

**NO COMET**  
By Ray Vukceвич  
\* \* \* \*

CONVINCED THAT MY SLANT on Bohr's version of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics was our last hope, I bullied Jane, who didn't want to be married to me anymore, and Sacha into cooperating with a final desperate attempt to save the world.

"This is stupid, Tim," Jane said, her voice softened a little by the brown paper bag over her head.

"La la, la la, la la," Sacha sang. She banged the heels of her shoes against the legs of her chair in time to her tune. Wearing a bag over her head was still fun, I thought, but our daughter was seven and had fidgeting down to a fine art. How long would she stick with me?

I'd pushed away my plate, but there was a sticky spot, orange marmalade probably, where I would have liked to put my hands. I put them in my lap instead. Breakfast had been tense. Jane had banged some pots around, scorched some eggs, burned some toast, warmed some bacon. I wished I'd brushed my teeth before I put a bag over my own head.

Everything was tan, but not an even tan, I imagined it was like looking through the dry, mottled skin of some desert creature, maybe a horned toad. There was a seam where the brown paper overlapped and joined to make a bag, and I couldn't see much light through that double layer. If I tilted my head back carefully, I could see what looked like the letter H in some fancy font (except for the way the seam came up and touched the cross piece of the H) made from the overlaps needed to square off and seal the bottom of the bag.

"I don't think I could have missed the fact that a comet is about to hit the Earth, Tim," Jane said.

"Do you read the newspapers?"

"No."

"Do you watch TV?"

"You know I don't."

"How about the radio?"

"Well, no. Not today."

“None of your goofy friends do either.” I nailed down my point. “So just how do you think you would have heard about it?”

“That tone is exactly why I say we need to live apart, Tim.”

“Boop boop boop be doop,” Sachs sang.

“Everyone just relax,” I said. “And keep your bags on.” Things were slipping away. I needed to circle our wagons. It was vital that none of us give the world outside even a fleeting glance.

My own breath aside, the smell inside my bag reminded me of all the things you can carry in a brown paper bag. Curiously, the first thing that came to mind was books. Surely, I’d carried home more groceries in brown paper bags than books. In fact the name of the grocery store was printed right on the bag in red letters. Nevertheless, I thought of books, and clothes, and moving. I thought of garbage in the bags before I thought of groceries. Maybe it was because groceries spend so little time in the bags. I knew that if I packed my stuff up in paper bags, the bags might just sit for months in some cold new place.

“This isn’t just my plan, Jane,” I said. “The president has been on TV urging people not to look. Forests have been lighted to smoke up the skies. Teams are everywhere in primitive areas making sure no one looks.”

“Even if there is a giant comet about to hit the Earth, just what good do you expect these bags to do?” Jane asked.

“Things that might happen can’t be separated from the devices you use to measure them,” I said. “You can’t look at something without changing it.”

“What?”

“The moon’s not there if no one is looking. Or in our case, the comet.”

“Like the tree in the forest?”

“Sort of,” I said. “But that was philosophy. This is science.”

“Oh, right. Sure.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Sacha said.

“Soon, Honey,” I said. “Just hang on a little while longer.”

“Someone would peek,” Jane said.

“Maybe. But it won’t be us.”

“How can that matter?”

“This is the same argument you use for not voting, Jane.” I knew I should be soothing her instead of snapping at her, but I couldn’t help it. “It’s irresponsible. If everyone thought like you, no one would vote.”

“Who’s talking about voting? We’re sitting around the kitchen table with grocery sacks over our heads!”

Sacha giggled.

I decided to try silence on Jane. I could hear my own breathing against the sides of the bag, and with any little movement there was a rustle like dry autumn leaves in a green plastic trash sack. I could hear birds, too. They would be in the feeder outside the window over the sink. They would fly away if they caught us looking at them. I could pull the bag away from my face a little and look straight down and see my white shirt over the gut hanging into my lap. I could suck the gut in; I could sigh it out. I could see my tan slacks, my black loafers, and the black and white kitchen tiles.

