

5-15-2022

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Recommended Citation

Amestoy, Austin (2022) "A Meeting At the End," *The Oval*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol15/iss1/15>

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FICTION

A MEETING AT THE END

Austin Amestoy

“DAMN it all, Josephine. The sky’s not going anywhere, so stop looking at it!”

Dan clenched the wooden armrests of the director’s chair a little tighter.

“It’s not the sky I’m worried about,” the actress snapped. She kicked her legs over the side of the 2020 Dodge Grand Caravan and folded her arms across her tattered tank top. “Plus, I’m overheating up here. Call a five.”

“I’ll call a five when you give me the goddamn scene,” Dan said.

A soft hand touched his forearm. “Danny,” his wife said, “It’s SAG policy. You know that.”

His brow furrowed. He smacked the bundle of papers in his lap. “It’s the final scene, Mary. Who gives a fuck about the SAG these days, anyway?”

Her eyes darted to the sky, then back to her husband. “Can’t you drum up a little compassion? Extenuating circumstances.”

Josephine glared at Dan.

“Besides,” Mary continued, “I’m your executive producer. This is an executive order.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Five minutes, and not a second more!”

A bell rang, and the set began to clear. Dan surveyed his skeleton crew of deadbeat grips and C-list actors. Agarra swung down from her roost and headed for her trailer to freshen up. Dan knew she’d saunter back to the set ten minutes after the five-minute deadline, a fresh coat of makeup on her face and a touch of powder under her nose.

As she passed the director, she sneered. “Never thought it’d take an apocalypse to get my big break.”

“It’s a big leap from toothpaste commercials to the lead role in an arthouse blockbuster, sweetheart,” Dan retorted. “You should be thanking me.”

“I’ll send the card and the chocolates if we live,” she grumbled.

Four zombie extras staggered away from the van, heading

to the refreshment trailer. They'd picked them up from a shelter downtown weeks ago—offered them \$25,000 each. The grips were a gang of teenage orphans who'd recently run afoul of the law. Mary had convinced the judge to let them do their time on-set. The cinematographer they'd found at the local university after she applied for dozens of internships and discovered nowhere was hiring.

Mary told Dan he was lucky to get anyone at all. Turns out, no one wants to make a movie during the end of the world.

Mary's hand moved to his shoulder and he brushed it off.

"Where's the Pendleton?" he asked.

"You drank it all."

He sighed. "And the Fireball?"

She shot him a withering look.

Dan slumped off his chair and walked toward the director's trailer. Gravity took hold of his aging body, dragging down the already prominent bags under his eyes that melted into his wrinkled cheeks. Inside, the trailer's incandescent light cast his skin in a sickly yellow glow.

The door opened behind him. Without turning, he asked, "Where's my stock?"

"I threw it out."

"Mary." He turned around to find his wife in a pose she'd adopted in the later years of their marriage: arms folded across her chest, hands balled into fists.

She had aged so gracefully, Dan thought. The red-gold glare from the late afternoon sun filtered through the window, gifting her white curls a rosy halo. Her body had kept its lithe, familiar shape, and though he knew it down to the freckle, he had trouble remembering his way around it, like a deep fog descending on the road to his hometown.

Dan checked the empty liquor cabinet. "Where'd you hide it this time?"

She kept silent, lips downturned. Dan shuffled past her and opened a door above the fridge, finding a half-empty bottle of Kirkland-brand vodka. He fumbled for a glass on the table and poured.

"Last drink?" she asked. The hopeful chord he'd once heard ringing inside the question had faded long ago.

Dan pounded the glass. "Ask me again next time."

"You're running out of 'next times,'" Mary said. Her stance softened. "Danny, come on. It'll be here tomorrow. They're shutting down government buildings. Do you think maybe it's time to—"

"Hang it up? Call it quits? You know me better than that. Besides,

what are we going to do? Sit around our table at home drinking and playing mancala until that fucking rock obliterates us?”

“I’m not worried about us,” Mary snapped. “But the crew, Danny. They have families to go back to.”

“They knew what they were signing up for,” Dan said. He downed another glass. “Besides, there’s a five percent chance that this will be their big break.”

“Five percent chance we survive, you mean,” Mary replied.

They’d had the argument many times in the year since the scientists discovered XGR-2443’s apocalyptic path toward Earth, and both knew there was nothing left to say.

