

THE BALM AND THE WOUND

Robin Wasserman

Here's how it works in my business: First, you pick a date—your show-offs will go for something flashy, October 31 or New Year's Eve, but you ask me, pin the tail on the calendar works just as well and a random Tuesday in August carries that extra whiff of authenticity. Then you drum up some visions of hellfire, a smorgasbord of catastrophe—earthquake, skull-faced horsemen sowing flame and famine in their wake, enough death and destruction to make your average believer cream his pants—and that's when you toss out the life-preserver, the get-out-of-apocalypse-free card. Do not pass *go*, do not collect \$200, do not get consumed by the lake of righteous fire, go directly to heaven on a wing and a prayer and a small contribution to the cause, specifically the totality of your belongings and life savings, 401Ks and IRAs—for obvious reasons—included.

Here's how it's supposed to work in my business: You tuck that money away for safe keeping, preferably in a bank headquartered in a non-extradition country, await the end days with clasped hands and kumbayas, and then, when the sun rises on an impossible morning, oh, you praise the Lord for hearing your prayers and offering a last minute reprieve, you go ahead and praise yourself for out-arguing Abraham and saving your modern day Sodom and Gomorrah, and let's

all give thanks for living to pray another day, even if we live in bankruptcy court.

If you don't have the juice to pull that one off, there's always the mulligan—*oopsy daisy, misread the signs, ignored the morning star, overlooked the rotational angle of Saturn, forgot to carry the one, my bad*. Dicey, but better than drinking the Kool-Aid—and if you can't envision a Great Beyond worse than prison, you might be in the wrong line of work. You do your job right, by the time the fog clears and the pitchforks and torches hit your doorstep, you're long gone, burning your way through those lifetimes of pinched pennies one piña colada at a time.

Like I said: Supposed to.

I'm a man who likes a back-up plan, a worst-case-scenario fix for every contingency, a bug-out route in case anything goes wrong. Never occurred to me to plan for being right.

The signs are bullshit. Have to be. You know who "read" the signs? Pick your poison: Nostradamus. Jesus Christ. Jim Jones, Martin Luther, the whole Mayan civilization. Every flim-flam man from Cotton Mather to Uncle Sam. And every single one of them screwed the pooch. Then, somehow, along comes me. You know what they say about those million monkeys banging away on their million typewriters until one of them slams out *Hamlet*?

Just call me Will.

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HEAVEN IS A PLACE ON PLANET X

Desirina Boskovich

It was 8:34 p.m. on a Tuesday, and it was almost the end of the world.

Actually, the world was expected to end on Friday, at precisely 5 p.m., eastern daylight time. This was not a forecast, or a projection: it was more like an appointment.

On Friday at 5 p.m. eastern, a thousand high-powered laser cannons would fire simultaneously from their hidden positions in outer space, instantly reducing Planet Earth to vapor and ash. At the exact same moment, the consciousness of every living human being would manifest itself on Planet Xyrxiconia. This planet was located a trillion light years away in a far-flung region of the universe Earth's scientists had not yet glimpsed. There, on Planet X, humanity would find themselves in fresh bodies—remade vessels. These reincarnations would live eternally in a world of infinite luxury.

At least . . . that's what the aliens claimed.

They'd arrived two weeks ago. They'd been rather vague on the subject of their origins; apparently, they came from all over. And they'd been traveling a while. They'd spent more time in the dark empty places between stars than we could possibly imagine; they'd been staring into the endless void since before we were finger-painting on the solid walls of

caves.

Through human mouthpieces, the aliens communicated their expectations. There would be no end-of-the-world parties, no apocalyptic adventures, no doomsday loss of decorum. There would be no orgies, no mass suicides.

Directive: Continue about your business, human citizen. Wait patiently for the appointed day. Shop, work, eat, sleep. Stick to routine. And stay calm. This mandate came with teeth. The aliens suggested that one out of every thousand humans on Earth be appointed to the noble task of enforcing. They left the details to our local governments. When Italy, France, Switzerland, and Mexico formed a coalition protesting this tyrannical treatment, their heads of state were promptly vaporized on the spot.

After that, no one resisted. As directed, local governments staged lotteries. One in a thousand.

Of course, my number came up; it always does.

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It was 8:34 p.m. on Tuesday. I sat at the bar, running my fingertips across the polished wood, sipping whiskey that burned like fire all the way down.

This was typical behavior for a Tuesday evening; I was in the clear.

Across the bar sat a frumpy middle-aged white guy in a neon sweater vest, tossing me dirty looks. Finally he stood up, strode over, and slammed his glass on the bar beside me.

BREAK! BREAK! BREAK!

Charlie Jane Anders

Earliest I remember, Daddy threw me off the roof of our split-level house. “Boy’s gotta learn to fall sometime,” he told my mom just before he slung my pants-seat and let go. As I dropped, Dad called out instructions, but they tangled in my ears. I was four or five. My brother caught me one-handed, gave me a spank, and dropped me on the lawn. Then up to the roof for another go round, with my body more slack this time.

From my dad, I learned there were just two kinds of bodies: falling, and falling on fire.

My dad was a stuntman with a left-field resemblance to an actor named Jared Gilmore who’d been in some TV show before I was born, and he’d gotten it in his head Jared was going to be the next big action movie star. My father wanted to be Jared’s personal stunt double and “prosthetic acting device,” but Jared never responded to the letters, emails, and websites, and Dad got a smidge persistent, which led to some restraining orders and blacklisting. Now he was stuck in the boonies doing stunts for TV movies about people who survive accidents. My mama did data entry to cover the rest of the rent. My dad was determined that my brother Holman and I would know the difference between a real and a fake punch, and how to roll with either kind.