

BALLANTINE
Star

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Editor FREDERIK POHL • Art director RICHARD POWERS

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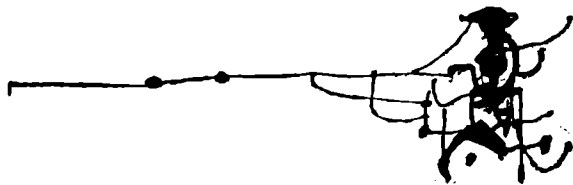
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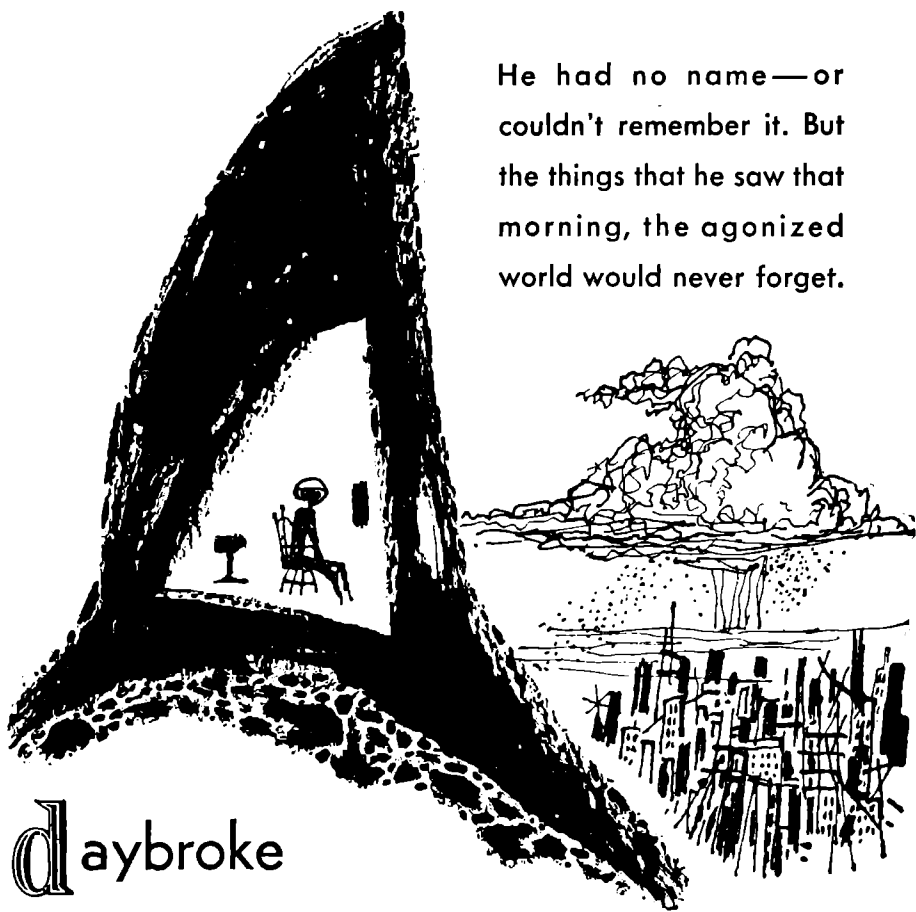
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He had no name—or couldn't remember it. But the things that he saw that morning, the agonized world would never forget.



Daybroke

ROBERT BLOCH

UP IN the sky the warheads whirled, and the thunder of their passing shook the mountain.

Deep in his vaulted sanctuary he sat, godlike and inscrutable, marking neither the sparrow's or the missile's

fall. There was no need to leave his shelter to stare down at the city.

He knew what was happening—had known ever since early in the evening when the television flickered and died. An announcer in the holy

white garb of the healing arts had been delivering an important message about the world's most popular laxative—the one most people preferred, the one four out of five doctors used themselves. Midway in his praise of this amazing new medical discovery he had paused and advised the audience to stand by for a special bulletin.

But the bulletin never came; instead the screen went blank and the thunder boomed.

All night long the mountain trembled, and the seated man trembled too; not with anticipation but with realization. He had expected this, of course, and that was why he was here. Others had talked about it for years; there had been wild rumors and solemn warnings and much muttering in taverns. But the rumor-mongers and the warning-sounders and the tavern-mutterers had made no move. They had stayed in the city and he alone had fled.

Some of them, he knew, had stayed to stave off the inevitable end as best they could, and these he saluted for their courage. Others had attempted to ignore the future, and these he detested for their blindness. And all of them he pitied.

For he had realized, long ago, that courage was not enough and that ignorance was no salvation. Wise words and foolish words are one—they will not halt the storm. And when the storm approaches, it is best to flee.