Back outside the trailer, conditions were perfect for shooting, Dan thought. A glimmer in the sky occasionally caught his eye, sunlight glancing off a ripple in the smooth blue dome.

They’d been shooting in the city for weeks, and the street they had booked for the day was packed with cars in varying states of disrepair. The film would be his second coming, he thought. A true return to form. His magnum opus.

One of the zombies approached him, staggering as if still in character. A twenty-one-year-old extra named Bernie—one of the crew they’d picked up at the shelter. Dan hadn’t been forced to cast roles himself since film school. Desperate times, desperate measures.

“Hey, Mr. Arlington, man, I’ve been thinking—”

“That’s not good.”

“Yeah man, I’ve been thinking, if this is, like, a zombie movie and all, shouldn’t there be more zombies than, like, Fred and Charlie and Jackson and me?”

“You ever heard of computer effects, Bernie?”

He shook his head. A chunk of rot disconnected from his jaw.

“It’s this magic development of modern cinema where I get to do whatever the fuck I want after we shoot.”

Bernie’s eyes went wide.

“How would you like there to be twenty of you, huh?” Dan asked him. “Twenty methhead zombies swarming former toothpaste model Josephine Agarra as she makes her last stand in the dying daylight. Pretty good, huh?”

“That’s badass!”

“Get into position, dickhead,” Dan commanded. Bernie staggered back to the van, meeting up with his fellow zombies.

“Amateurs,” Dan grumbled.

Josephine stalked back to the van in her combat boots and cargo pants. She glanced at the sky, then at Dan.

“Alright, let’s reset!” he barked.

A bell rang, and Josephine hopped onto the van’s roof. Fred and Carlie and Jackson and Bernie clawed at her feet, gargling their best impression of the undead. Bernie couldn’t stop scratching his arm.

Dan rolled his eyes. “Action!”

Josephine flung a hand to her forehead in dramatic fashion. Dan admired her commitment to the craft, as amateur as she was.

“So, this is the end!” she wailed. “And what an end it is.”

Suddenly, sirens cut through the scene. Dan whirled, ready to strangle someone.

Police were swarming his set, escorting his troop of misfits and addicts away. A mountainous man with a shining badge on his jacket approached him, chomping on a cigar. Dan remembered him from the permitting process they’d gone through to book the street—Chief of Police Barnard Braddock.

“Smoking on the job, officer?” Dan asked. He clenched a fist.

“It’s the end of the world, Arlington,” Braddock drawled. “And we’re closing you down. We need this street to evacuate civilians.”

“To where?”

“To some place safer, I guess.”

“What, to the fucking moon? I’m making art, Braddock.”

“Sorry, buddy. Art is canceled.”

Josephine hopped down from the van, grinning ear-to-ear.

Four-time Oscar-winning director Daniel Arlington punched Chief Braddock in the face.

The crickets had stopped singing through the night three days ago. Dan had noticed it during the silences that often enveloped him and Mary, sitting on their front porch in their matching rocking chairs with chipping white paint. Those long periods of quiet were once comfortable, many years ago when they were young and in love with each other, themselves, and the magic of filmmaking. Mary, a TV soap-opera producer hunting for a project that would thrust her into Hollywood. Dan, a film-school prodigy toting around a screenplay with an unprecedented marriage of disaster and arthouse storytelling. Their meeting was electric, as was their baby, titled *A Parting at the Start*. Awards, accolades, acclaim—love followed.

But that was a long time ago, Dan thought, rocking in his chair.

That night, the air was entirely still, as if the whole world was holding its breath. The feeling clung to his sagging skin like a parasite.

The police chief had driven Dan and Mary to their home nestled in the grain fields outside the city. He called it a “professional courtesy.” As they crossed the Belfort Suspension Bridge, Mary had asked the police chief if he’d seen any of their films.

“If you’ll excuse me for saying so, ma’am,” Braddock had said, “I’m not a big fan of the *Backyard Apocalypse* saga.”

“That makes two of us,” Dan mumbled through the wad of Kleenex plugging his nosebleed. Braddock had punched him right back.

“Ho-ly shit,” a voice had piped up from the backseat. “I didn’t know you made movies, Mr. Arlington! I used to fall asleep every night with *Backyard Apocalypse: Retribution* playing on the TV.”

