

TWO YEARS AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD  
(D.R. Park)

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick RIBBET  
RIBBET RIBBET RIBBET RIBBET RIBBET RIBBET RIBBET RIBBET RIBBET

A hand flashed through the early morning light and struggled vainly with the very solid clock. It couldn't locate the lever to silence the alarm, so it slid a finger in between the two bells that the striking hammer was vigorously attacking.

RIBBET thwack RIBBET thwack RIBBET thwack RIBBET thwack RIBBET  
thwack

Jake Morly recognized irritably that this wasn't going to work. The hammer was now vigorously striking the bell and his finger. Noise and pain rapidly dispelled the blanket of sleep that he was so cosily wrapped up in. He squinched open one eye. He couldn't see a thing. He squinched open the eye that wasn't laying against the bed. There, that was much better.

He turned off the alarm and looked out his bedroom window, the window that contained no glass. It was going to be a sunny day. There wasn't a cloud in the blue sky. Light reflected its blue rays from the walls of the house across the street. The blue man walking down the blue street waved at him with a blue hand, noticing through the translucent wooden walls that Jake was looking at him.

Jake sighed and rolled out of bed. He hated blue days. He'd much rather gray days, which were much closer to normalcy than any other color day, but gray days were wet. He hated wet days, as well. At least it wasn't a yellow day with its billowing fog of brightly glowing mist that you could get lost in ten paces from your home.

Dutifully, he performed morning rituals; brushing his face, washing his teeth, and shaking his head from side to side until his disarrayed hair fell into perfect alignment and looked as if he just walked out of a barbershop. What used to be a barbershop, he reminded himself, sharply. Melancholy took hold for just a second, but he shook his head once more. His hair gleamed with the look of freshly washed.

Breakfast was the next order of the day. Jake sat on the see-through chair and gently placed his hands on the see-through table. Do I starve today? He was never very good at it, but had gotten progressively better. He visualized three strips of bacon, two eggs and two pieces of toast. Then, when he was sure he had the image perfect, he spoke the activating phrase. "I'm hungry."

Somewhere in the city, a pig ceased to exist. It didn't even have time for a surprised "Oink!" Other pigs who noticed the disappearance grunted sadly and nodded their heads knowingly.

This was an unfortunate day for chickens, as well. After a prolonged study in the art of flying, one extremely intelligent hen had discovered that chickens could fly. Better than hawks. There was a certain way to position the wings, and instead of flapping with random abandon, just gently applying a forward brushing technique. She was a thousand feet in the air, ecstatic with her new-found ability. She must tell the others. What a day for the chicken kingdom! Freedom for all! She suddenly disappeared, to be replaced with two eggs. The eggs disappeared as well.

Jake opened his watering eyes. They had been pinched tightly shut with this bout of breakfast concentration. There before him on the table were three strips of bacon, crisply fried, two eggs, over easy, but no toast. Then he remembered

that toast was a bad idea and he was lucky he hadn't been able to conjure it. He was elated he had been able to do an almost perfect materialization on the first try this morning until he discovered that he had forgotten the plate. And the eating utensils. He retrieved a concrete fork and plate out of the cupboard, situated the food items properly on the plate, and began to eat.

While he was eating, Jake experienced another surge of nostalgia. It touched his eyes, briefly, causing a slight dampness to collect there. It touched his nasal passages, causing a slight blockage there. It touched his throat (which was at the moment trying to swallow a mixture of crisp bacon and over easy eggs) causing a slight choking there. This resulted with crying, sniffing and coughing in rapid succession. The crying and sniffing didn't do anything to alleviate the lack of air his lungs were suddenly demanding, so Jake concentrated on clearing his throat. His success was rewarded with food being sprayed all over the table. His breakfast was ruined, but at least he could breathe again.

"Oh, go away," he muttered. Food, plate and eating utensils disappeared dutifully. As did the table and chair. Sitting on the floor, on bruised buttocks, Jake thought about how miserable life had been for the past two years. It had all started with the end of the world.

The entire office groaned at the same time. It started as a low moan, then escalated into a louder moan, which ended in simultaneous exclamations of, "Oh, no!" As Jake's monitor had gone dead at the same precise instant of the group groan (of which his own groan had been a part), he knew immediately that the power had gone off. It had taken him three-quarters of an hour to write the article he had been working on, pecking at his keyboard with the two-fingered diligence that all newspaper reporters seemed to acquire. He had not saved his work to floppy disk, nor even had the automatic backup turned on in the word processing program. Irretrievably, his article was gone. Jake groaned again, which was echoed by the stricken group throughout the office. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who worked with the backup function turned off.

"What the hell happened to the backup generators?" someone yelled in the ensuing silence.

