

Still Life with Apocalypse

by Richard Kadrey

They're dragging another horse from the canal, its chestnut coat sheened bubblegum pink from the freon. Every night, more pools bubble to the surface from deep underground. Freon. Old engine oil. Heavy water from forgotten nukes. Dozens of animals drown in the stagnant pools every day.

Loose-limbed in death, the drowned horse sways, rag-like, as the little diesel crane pulls it noisily from the muck and sets in on the pier with the other bodies. In the blue-tinted work lights, we divide the dead into human and animal, sub-divide the animals into Mammals and Other, then sub-divide the Others into Vertebrates and Invertebrates, and so on.

I started out on Information Retrieval, swimming through submerged government offices, old libraries and bookstores, bringing back whatever seemed important. I came up in a police records vault, surrounded by mug shots and photos of murder scenes and rapes. I came up in an IRS office where a dissatisfied citizen had gutted an auditor, and placed the bureaucrat's viscera on a photocopier. I swam through hundreds of duplicates of his liver and intestines. I came up in adult bookshops and bought back waterlogged dildos and old issues of *Wet & Messy Fun*. Everything I bought back went into one big pile.

I wish there had been a war, a plague or a newer, grander Chernobyl. Something we could all point to and say, "That's it. That's what killed the world." But it wasn't like that.

It started in New York. Or maybe London. Later, someone told me it had been New Delhi. There was a minor traffic accident — just a fender bender — and someone missed a meeting, which meant someone else couldn't send a fax, which made someone else miss a plane. That someone got into an argument with the cabbie and was shot, possibly by the cabbie, possibly by someone nearby. Whatever happened, the shooting started a riot. TV cameras broadcast the riot live, which started other riots around the country. When the footage hit the satellites, riots exploded around the world.

In the Helsinki-Vantaa airport, rioters pushed vending machines from waiting room windows onto the parking lot, killing a visiting Spanish choirmaster. In Beijing, a mob went on a rampage destroying phone booths and overturning police cars. In New Orleans, children invaded the above-ground cemeteries and dragged the dead through the streets.

Ancient and secret national rivalries came to the surface. Governments went into emergency sessions. Some politicians saw the sudden eruption of violence as an attack on their citizens by foreign agents. Others claimed it was all an elaborate disinformation campaign, which maybe it was.

I can't say how long it's been since the world went to pieces. All the clocks have stopped. A couple of kids built a sundial, but with half the cities in the world still burning, the sun doesn't come around here much anymore. We keep warm by looting the libraries I used to wade through, burning first the old periodicals, then the card catalogs, bestsellers and self-help books, finally working our way up to the first editions.

Some days, the sky opens up and it rains fish. Sometimes stones or Barbie dolls. Last night, I cooked a sky salmon over a signed copy of *The Great Gatsby*. I shared the fish with Natasha, the mute girl who runs a crane, hauling carcasses from the freon pools. She's been staying with me out by the port, in the cargo container I commandeered. I killed a man to get the container and still have to slice and dice the

occasional interloper. Natasha's not shy and has done a few intruders herself. I assume they were intruders. Anyway, it keeps us in meat.

I'm not sure you'd call what we have an example of the Romantic Ideal. I live with a girl who can make gloves from a poodle's hide and scavenges boots for me in my size. She grows flowers in a bathtub on the roof and decorates our home with wind-up toys and parts of broken statues from museums all over town. I miss ice cream, convertibles and baseball. And Scorsese movies. I'm not fool enough to say that I'm happier since the world went away, but except for the rains of stones, I'm no more miserable.

They found a layer of zoo animals under the collapsed roadway of the Williamsburg Bridge. People over there have been living well on elephant steaks and giraffe burgers for some time. The local government wants us to help gather up the remaining body parts. We do. We don't ask why. It seems important to them, and here at the end, these little kindnesses count for a lot. Besides, the paper pushers refuse to let the world end until every form is turned in and properly initialed. Apocalypse is the last gasp of bureaucracy.

After dinner, Natasha and I sit on top of the cargo container watching a field full of police cars sink slowly into a newly risen tar pit. We and the neighbors give up a little cheer as the last car slides, bubbling, below the surface. Will the last person on the planet please turn off the lights?