Somehow, Bernie had ended up in the patrol car, too. They couldn’t return him to the shelter; it had closed its doors earlier that day so employees could be with their families.

“I don’t have much family, Mr. and Mrs. Arlington,” Bernie had said. Dan couldn’t tell if his eyes were red-ringed from tears or the meth.

Now Dan was rocking in his chair, pining for the sound of crickets while Mary comforted a wailing Bernie on the porch swing. She’d brewed chamomile tea—her favorite. Dan figured it was the first non-inebriating liquid Bernie’d had in years.

Pathetic, he thought. He took a swig from the bottle of lemon Bacardi.

“I just can’t thank you enough for taking me with you,” Bernie blubbered. “It’s good to be with trusted friends before the end.”

“You’ve been working for me for two weeks,” Dan said.

Bernie reared up for a sneeze and grabbed his dirty blond hair in lieu of a tissue. Mary cringed at the snotty cords of hair.

“I’ll go get some tissues,” she said. As she passed Dan, he shot her a pained look. Mary shot him the “it-was-the-right-thing-to-do-you-heartless-bastard” look.

Silence enveloped the duo. The night was clear and brilliant near the peak of the sky, but as his eyes traced an arc to the horizon, Dan could see an unmistakable bloody glow.

“The sun set hours ago,” Bernie said, his voice wavering.

“The asteroid’s not going to hit us,” Dan said. “The sun will rise and set tomorrow, the day after that—all the days after that, until you’re dead and I’m dead, too. You’ll go first, of course. I don’t doubt that.”

Bernie sniffled. “You really think so?”

“Yes, I do. Methamphetamine’s a whole lot harder than the drink.”

“You got any?”

“Drink?”

“Crank.”

Dan turned his head. In the dim light, he could almost imagine Bernie was anyone else. Brad Pitt, maybe. Or Matthew McConaughey.

“No, Bernie. I don’t have any goddamn crank.”

The screen door swung open, and Mary emerged with a roll of toilet paper in hand.

“Sorry, we’re out of Kleenex.”

The porch swing creaked as Dan rocked silently. Bernie blew another load of gunk into his toilet paper.

“When are you going to finish your movie?” he asked.

Dan almost cut him off. “Tomorrow.”

Mary stiffened. “Wishful thinking. The cinematographer quit after the police showed up. Josephine left set without a trace. The city tore down your set, Danny.”

“We’ll make it happen,” Dan said.

Bernie made a sound like a strangled trumpet as he blew his nose. “I’ll be there, Mr. Arlington.”

After their houseguest began nodding off in the swing, Mary took him inside to the second floor.

“He asked me if my knitting needles were hollow,” she said as she returned to the porch. She sank into the rocking chair next to her husband with a heavy sigh.

“You always did want a kid,” Dan said after a long pause.

“I wanted a daughter.”

“You also—we also—wanted a career, Mary.”

They stared into the burning horizon. Dan swigged from the Bacardi bottle again, draining it. He let it fall onto the deck’s soft wood.

“I brought something,” Mary said in a small voice. She held up a tall, green bottle stoppered with a dark cork. He knew without looking that its label read, “*Une Réunion à la Fin, N°4.*”

“No,” Dan said. “We haven’t wrapped yet.”

“Well, we were supposed to wrap today.”

“And that didn’t happen, did it?” he snapped. “We’ll wrap tomorrow.”

“Listen to yourself,” she hissed. “It’s over, Daniel. Give it up. None of this is worth anything after tomorrow.”

“It’s worth everything,” he said.

His wife huffed in disbelief.

“Can you really look at me and tell me it’s not?”

“You’re not serious right now.”

“It’s how I met you, my sweet. *A Parting at the Start?* You believed in me. You believed in *art*, Mary!”

Mary Arlington had gone very quiet. Her rocking chair didn’t move.

“And look where that got me,” she said. “Spending my last night with a man obsessed with salvaging his image as the world crumbles around him. No sons or daughters calling to say, ‘I love you.’”

“Is that what you want?”

She sighed. “I don’t know.”

The red glow in the low sky had spread ever so slightly. A brilliant pinprick of light had crested the hilltops on the horizon, now the brightest point in the sky.

“This is my last chance,” Dan said. “The cinematographer, *Backyard Apocalypse*, Josephine, Chief Braddock, your wished-for children, this fucking asteroid—fuck it all.”

Mary sat as if she was made of marble.

