the numbers and graphs on their computer screens.

A few hours after asking to be let outside, I'm met by a twitchy, abrupt biologist who explains, only once, the mechanics of the airlock and how to put new oxygen tanks onto what looks like a barely updated Victorian diving suit.

Wrapped in my rubber and metal exoskeleton, I stand there for a long time feeling like a bug.

Eventually I step through the airlock and seal the first door behind me. It's time to leave the hive

I unseal the airlock's outer door and step outside.

An immense shard of opaque white ice looms over the landscape, its sharpest point curls over toward me, from miles away, and points almost directly down onto the D.U.M.B.'s entrance like a mountain-sized icicle. Intersecting that first shard is a second, sharper, more jagged, and curved upwards like a frozen wave. Both fragments are only visible because they are illuminated from below by the D.U.M.B.'s Surface Light system—a grid of twenty-thousand spotlights on sticks, pointing up into the night sky, designed to be visible as an immense, three mile long sheet of light, from both the Soviet and Euro-American space-stations. I wonder for a moment how long the food reserves in the space stations were provisioned to last for; how well insulated were the stations themselves? Are they orbital prison cells now, or cold satellite mausoleums?

The pieces of dead sky above are awe inspiring, if only for their sheer magnitude, but I've looked up at that pre-apocalypse sky my whole life. I want to see beyond it.

Petrified white grass crunches underfoot. The trees lining the fields are still leafy, but their leaves are white, their bark has gone black. The little photoluminescent watch face on the back of my hand says I have six hours of oxygen left. The shards are only a few miles long, and I estimate I could be clear of their edges in maybe two hours. That leaves an hour to look, and two hours to return, with an hour for unforeseen emergencies

The dead city streets are filled with perfectly preserved cars manned by flash-frozen drivers. The shattered bodies of birds frozen mid-flight litter the roads.

Finally, I break past the edge of the first shard and see a sliver of what lies beyond. It's everything I could have hoped for and more. Swirling galaxies bleed around the edges of the frozen atmosphere, planets orbiting distant stars blink morse-code messages as they pass through galaxy-wide clouds of space dust. But this sliver of infinite night isn't enough. I want to see all of it—the entire, unblemished beyond.

I check my oxygen levels: just over three hours. Continuing would take me past the point of no return.

Above me, heaven is blacker than black, the endless abyss punctuated by slashes of liquid colour—oil on a wet road but stretched out forever—pinpointed by billions of scintillating little shards of diamond.

Between the Pollock spirals painting blue, green and gold across distant nebulae, glowing satellites rotate slowly through the emptiness and unnamed comets shoot by at impossible speeds. And there are things in groups buzzing about around one another in little dancing spirals, flashing and dancing schizophrenic rhythms like little alien fireflies made of broken neon signs and slow-motion lightning. I want to watch them, but I don't. I keep looking around the colours and movements rather than at them. I'm pulled to the sky's blackest spaces.

Above me, the sky is littered with dozens of black squares of dead, empty space. It seems our star was not the only one to die. Millions of stars must have gone cold to leave such huge black stamps of darkness in the sky. But not just darkness, total absence-of-anything emptiness. True and utter void. Vacuum as a chasm. It's impossible to describe, but it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It's looking down at me and asking me to crawl inside it; wrap myself up in it. Cold and pure and I can never leave. It's a canvas as a work of art, the space between the sublime.

I think to myself, half-mad: It was worth the world ending just to see this bright new sky.