So he had prepared for himself this mountain retreat, high over the city, and here he was safe; would be safe for years to come. Other men of equal wealth could have done the same, but they were too wise or too foolish to face reality. So while they spread their rumors and sounded their warnings and muttered in their cups, he built his sanctuary; lead-guarded, amply provisioned, and stocked with every need for years to come, including even a generous supply of the world's most popular laxative.

DAWN came at last and the echoes of the thunder died, and he went to a special, shielded place where he could sight his spyglass at the city. He stared and he squinted, but there was nothing to be seen—nothing but swirling clouds that billowed blackly and rolled redly across the hazed horizon.

Then he knew that he must go down to the city if he

wanted to find out, and made due preparations.

There was a special suit to wear, a cunning seamless garment of insulated cloth and lead, difficult and costly to obtain. It was a top secret suit; the kind only Pentagon generals possess. They cannot procure them for their wives, and they must steal them for their mistresses. But he had one. He donned it now.

An elevated platform aided his descent to the base of the mountain, and there his car was waiting. He drove out, the shielded doors closing automatically behind him, and started for the city. Through the eyepiece of his insulated helmet he stared out at a yellowish fog, and he drove slowly, even though he encountered no traffic nor any sign of life.

After a time the fog lifted, and he could see the countryside. Yellow trees and yellow grass stood stiffly silhouetted against a yellow sky in which great clouds writhed and whirled.

Van Gogh's work, he told himself, knowing it was a lie. For no artist's hand had smashed the windows of the farmhouses, peeled the paint from the sides of the barns, or squeezed the warm breath from the herds huddling in

the fields, standing frightened but dead.

He drove along the broad arterial leading to the city; an arterial which ordinarily swarmed with the multicolored corpuscles of motor vehicles. But there were no cars moving today, not in this artery.

Not until he neared the suburbs did he see them, and then he rounded a curve and was halfway upon the van-guard before he panicked and halted in a ditch.

The roadway ahead was packed with automobiles as far as the eye could see—a solid mass, bumper to bumper, ready to descend upon him with whirring wheels.

But the wheels were not turning.

The cars were dead. The further stretches of the highway were an automotive graveyard. He approached the spot on foot, treading with proper reverence past the Cadillac-corpses, the cadavers of Chevrolets, the bodies of Buicks. Close at hand he could see the evidence of violent ends; the shattered glass, the smashed fenders, the battered bumpers and twisted hoods.

The signs of struggle were often pitiable to observe; here was a tiny Volkswagen, trap-

ped and crushed between two looming Lincolns; there an MG had died beneath the wheels of a charging Chrysler. But all were still now. The Dodges dodged no longer, the Hornets had ceased their buzzing, and the Ramblers would never ramble again.

It was hard for him to realize with equal clarity the tragedy that had overtaken the people inside these cars—they were dead, too, of course, but somehow their passing seemed insignificant. Maybe his thinking had been affected by the attitude of the age, in which a man tended to be less and less identified as an individual and more and more regarded on the basis of the symbolic status of the car he drove. When a stranger rode down the street, one seldom thought of him as a person; one's only immediate reaction was, "There goes a Ford—there goes a Pontiac—there goes one of those big goddam Imperials." And men bragged about their cars instead of their characters. So somehow the death of the automobiles seemed more important than the death of their owners. It didn't seem as though human beings had perished in this panic-stricken effort to escape from the city; it was the cars which had made a dash for

final freedom and then failed.

He skirted the road now and continued along the ditch until he came to the first sidewalks of the suburbs. Here the evidence of destruction was accentuated. Explosion and implosion had done their work. In the country, paint had been peeled from the walls, but in the suburbs walls had been peeled from the buildings. Not every home was leveled. There were still plenty of ranchhouses standing, though no sign of a rancher in a gray flannel suit. In some of the picturesquely modern white houses, with their light lines and heavy mortgages, the glass side walls remained unshattered, but there was no sign of happy, busy suburban life within—the television sets were dead.

Now he found his progress impeded by an increasing litter. Apparently a blast had swept through this area; his way was blocked by a clutter of the miscellaneous debris of Exurbia.

HE WADED through or stepped around:

Boxes of Kleenex, artificial shrunken heads which had once dangled in the windows of station-wagons, crumpled shopping-lists and scribbled

notices of appointments with psychiatrists.

He stepped on an Ivy League cap, nearly tripped over a twisted barbecue grille, got his feet tangled in the straps of foam-rubber falsies. The gutters were choked with the glut from a bombed-out drugstore; bobbie-pins, nylon bobby-socks, a spate of pocket-books, a carton of tranquilizers, a mass of suntan lotion, suppositories, deodorants, and a big cardboard cutout of Harry Belafonte obscured by a spilled can of hot fudge.