“So, put the champagne away. We’ll drink tomorrow night.”

The director rocked in his chair, watching the red glow swell larger and larger, pushing away the curtain of stars, until he began to detect sensation returning to his fingertips. On his way to the second-floor bedroom, he stopped in the kitchen to pour himself a shot of scotch to regain the dull tingle—he hated feeling his fingers.

He sat at the kitchen bar, thinking. He thought about apologizing to Mary, but decided against it. His apologies had lost their meaning over the years.

He thought about *A Parting at the Start*, and the passion and glory of his youth. He thought about the studio that had turned his masterpiece into a franchise cash cow. The pages and pages of notes from executives on where he went “too far” or “not far enough,” where he ought to add “a funny quip” or a clever “one-liner.” The press junkets and the raving fans and abysmal Rotten Tomatoes scores that eroded his passion and goodwill interview by interview, autograph by autograph, percentage point by percentage point, leaving behind someone he hated to be.

He thought about *A Meeting at the End*. He thought about redemption.

He thought about XGR-2433, and how his film—original, self-financed, unencumbered—would have the awards circuit all to itself, if that space rock missed.

When it missed.

And when he couldn't think about anything else, he stood up and walked to the stairwell. He passed the display cabinet in the foyer filled with glass pyramids and gold-inlaid plaques, all more than twenty years old and collecting dust.

On his way to the bedroom, he paused. A sliver of light beamed through the bathroom doorframe. The sound of running water met his ears.

"There, now. You're alright. You're okay," Mary was saying. He peeked inside to find her rubbing a washcloth up Bernie's arm as he sat in the bathtub with his head between his legs, shuddering with sobs. "Tell me about her again," Mary said.

Dan looked away, ashamed for a reason he didn't understand. He tramped back downstairs and found himself on the barstool again, thinking until he fell asleep slumped over the countertop.

Mary was gone in the morning. Dan found the champagne bottle on the kitchen counter next to where he'd fallen asleep with a note stuck over the label. He didn't read it.

The first call he placed was to his driver, Matthew.

"I need a ride to the city," Dan said, swirling his morning gin. "Pick me up in thirty minutes."

Matthew told his boss to kindly fuck off. He was with his wife and children, glued to CNN's live coverage of XGR-2443's unrelenting approach.

"Bet those reporters have wives and children too, Matt," Dan said.

The line went dead.

The next call went to Josephine.

"You're joking," she said. Her words sounded slurred and droopy. "You're fucking joking with me, yeah?"

"It's just one scene," Dan said, getting up and walking toward the door. "I'll double your fee."

"I just threw all the cash in my wallet out my hotel window, Daniel. Find someone else to scratch your back."

The director smashed the "end call" button and stormed onto the porch. It was visible against the pale blue sky, now—a lump of rock haloed in blood. Dan planted his feet and glared at his nemesis.

"Morning, Mr. Arlington!"

Dan lurched forward, nearly tumbling off the porch. "Jesus Christ!" Bernie got up from the porch swing and trotted over to the director.

The red had cleared from his eyes and his volcanic skin seemed to have cooled. Even his hair looked free of grime.

“Bernie.”

“That’s right, sir. Mrs. Arlington cleaned me up good last night before she left.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

His long locks swayed side-to-side. “Mm-mm. She told me you’d need some help, though.”

Dan stared at the young man. “I’ve got a movie to finish, and I need to get to town. Can you drive?”

Bernie’s eyes went wide. “I could before they took my license, sir. I still can, probably.”

“Fantastic. I’ll pay you by the hour. Let’s go find a place to shoot.”

Honestly, Dan thought as Bernie charged through another four-way stop, *he’s not much worse than Matt.*

It took them forty-five minutes to reach the city—fifteen minutes less than it should have taken. The country roads that had been packed with cars and vans and buses yesterday afternoon were barren.

As they approached the suspension bridge, Dan noticed cars beginning to appear in the barrow pits along the highway. He presumed their owners had abandoned them in an effort to escape the traffic. They crested a hill, and Dan saw plumes of smoke rising from between the skyscrapers.

“Bernie?” the director asked. He popped open the top of his stainless-steel flask and took a drink.

“Sir.”

“Why’d you say yes when we asked you to be an extra?”

The car lurched to avoid something in the road. Dan craned his neck to try and make out what it was. He saw arms and legs in a tangled mess. He looked away.