Strange, but I couldn’t see the name of our grocery store through the bag. Had I put the bag on backwards? I twisted it around. I still couldn’t see the letters, and then I didn’t know which way the bag was. Were the red letters to the front or to the back? I felt unhooked, disoriented, lost.

Things suddenly got brighter. It is my opinion that was when the comet touched the atmosphere, and because it didn’t hit just then, I think the last person on Earth quit looking at it at precisely that moment.

“Don’t you see the sudden light of the fire?”

“A cloud probably just moved away from the sun,” Jane said.

I thought I heard some uncertainty in her voice. “That’s what you’d like to think,” I said.

“How long are we going to play this game, Tim?”

How long? Why, just until the comet’s gone, I almost said. It hit me then that Jane’s question was a good one. If finally no one was looking at the comet, did that mean it went away, or did it mean the comet was hanging frozen just inside the atmosphere, filling the entire sky, ready to plunge down on us as soon as we looked? Didn’t that mean we could never look? Didn’t that mean we were doomed to sit there at the kitchen table with bags over our heads forever?

“It makes no sense,” Jane said. “What about intelligences on other planets? What if some alien shaman is looking at your comet through a telescope?”

“One of your saucer people?”

“At least there’s good evidence for them. Unlike your stupid comet.”

“Jane,” I said, “if you looked out the window right now you’d see the sky filled with fire, and just because you looked, the comet would crash down and blow us all up.”

“You’re scaring me, Daddy,” Sacha said.

“Don’t worry, Honey.” I would have liked to touch her hand, but I couldn’t reach her. “Nothing can hurt you if you keep your head in the bag.”

“You’re teaching her to be an ostrich!”

“What’s an ostrich?” Sacha asked.

“Is that why you won’t let me have the weekends?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I really, really have to go, Daddy,” Sacha said.

I heard them shifting in their chairs, moving around, trying to be quiet, but not succeeding. I heard them whispering. Fear turned me to stone. The game was up. I pictured Jane quietly slipping off her bag and setting it aside, pictured her carefully removing Sacha’s bag, saw Jane grin and roll her eyes in my direction and put her finger to her lips so Sacha would be quiet, saw them both looking at me stiff in my bag, the two of them, the little alien, the Russian girl, our surprising blond Sacha, and the big one, looking so sweetly sad suddenly, Jane. It wasn’t that she hated me, I realized. She’d moved on when I wasn’t looking. She was bored, restless; we had so little in common these days. She wandered like a wounded bird, one leg missing maybe, circling east, and I plodded ever westward. What in the world did we have to talk about?

I saw Sacha make an O of her mouth when she looked at the window and saw the comet peeking in at us like an angry red eye filling the sky. I saw the comet leap to Earth and fire the trees, the city, our house. Burning hurricane winds knocked down our walls and crisped our skin and peeled our bones.

I cried out.

Jane snatched the bag from my head.

Sunshine turned the refrigerator into a gleaming white block, an alien monolith that had popped into existence among our chrome pots and wooden bowls. From somewhere far away came the tiny tinkle tinkle of an ice-cream truck. I looked at the window over the sink, and, in a flutter of squawks and black wings, birds fled the feeder.

“It’s easy to see what happened,” I said. “You were right, Jane. Someone peeked. But we didn’t. And because we didn’t, by the time we looked, we’d split off into a reality in which the comet never existed in the first place. We’re saved!”

“Oh, Daddy.” Sacha hugged me quickly, then ran off to the bathroom.

“Okay,” Jane said, “you can have every other weekend. But we take the cat.”

“What cat?” I asked.

\* \* \* \*

Ray Vukcevich’s first story in F&SF, “Mom’s Little Friends” (April, 1992), will reappear in *The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction*, to be published by St. Martin’s Press in October. He has since sold us several other stories, of which “No Comet” is the first

His short fiction has appeared in *Aboriginal SF*, *Amazing Stories*, *Asimov’s*, *Pulphouse*, and other magazines. He is a research assistant for the Institute of Cognitive and Decision Sciences at the University of Oregon, and is currently working on a novel.