Jake's first thought was that the building engineers probably worked with the backup function turned off, but dismissed it. He sighed. This issue of the Daily Aberteen Chronicles was going to be late. At the time, he didn't realize how late it was going to be, which was never. But we'll get to that in a moment.

There was a groaning above their heads. This was not made by the humans on staff. Apparently, the office tower they occupied didn't like the idea of a power shortage any more than they did. Its groan became much louder. Jake began to shake. Actually, it was the building that was shaking. It was groaning and shaking.

It is at this point that it must be mentioned that human beings are inescapably intelligent when it comes to doom and gloom. They are instantly aware when it's about to happen. However, the intelligence required to avoid that doom and gloom somehow escapes those same humans. This became totally clear when fourteen people on the bottom floor of the twenty story building all tried to fit through the exit door at the same time.

After a couple of tense moments of furniture falling through the ceiling and barely missing some of them, crashing loudly, and heightening the fear that swept through all of them, these intelligent humans reorganized, pulled back from the exit, and

rushed forward to jam it again.

It was lucky for them that the steel doorframe had turned into a consistency of rubber and the glass had shattered and lay flaming like little hot coals on the floor. The door suddenly stretched open. They popped through in the same terrified group and fell like dominoes, picked themselves up, and ran into the middle of the street as fast as they could. This was not lucky for some of them as they had rushed blindly into traffic. Careening cars and bodies filled the air. In the meantime, the office building that had once contained the Daily Aberteen Chronicles offices collapsed in on itself with a curious series of thumps, crashes, tinkles, and ribbets. This was not lucky for the humans, occupying the twenty floors above the main floor of the building, who happened to be part of the collapsing.

Lucky for us we worked on the bottom floor, Jake Morly thought, who had petitioned for office space on the higher sections of the building because street noise from the entrance interfered with his thinking process.

All along Street 221 buildings collapsed on both sides with that curious mixture of thumps, crashes, tinkles and ribbets. It was as if a demolition team had come along, planted all the proper explosives in the proper positions, and then without warning flicked the switch that was labeled, "Do not flick this switch unless you REALLY mean it." There must have been a "PS" underneath that label that read, "If you do flick it, don't tell anyone first." Someone had really meant it. And nobody had been told first.

Jake watched a bus, totally out of control, swerve into a wooden street pole. At least he thought it was a street pole. It was completely transparent. The bus hit very hard, went "ribbet", then bounced back at the same speed it hit the pole. Other vehicles were doing the same sort of thing i.e. hitting objects, bouncing away from them with that "ribbet" sound, then folding in on themselves like suddenly deflated balloons.

Jake opened his mouth.

"What the hell is going on?" someone shouted.

Jake closed his mouth. No sense repeating the man. Instead, he looked up and down the street, taking in all that he could see. There were no buildings left standing on either side of the street as far as he could see. The last of the runaway vehicles had come to a halt, quivering gelatinously in their final positions, while their owners desperately stretched material and clambered out. It looked like some kind of bizarre birthing scene. A person would come out, headfirst, then shoulders, then rest of body, to plop on the ground beside the vehicle. The similarity to birth became more pronounced as each one of the escapees began to cry when they looked at the mess that used to be their vehicle.

In the rubble of buildings there were bodies. In the streets there were bodies. Jake watched a man shake his head, fish out a cigarette and try to light it. His lighter wouldn't work. He resorted to the spare packet of matches he found in another pocket. They wouldn't light. He noticed that glass was burning in one of the cars and held his cigarette to it until it lit. He puffed on the business end of the cigarette until it started to burn eagerly, took a deep satisfying drag, blew the smoke out in a pink cloud, developed a curious expression on his face, then keeled over. The body count went up by one.

People other than Jake who noticed this happening immediately took their cigarette packages out of their pockets and threw them away with all their strength. All except one man, who snorted derisively and lit a cigarette on the same piece of burning glass. One pink cloud later, he joined his fellow on the pavement. People hastily checked their pockets again just in

case they missed cigarettes on the first go-through.

There were no sirens from police cars, ambulances, fire trucks, emergency vehicles or any other type of noise generating vehicle. There was only the sound of rubble settling into itself.

Suddenly, everything that could be seen turned blue. Jake heard someone scream, "It's the end of the world!" That someone was right.

A month later a lot of people, along with Jake, were starving. Most people were suffering from nicotine withdrawal, fighting constantly with spouses, and generally being miserable. They were starving too, but it didn't seem to matter as much as cigarettes had. Whatever had happened, for whatever reason, had affected everything.