“If you don’t mind my being honest, I need the money,” Bernie said. An unexpected pensiveness had entered the young man’s voice.

Dan scoffed. “For more ‘crank.’”

Bernie shook his head profusely. “No, Mr. Arlington. For my daughter.”

“Jesus, you’ve got a kid?”

“Yes, sir. She’s four years old and the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“How the fuck did you manage that?”

Bernie smiled. He kept his hands diligently at ten and two on the wheel. “Sometimes you just get lucky, I guess. I got lucky with Sophie.”

They were crossing the bridge. The bay waters were so glassy and still, Dan thought he could see the reflection of their car on the surface. He looked up through the sunroof. XGR-2443 stared back, a bit larger than before.

“You knew it was coming, though. The asteroid.”

“Sure did.”

Dan started to laugh. “And do you think we’re all going to die?”

“You said it yourself, Mr. Arlington—we’re all gonna die, eventually.”

Something in Bernie’s voice caused Dan to shift in the black leather seat.

“But, see, they’re not letting me hold her anymore,” Bernie continued, “or go anywhere near her, you know? I’ve been hopping around from job to job, trying to stick. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I break down and smoke. But I always keep Sophie front and center, sir. Always number one.” He smiled and fished into his pocket. A wrinkled photograph emerged, torn in two corners. He handed it back to his director, and Dan saw two brilliant blue eyes smiling at him from beneath a brunette bob. “This gig will help me pay for her school, when I’m clean. I’ll get her back, Mr. Arlington.”

Dan studied the little girl in the photograph and stayed quiet for a long while.

“It’s all about the ‘if,’ man,” Bernie said. “They say we’re all gonna get wiped by this thing, but there’s a chance. A tiny chance we don’t. And if we don’t, I’m not gonna tell my little girl I gave up on her at the end.

“She’s all I’ve got, anyhow,” he finished.

Dan tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. “Alright, kid. I’m down a DP, all my grips, the lighting tech, and Agarra. But I’ve got the footage in the trailer back at the house and a decent camera right here in my pocket. How would you like to be a star?”

The inner city was on fire. Businesses burned, black smoke poured thickly into the streets. Bernie nearly ran over a group of looters as they charged across the road, jewelry pouring from their bags. They passed cars and trucks and emergency vehicles snarled together in twists of metal and ash.

High in the firmament above them, XGR-2443 had grown larger than the full moon.

“Well,” Dan said, “it won’t be too hard to find a place to set up.”

“I think I need to stop, Mr. Arlington,” Bernie said.

An orange glow enveloped the front windshield. Bernie pulled to the curb and the duo exited the BMW.

In the middle of an intersection, a school bus sat in a crown of flame that licked at the sky. Glass from shattered windows coated the pavement, catching the chaotic light and scattering it like gold confetti across the onlookers.

Dan approached one of them, a woman wearing a long braid and a cap that reminded him of “Newsies.” He held up a hand to shield his face from the furious heat.

“It’s transfixing,” she said. Her face was devoid of expression and the flames reflected in her pupils.

“First time?” Dan asked. “I’ve seen a few burning buses in my day.”

The woman turned to him: squinted. Then recognition dawned.

“You’re—you’re Daniel Arlington!”

Dan grinned. “The one and only.”

She grabbed his arm and squeezed, almost painfully. “The original *Backyard Apocalypse* is my bible. Two, three and four absolutely *fucked*, too—respectfully, sir.”

The director’s smile flattened. “What about *A Parting at the Start?*”

The woman’s expression turned quizzical. “I, uh, I’m not sure I’ve heard of that one.”

Dan sighed. “Well, if we make it to tomorrow, give it a watch. That’s my only good one, really.”

Bernie jogged over from the curb. “Mr. Arlington, the radio just said we’ve got an hour left.”

Dan turned back to the young woman. He looked at his hand and flexed each finger, one after the other. He could feel each motion with new clarity.

“How would you like to help me finish my masterpiece?”

Two blocks from the burning bus—past the charred corpse of a man who’d self-immolated and just beyond the front window of the Sunshine Academy Daycare where four children were playing duck-duck-goose—Dan found a blue 2020 Dodge Grand Caravan parked in the center of the street.

“Fucking providence,” he whispered.

Bernie had tied his unruly hair back with a scrunchie by Dan’s request—the director told him he’d look just like Josephine Agarra.