He shuffled on, through a welter of women's electric shavers, Book-of-the-Month-Club bonus selections, Presley records, false teeth, and treatises on Existentialism. Now he was actually approaching the city proper. Signs of devastation multiplied. Trudging past the campus of the university he noted, with a start of horror, that the huge football stadium was no more. Nestled next to it was the tiny Fine Arts building, and at first he thought that it too had been razed. Upon closer inspection, however, he realized it was untouched, save for the natural evidence of neglect and decay.

He found it difficult to maintain a regular course,

now, for the streets were choked with wrecked vehicles and the sidewalks often blocked by beams or the entire toppled fronts of buildings. Whole structures had been ripped apart, and here and there were freakish variations where a roof had fallen in or a single room smashed to expose its contents. Apparently the blow had come instantly, and without forewarning, for there were few bodies on the streets and those he glimpsed inside the opened buildings gave indication that death had found them in the midst of their natural occupations.

Here, in a gutted basement, a fat man sprawled over the table of his home workshop, his sightless eyes fixed upon the familiar calendar exhibiting entirely the charms of Marilyn Monroe. Two flights above him, through the empty frame of a bathroom window, one could see his wife, dead in the tub, her hand still clutching a movie magazine with a Rock Hudson portrait on the cover. And up in the attic, open to the sky, two young lovers stretched on a brass bed, locked naked in headless ecstasy.

He turned away, and as his progress continued he deliberately avoided looking at the bodies. But he could not avoid

seeing them now, and with familiarity the revulsion softened to the merest twinge. It then gave way to curiosity.

Passing a school playground he was pleased to see that the end had come without grotesque or unnatural violence. Probably a wave of paralyzing gas had swept through this area. Most of the figures were frozen upright in normal postures. Here were all of the aspects of ordinary childhood—the big kid punching the little kid, both leaning up against a fence where the blast had found them; a group of six youngsters in uniform black leather jackets piled upon the body of a child wearing a white leather jacket.

Beyond the playground loomed the center of the city. From a distance the mass of shattered masonry looked like a crazy garden-patch turned by a mad plowman. Here and there were tiny blossoms of flame sprouting forth from the interstices of huge clods, and at intervals he could see lopped, stemlike formations, the lower stories of skyscrapers from which the tops had been sheared by the swish of a thermonuclear scythe.

He hesitated, wondering if it was practical to venture into this weird welter. Then

he caught sight of the hillside beyond, and of the imposing structure which was the new Federal Building. It stood there, somehow miraculously untouched by the blast, and in the haze he could see the flag still fluttering from its roof. There would be life here, and he knew he would not be content until he reached it.

But long before he attained his objective, he found other evidences of continued existence. Moving delicately and deliberately through the debris, he became aware that he was not entirely alone here in the central chaos.

Wherever the flames flared and flickered, there were furtive figures moving against the fire. To his horror, he realized that they were actually kindling the blazes; burning away barricades that could not otherwise be removed, as they entered shops and stores to loot. Some of the scavengers were silent and ashamed, others were boisterous and drunken; all were doomed.

It was this knowledge which kept him from interfering. Let them plunder and pilfer at will, let them quarrel over the spoils in the shattered streets; in a few hours or a few days, radiation and

fallout would take inevitable toll.

NO ONE interfered with his passage; perhaps the helmet and protective garment resembled an official uniform. He went his way unhindered and saw:

A barefooted man wearing a mink coat, dashing through the door of a cocktail lounge and passing bottles out to a bucket-brigade of four small children——

An old woman standing in a bombed-out bank vault, sweeping stacks of bills into the street with her broom. Over in one corner lay the body of a white-haired man, his futile arms outstretched to embrace a heap of coins. Impatiently, the old woman nudged him with her broom. His head lolled, and a silver dollar popped out of his open mouth——

A soldier and a woman wearing the armband of the Red Cross, carrying a stretcher to the blocked entrance of a partially-razed church. Unable to enter, they bore the stretcher around to the side, and the soldier kicked in one of the stained-glass windows——

An artist's basement studio, open to the sky; its walls still intact and covered with

abstract paintings. In the center of the room stood the easel, but the artist was gone. What was left of him was smeared across the canvas in a dripping mass, as though the artist had finally succeeded in putting something of himself into his picture——

A welter of glassware that had once been a chemical laboratory, and in the center of it a smocked figure slumped over a microscope. On the slide was a single cell which the scientist had been intently observing when the world crashed about his ears——

A woman with the face of a *Vogue* model, spread-eagled in the street. Apparently she had been struck down while answering the call of duty, for one slim, aristocratic hand still gripped the strap of her hatbox. Otherwise, due to some prank of explosion, the blast had stripped her quite naked; she lay there with all her expensive loveliness exposed, and a pigeon nested in her golden pelvis——

A thin man, emerging from a pawnshop and carrying an enormous tuba. He disappeared momentarily into a meat market nextdoor, then came out again, the bell of his tuba stuffed with sausages——