Electricity wouldn't work. It didn't seem very important when they first discovered that. Man had lived without power before Ben Franklin began flying kites. "No problem," said the people of Earth in one mind. "We just have to tough it out." There was no light at day's end. People found by rubbing two pieces of glass (which had become opaque) together, they ignited very quickly and provided heat and light. People used anything glass in their homes, including windows, to provide this comfort. "See, we can make do." Fridges began to thaw, and spoiled food became more predominant than edible. Again, lucid minds took over. "We'll just have to ration foodstuffs from the farms. We'll help each other to survive." The riots only really began when they discovered they couldn't see their computer screens on their laptops and that they wouldn't turn on.

Long-range communication (like, to the next block) was seriously hemorrhaged. This went hand-in-hand with the electricity thing. Nothing seemed to be able to generate a current of any kind.

Wood became a transparent, unbreakable substance. Money was useless, as it was made out of paper, which is made out of wood. Nobody could open their wallets to get at it. Strangely enough, any type of insulation, especially pink fibreglass, also became transparent. This didn't hamper people too much. They got used to the Peeping Toms checking them out when they went to bed. Most ignored them. Others hung sheets over their walls. Still others, boldly and with leering grins, provided a striptease as they readied for bed, dancing to imaginary music.

Steel turned into rubber. This was the heartbreaker. Although it still had its nice shiny surface, anything made out of steel became as flexible, pliable, and downright unsupportable as a piece of rubber. Buildings and vehicles collapsed, unable to stand under their own weight. Mechanisms refused to operate with rubber gears. And curiously, any time a piece of metal was hit with an object, it made a low "ribbet" sound, just like a frog. Horses were suddenly the rage as they were the only means of locomotion, other than walking.

Some plants, and foods, were extremely poisonous. During that first month, people were continually asking each other, "So, what killed Bob? What was the last thing he ate?" Or, "Try some of this nice blueberry pie," after which they would stare diligently at the person in question who was eating it, just to see what happened.

Pork was all right. As a matter of fact, its flavor came close to the legendary taste of ambrosia that was spoken about in religious sectors. Trade in pigs skyrocketed. Alcohol wouldn't do its job. Nobody got drunk any more. Well, they did when they figured out that beef had become an alternative substance that provided all the effects that alcohol had once provided, but left no hangover in the morning, especially if eaten raw. Trade in

cow stocks skyrocketed. This didn't mean much to the cows, as they were generally so inebriated they didn't know much of what was going on, anyway.

Weather patterns developed into technicolor occurrences. Blue meant sunny, gray meant rainy, yellow meant foggy/hazy, red meant extremely cold, green meant snowy, brown meant smoggy (at least everyone recognized that one), white meant very, very hot (fry eggs on the pavement type of heat). Any hue of these colors meant a combination of weather. Black meant it was night and you might as well stay home.

Jake refused to list any other changes in his mind. They were endless. He concentrated, instead, on what the eggheads had come up with. They had worked diligently to produce a theory for these bizarre and strange effects and had schooled their friends with their theory. They told two friends, and they told two friends, and so on.

The general theory that was produced by scientists and philosophers (when it finally came around to Jake three weeks later) was this: Earth's solar system was traveling through space (i.e. the universe) at approximately sixty-five thousand miles an hour. The universe, which was also expanding, was traveling at a different rate. It could be faster; it could be slower. That part they didn't know. The universe was also infinite. Any part of the universe didn't necessarily have to agree with any other part of the universe with the fundamentals and laws of physics. Logically, if the laws of physics had changed, Earth was now in a different part of the universe where the normal set of rules no longer applied. Everyone would just have to muck along until they discovered what the new rules were. Lynch mobs became the rage. There was a sudden shortage of scientists and philosophers and the theory got shelved until something better came along.

Amazingly, people began to discover how to build things. They found out how to cut wood with a piece of glass. They just slid it along the surface and the glass heated and separated the wood as if they were using a knife. Glass cutters now really were made out of glass.

Concrete became the new wonder substance. It could be cut with a knife (made out of plastic), or any other sharp edged object (except glass for some weird reason), but maintained its shape and strength. The first thing made was a clock. People always liked to know what time it was and since their little digital watches no longer worked, (and they couldn't see the time through the opaque covering if they had) this seemed like the best idea.

Circles made out of wood provided the faces for clocks. The gears, intricate little pieces that provided hand movement and clock housing were made out of concrete. The bells were made out of steel, and were found easily on the old rubber-like clocks found in many abandoned stores. They were made out of steel because steel made that irritating "ribbet" frog sound, and it was reasoned that people would wake up more quickly by irritation than by bell tones. Besides, they couldn't find anything that would produce bell tones. Rubber had disintegrated into powder, so they couldn't check that for bell sounds. The only problem with the clocks was that they were extremely heavy. Once placed on the invisible table beside the bed, they tended to stay put.