“Get on up there, Bernie!” Dan barked.

The young man smiled. “Sir, yes sir!”

The looters, rioters and revelers had left the street. Tones of blue and yellow had all but fled the sky, leaving only the asteroid’s infinite color of rust behind. The world was quiet.

Dan handed his phone to the young woman they’d met by the burning bus—her name was Julianne—and showed her how to frame the shot from below. “A true hero shot,” he said. He stepped to the side and marveled at his new set and crew.

“Ready? Action!”

Bernie tossed his hair and looked fearfully at the ground beneath the van. “So, this is the end!” he drawled. “And what an end it will be.” He thumped a hand to his chest and launched it toward the sky, stabbing a finger at the asteroid.

The ground began to shake, and XGR-2443’s stony bulk flared as brightly as the sun itself as it entered the upper atmosphere.

Chills wracked Dan’s spine.

“So far to have come, and so little to show for it. Nothing gained and so much lost,” Bernie intoned.

A blast of hot air tore down the urban canyon, shattering skyscraper windows and blowing out the van’s glass. The trio clapped their hands over their ears.

“Keep going!” Dan screamed over the din. “This is it!”

“The world,” Bernie whispered, falling to his knees. “Now I see it. Its grandeur, its tragedy, its deserts and oases.”

Every line, Dan wondered to himself. *My script—flawless.* To his right, Julianne rolled on, enraptured.

“Finish it!” Dan roared.

Bernie’s gaze caught his director’s and he opened his mouth to deliver the final line. He wavered. A tear slipped from the corner of his eye.

Bernie looked up.

• • •

The shimmer of cricket sounds woke Dan from his resting place on the pavement. Cold asphalt bit into his cheek. He felt around his mouth with a swollen tongue, finding a void where one of his incisors should have been.

The street was dark and silent. The sun had set once again, leaving the night sky as he remembered it. The red glow had gone.

People were milling about the sidewalk, some in pajamas, others in torn and wrinkled business attire—all wearing expressions devoid of affect. Dan pushed himself wearily to his feet and looked around. Julianne was nowhere to be seen, but his phone was lying on the ground a dozen feet from where she'd been recording. He gasped as he picked it up—a spider web of cracks crisscrossed the glass.

“No, no, no,” he mumbled. He punched at the power button repeatedly. The phone didn't respond.

XGR-2443's airburst had tossed the van on its side. When Dan walked around it, the first thing he saw was the dark pool oozing from beneath. Then he saw the young man resting within, the back of his head lying open against the pavement, blonde hair arcing around him like beams of radiance. He was still smiling.

Something solid and round lodged itself in Dan's stomach. He turned away.

He shuffled toward the sidewalk, cast in the pale glow of the moon, and tapped dumbly at the shattered screen.

“What's wrong, mister?”

A doe-eyed girl in an ash-stained nightgown stared up at him from her place seated on the curb.

“My phone broke,” Dan said dumbly. “It's got the last shot of my movie on it.”

The moonlight caught in the icy blue rim of her irises.

“You ever seen *A Parting at the Start*?” Dan asked.

She shook her head.

“... *Backyard Apocalypse*?”

She grinned and nodded.

Dan sighed. He sat down beside her, groaning at the effort required. “That's alright. This was supposed to be my return to form. Lift the franchise back to where I left it, you know?”

The little girl stood up and threw her arms around the director's neck.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

He didn't move, letting the girl hold him. She smelled of chamomile tea.

Dan sat with the girl for thirty minutes before her mother found them and graciously offered to take him home. The drive back to the farmhouse was illuminated only thanks to the rising sun, as XGR-2443's near-miss had knocked out power to the entire state.

The airburst had blown out the house's windows and torn the rocking chairs from the porch and tossed them onto the gravel driveway. Dan passed them in silence, pacing into the kitchen where the bottle of champagne sat on the counter—untouched, by an unknown miracle. Even the glass in his trophy case had shattered.

When he reached the bottle, he peeled off the note Mary had left and read the lines once, twice, three times. He closed his eyes for a moment, then crumpled the note into his fist.

Daniel Arlington walked back into the foyer, champagne in hand. He uncorked the bottle, tipped it, and let the bubbling memory flow, pouring out and onto the stained and faded floorboards, seeping through the pores and pockets of the wood and down into the still-breathing earth.