

**Uh oh, overflow, population, common group.
But it'll do, save yourself, serve yourself.
World serves its own needs, listen to your heart bleed.
Tell me with the rapture and the reverent in the right, right.
You vitriolic, patriotic, slam, fight, bright light.
Feeling pretty psyched.
It's the end of the world as we know it.
It's the end of the world as we know it.
It's the end of the world as we know it.
And I feel fine.**

R.E.M., 1987

It's The End of the World as We Know It (and I feel fine), Document

June 15, 3:55 p.m.

"I'd guess we are about here," Susie indicated by placing her forefinger a few centimetres from Whitney on the map she'd just unfolded. "It seems so, oh, I don't know...so counterproductive to have come all this way and have to turn around. Maybe the people in Whitney are just scared given everything that's happened and we could establish some form of trade, or alliance, or even just friendly relations?" she stated, obviously unsure by the questioning cadence in her voice.

"I think you're too trusting," Mac began in response. "One of our species' flaws, I believe anyways, is that we trust others too easily. We give them the benefit of the doubt...and that can be used to great advantage by some, especially the corrupt and greedy...like our ruling caste, for example."

"Trust and hope are important to the human condition," Susie retorted.

"Hope?" Mac answered, raising his eyebrows as he glanced at her. "That's a double-edged sword too. Yes, it can help guide energy towards positive actions but false hope can be a huge impediment, causing misdirected behaviour or lack of motivation as the feeling that things will turn out fine requires no altered behaviour or actions."

He paused for the briefest of moments, then continued. "Just look at how much false hope has been bestowed upon the criminal, er, I mean political class with the misguided notion that they could actually help solve or manage some of the multitude of dilemmas complex societies create, rather than the totally self-serving sociopaths history has shown them to be. I tell you, Susie, my experience the past couple of years has totally killed my faith in the government and politicians. A legalised criminal organisation run by the clinically sociopathic is what our political systems have evolved, or should I say devolved into.

“Or how about the grand narrative that they've helped to push--mostly for the profit of crony capitalists--that technology will save us and the planet when in reality it's probably significantly contributed to the crises we've encountered over the years. Robots that have decimated employment in various job sectors. Exponentially increasing energy demands regardless of supposed efficiencies. Failed relationships because of social media. Algorithms that filter the various newsfeeds and ensure government and corporate narratives gain prominence amongst the masses.”

“I think you've been hanging out with Michael too long but tell me what you really think?” Susie asked, failing to suppress a smile at Mac's short rant.

Mac smiled back, “Okay, regardless of our philosophical differences regarding trust, hope, and humanity, I'm fairly certain that by the looks of that body, whoever is in Whitney may not be too affable to a friendly alliance. So, if we start back now we should make it part of the way back before dark.”

Susie sighed. “I was really hoping to get to Whitney. The girls have given me a list of items I really need to track down.”

Mac looked at her inquisitively.

“As prepared as my brother appears to be,” she began, “he really didn't plan on hosting a number of women. We have a severe shortage of feminine hygiene products.”

“Ah, yes, I can see the dilemma. It's not really something Sam would have foreseen methinks.”

“Besides,” Susie continued, “where's your sense of adventure?”

“Isn't that how you coerced me into getting this lovely facial accoutrement?” Mac reminded her, rubbing at his scarred cheekbone.

Susie demurely avoided his gaze as she answered, “I suppose you're right.”

“Hold the presses. That's the first time ever that I've heard those words strung together by you and aimed my way,” Mac stated, his smile widening. “Who are you and what have you done with my beautiful companion?”

Susie pushed him playfully, causing him to lose his balance as he squatted in front of the map. Mac set himself and then continued, “Okay, if Whitney is out of the question let's look this way,” he suggested, moving his own forefinger to the east over Madawaska.”

“We're looking at more than just a few days then, I'd guess. We will have lost two days just to get here and get back to Sam's,” Susie offered. “Another day or more at least to get to

Madawaska and then another one or two to look around, and finally the return trip to the camp. At least a week," she concluded.

"I know you'd hate a few extra days of privacy with me," Mac said, leaning towards her and brushing his lips and the tip of his tongue against her closest ear.

Susie shuddered in response, feeling that rush of hormones that accompanied the initial stages of romantic relationships. Obviously, it wasn't the first time she'd ever felt this rush of emotions and the physical responses that accompanied them. It wasn't even the first time she'd experienced them with Mac. She felt them nonetheless and smiled at him. She traced his scar with a finger and leaned towards him, gently kissing his mouth. "I'm glad you're here with me. The world may have gone to hell in a handbasket but I feel just fine with you around."

"I think there's a song in that sentiment somewhere," Mac responded, smiling broadly. "Anyways, if time is a factor we can save some if we want and don't even need to detour to the cabin to let the group know our change of plans. Sam gave me one of his long-range walkies so we can just check in once we're in range," Mac continued. "He was going to keep his on while we were gone so we should be able to contact them as we pass by."