A broadcasting studio, com-

pletely demolished, its once immaculate sound stage littered with the crumpled cartons of fifteen different varieties of America's Favorite Cigarette and the broken bottles of twenty brands of America's Favorite Beer. Protruding from the wreckage was the head of America's Favorite Quizmaster, eyes staring glassily at a sealed booth in the corner which now served as the coffin for a nine-year-old boy who had known the batting-averages of every team in the American and National Leagues since 1882—

A wild-eyed woman sitting in the street, crying and crooning over a kitten cradled in her arms—

A broker caught at his desk, his body mummified in coils of ticker-tape—

A motor-bus, smashed into a brick wall; its passengers still jamming the aisles; standees clutching straps even in *rigor mortis*—

The hindquarters of a stone lion before what had once been the Public Library; before it, on the steps, the corpse of an elderly lady whose shopping-bag had spewed its contents over the street—two murder-mysteries, a rental copy of *Peyton*

Place, and the latest issue of the *Reader's Digest*—

A small boy wearing a cowboy hat, who levelled a toy pistol at his little sister and shouted, "Bang! You're dead!"

(She was.)

He walked slowly now, his pace impeded by obstacles both physical and of the spirit. He approached the building on the hillside by a circuitous route; avoiding repugnance, overcoming morbid curiosity, shunning pity, recoiling from horror, surmounting shock.

He knew there were others about him here in the city's core, some bent on acts of mercy, some on heroic rescue. But he ignored them all, for they were dead. Mercy had no meaning in this mist, and there was no rescue from radiation. Some of those who passed called out to him, but he went his way unheeding, knowing their words were mere death-rattles.

But suddenly, as he climbed the hillside, he was crying. The salty warmth ran down his cheeks and blurred the inner surface of his helmet so that he no longer saw anything clearly. And it was thus he emerged from the inner circle; the inner circle

of the city, the inner circle of Dante's hell.

His tears ceased to flow and his vision cleared. Ahead of him was the proud outline of the Federal Building, shining and intact—or almost so.

AS HE neared the imposing steps and gazed up at the façade, he noted that there were a few hints of crumbling and corrosion on the surface of the structure. The freakish blast had done outright damage only to the sculptured figures surmounting the great arched doorway; the symbolic statuary had been partially shattered so that the frontal surface had fallen away. He blinked at the empty outlines of the three figures; somehow he never had realized that Faith, Hope and Charity were hollow.

Then he walked inside the building. There were tired soldiers guarding the doorway, but they made no move to stop him, probably because he wore a protective garment even more intricate and impressive than their own.

Inside the structure a small army of low clerks and high brass moved antlike in the corridors; marching grim-faced up and down the stairs. There were no elevators, of course—they'd ceased func-

tioning when the electricity gave out. But he could climb.

He wanted to climb now, for that was why he had come here. He wanted to gaze out over the city. In his gray insulation he resembled an automaton, and like an automaton he plodded stiffly up the stairways until he reached the topmost floor.

But there were no windows here, only walled-in offices. He walked down a long corridor until he came to the very end. Here, a single large cubicle glowed with gray light from the glass wall beyond.

A man sat at a desk, jiggling the receiver of a field telephone and cursing softly. He glanced curiously at the intruder, noted the insulating uniform, and returned to his abuse of the instrument in his hand.

So it was possible to walk over to the big window and look down.

It was possible to see the city, or the crater where the city had been.

Night was mingling with the haze on the horizon, but there was no darkness. The little incendiary blazes had been spreading, apparently, as the wind moved in, and now he gazed down upon a growing sea of flame. The crum-

bling spires and gutted structures were drowning in red waves. As he watched, the tears came again, but he knew there would not be enough tears to put the fires out.

So he turned back to the man at the desk, noting for the first time that he wore one of the very special uniforms reserved for generals.

This must be the commander, then. Yes, he was certain of it now, because the floor around the desk was littered with scraps of paper. Maybe they were obsolete maps, maybe they were obsolete plans, maybe they were obsolete treaties. It didn't matter now.

There was another map on the wall behind the desk, and this one mattered very much. It was studded with black and red pins, and it took but a moment to decipher their meaning. The red pins signified destruction, for there was one affixed to the name of this city. And there was one for New York, one for Chicago,

Detroit, Los Angeles—every important center had been pierced.

He looked at the general, and finally the words came.

"It must be awful," he said.

"Yes, awful," the general echoed.

"Millions upon millions dead."

"Dead."

"The cities destroyed, the air polluted, and no escape. No escape anywhere in the world."

"No escape."

He turned away and stared out the window once more, stared down at Inferno. Thinking, *this is what it has come to, this is the way the world ends.*

He glanced at the general again, and then sighed. "To think of our being beaten," he whispered.

The red glare mounted, and in its light he saw the general's face, gleeful and exultant.

"What do you mean, man?" the general said proudly, the flames rising. "We won!"