People were making do on their new/old world. When they found out that they could do magic, they were making do even better. The first person who discovered how to do magic was one of the starving masses mentioned earlier. Dreaming of porkpies, and vividly visualizing them, he had spoken out loud, "I'm hungry." There materialized before him a pie, crust golden brown, steaming gently, the tantalizing smell of pork-ambrosia wafting through the air. Immediately, the man had seized the pie

and stuffed it into his mouth as fast as he could eat it. It was unfortunate that he had forgotten that flour products now killed as quickly as tobacco leaf, and you didn't even have to light it first. It was fortunate that other people had witnessed this event. Choruses of "I'm hungry" rang out in the night and foods of all kinds started appearing everywhere. Interestingly enough, not one item was a pork pie.

They ate around the corpse silently. Well, they were starving, so there were noises of teeth crunching, mouths drooling, a few "ummmms", two or three slurps, and a general cacophony of swallows. Other than that, they ate silently. Then they saluted the corpse with a few rounds of beef slabs, the sounds of toasts to their now dead benefactor slapping fleshily all around.

People experimented. They discovered that by saying, "Oh, go away," caused anything that it was directed at to vanish. Many persons of an unlikeable nature disappeared before it was also discovered that by saying, "Well, I'm staying," neutralized the effect forever on a personal basis. Of course, the second phrase had to be said before the first one, but not everyone caught on to this at once. Earth's gene pool was suddenly strongly enhanced as the more intelligent people caught up to the dumber ones and told them to go away before they could think about staying.

One of the more startling effects was produced by saying "substitution locomotion." Anything that this was directed to became able to float on air and was subject to guidance by a person's force of will. Broomsticks were very uncomfortable for males (although women generally loved them). They decided to use toboggans instead and were, for the most part, laughed at because anybody underneath the toboggan while it was flying could see through the wooden frame at the scrunched up buttocks of the pilot. Man had finally invented anti-gravity vehicles.

Jake shook himself out of reverie. Sitting on the floor with no breakfast, no kitchen table and no chairs did nothing to improve his overall disposition. That disposition was: he didn't like it. He didn't like this new world at all. He wanted the old one back, the one where you woke up in the morning and the only thing yellow in a blue sky was the sun. He wanted to use a stove that could turn on and burn your fingers when you absent-mindedly placed your hand on the hot plate. He wanted coffee that didn't taste like yesterday's mud pies and gave you a really good facial if applied when freshly made. Most of all, he wanted bells to sound like bells again.

Jake had made the personal discovery of what had happened to all the bell sounds. One night, while strolling through Aberdeen Central Parking, banging occasionally into invisible trees, he heard the sound of angels singing. Tripping over invisible roots, he was led by this sound to the edge of the lily pond. Hundreds of bell tones, in perfect harmony with each other, sang into the night. He sat to listen and was entranced. One frog, bolder than the others, hopped almost directly in front of him, opened its mouth and emitted a perfect bell tone, octave No. 4, on the "C" scale. Then it stretched its ugly little mouth in the hugest grin it could without splitting its head in half, as if to say, "See what we get out of this. Finally, no more ugly croaking, no more ribbeting." It only had time to blink once before Jake's foot connected and sent it hurtling with a wet splash back into the pond. Jake hadn't been back to the park since.

"Oh, God, please," Jake prayed, kneeling piously in his kitchen, head down and eyes tightly shut. "I've never asked you for anything before. Well, I have on several occasions, but you

never answered those. Just this once. I'll never ask you for anything again. Won't you please make things normal again? Really, I mean it, whatever you want, I'll do. I'd do anything for a cigarette and a good cup of coffee."

For no reason other than an extremely coincidental coincidence, on the order of one to infinity minus one, it was at that very moment that Earth left the blanket of the space anomaly that had covered it for just over two years and entered the normal space-time continuum, continuing its sixty-five thousand mile an hour journey. Three million people fell screaming to their deaths when their thought powered vehicles suddenly became ordinary objects, brooms and toboggans, and rediscovered gravity.

When Jake looked around and saw that his walls were no longer invisible, he ran to the front door and threw it wide open. It was raining people. They were quite noisy about it, too. Other than that, sunlight streamed inside bringing normal, almost forgotten, colors of daylight. He ran back inside, upstairs to the bed stand, opened its now very visible drawer, and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He struck a match that lit with the tantalizing aroma of sulphur and applied it rapidly to a cigarette. Puffing blue-gray smoke leisurely, lazily, he leaned on the sill to his bedroom window, looked up into a sky of cloudless azure and beamed a radiant smile.

"Thanks," he said. "I owe you one."

END