"Good thinking," Susie shared, nodding her head as she folded the map back up and placed it in her pack.

"It was Shane's idea, actually. A bit paranoid I thought but given this," he pointed to the decaying body as he stood back up, "obviously quite prudent. We should alert them to this as well. We don't want anybody heading this way until we can maybe scout out the situation better, unless we want to do that instead of turning around. Although I would feel better doing it with a gun or two instead of just this crossbow," Mac finished, pulling at the weapon hanging from his shoulder.

Ginger suddenly neighed and reared his head against the rope. Mac reached forward and pet his nose, "What's up pal? Smell something?"

Mac's initial reaction was to scan the nearby woods, thinking an animal was likely approaching. It was just a moment later that Mac heard the easily recognisable sound of motorcycles in the distance coming from the direction of Whitney. Given the warning sign they had just come across, it seemed prudent to avoid interaction with anyone coming from the west.

"We need to get off the road, immediately," Mac stated with as much urgency as he could without freaking Susie out and pointing into the woods. He pulled the horse's rope to get him to follow them in amongst the trees. Mac scanned the area quickly and headed towards the thickest brush, leading the horse and Susie. With any luck, the speed of the bikes and their sound would prevent their detection. It would be unlikely that the riders would be scouring the woods for travellers, unless of course that's why they were out and about.

They hadn't reached the thickest of the woods when the sound of the bikes was fully upon them. Mac hoped it was enough to avoid being seen. Given that he only briefly caught sight of the three motorcycles that passed by them, he felt fairly confident that he, Susie, and the horse had gone undetected.

"I'm worried about my Dad and the others now," Susie stated as they remained motionless for the moment, frozen by their concern.

"They'll be okay. They were headed in the opposite direction and left yesterday morning. Your dad's a resourceful guy and he said they were going to stay off the main roads. They'll be fine. There's no reason to believe they'll encounter danger," Mac responded reassuringly, although in truth he was now unsure.

"We weren't expecting any, either," Susie replied, her face betraying her anxiety.

Mac was just beginning to think they could head back to the road when the sound of the motorcycles intruded once again.

Instead of racing past Mac and Susie on their way back towards Whitney, however, the bikes stopped close to where they had left the road. Mac's mind raced. He pointed towards a small fallen tree and urged Susie to take cover by simply stating, "There." She quickly moved to the spot he indicated and lay on the ground. Mac knelt beside her as he removed his pack, quietly digging the binoculars out and focused them on the riders dismounting their bikes.

All three of the men had rifles slung over their backs. Again, Mac regretted having left his own shotgun behind. He unslung the crossbow and as quietly as possible cocked the bow and loaded one of the metal bolts he had. The last thing he wanted to do was get into a firefight against three rifles when all he had was the crossbow and six bolts, and the blades he had brought as a last minute addition to the crossbow would only be useful in close quarters.

Mac watched as one of the men fished around in the pack on the back of his motorcycle. He withdrew a pair of binoculars himself and began scanning the woods. "Shit!" Mac exclaimed and then whispered to Susie, "Keep down. They're looking for something. I just hope it's not us." He and Susie would be almost impossible to see amongst the bushes, deadfall, and trees, but the horse wouldn't be so difficult. Mac just hoped it kept quiet and still. He looked over and could see that Ginger had found a clump of wild grass to munch upon. So far so good, he thought.

"I'm sure I spotted a horse as we rode by," the youngest of the three stated as he began scanning the woods with the binoculars.

"I hope you're sure, Brian, because although finding more horses is on our list, today was more about surveying further east and checking out several of the farm houses along the way for supplies."

"I thought horses were pretty high on our list of priorities, Stan. Are they not?" Brian responded, somewhat defiantly as he packed away the binoculars and unshouldered his rifle.

"What's the gun for, kid?" the third man asked.

"Bears. Or maybe Stan, I haven't decided, Nick."

"Fuck, kid, you're really pushing your luck," Stan barked. "I really don't give a shit who your father is. Show a little respect or you can be bear food for all I care."

"Chill out gentleman," Nick interjected in an attempt to calm his companions. "We've already scoured a few homes and located lots of goods for Bill and his group to retrieve over the next few days, Stan. The council will be plenty pleased. And certainly another horse would be great to add to our growing team of horses. They'll come in plenty handy for helping sow the fields. To say little about their use as transportation when our fuel eventually runs out."

"Stop being such a kiss-ass, Nick. It's embarrassing," Stan rebuked.

"Can't help it, friend. I was a mediator in the big city before I gave it all up and moved north to join my wife's family and try my hand at farming. It's in the blood."

Without warning, Brian fired two quick shots with his lever-action shotgun in the direction of Mac and Susie.