

Grinding to a Halt

By
Gerri Leen

We should have known something was wrong when they solved the Black Dahlia murder. How many years had it been, and suddenly her diary just pops out of the earth after a little earthquake (by L.A. standards), and they learn some sleazeball porn financier had invited her to his house for the weekend, and that led them to find his diary buried in the cellar of the rest home he died in? I mean how often does that happen? Only we weren't paying attention to how weird it was (probably because nothing defines weird like the whole Black Dahlia thing). We just watched. Movies-of-the-weeks were made, Elizabeth Short became a household word again for about nine months, and then life went back to normal.

Only, not really.

About a week after that, over in Scotland, old Nessie finally popped to the surface and stayed awhile. News crews came; photos were snapped. She turned out to be some survivor from an Apatosaurusy water dinosaur clan. It was in all the papers, and she even turned out to like dogs. I mean to play with, not to eat. She was a vegetarian, lived on lake algae and the occasional head of lettuce thrown in by wasted picnickers. Nessie was all the rage for a while, then life went back to normal.

Only, not really.

Then they figured out crop circles. Wasn't UFOs at all but this retarded-looking stealth plane the government had dreamed up. Kind of looked like a flying garbage can. Only a schmooshed up one, 'cause it wasn't very tall, just round with a lid thing. You know, UFO-like. Been around since the forties and they'd never had one crash--at least not where they couldn't do damage control. This one made an uncontrolled landing as they like to say. Bounced its way across a Bucks County field not far from where they filmed *Signs*. Everyone thought it was ironic. And then life went back to normal.

Only--hell, you get the idea.

Then it seemed like stuff started to solve itself, almost all on its own, like how many lone gunmen there really were, and what the Nazca lines meant, and how the pyramids were built. They found out what Stonehenge was really for. (An ancient disco: who would have guessed?) Easter Island turned out to be early abstract art. Mona Lisa wasn't smiling because she had no teeth. The only unexpected books in the Vatican library were some eighteenth-century porn (they'd read it for the articles, of course). And Richard the Third didn't off his nephews. Even back then, babysitters were saying: "Someone's going to end up getting hurt." Only roughhousing in the Tower had proved fatal, and this babysitter knew she was going to take the heat. So she ran off after shoving the kids' bodies into the crawlspace under the stairwell: voila, a historical mystery for the ages solved.

We found out Anne Boleyn didn't have a sixth finger, Rasputin wasn't crazy, and Marilyn Monroe died just the way Spoto said she did. Jack the Ripper was the prince's doctor, after all; Shakespeare turned out to have written his own plays; virgin queen Elizabeth the First was not a hermaphrodite (or a virgin); and the Bermuda Triangle was actually one of several terrestrial black holes, which explained Amelia Earhart and the *Marie-Celeste*, as well as a whole lot of other things.

But it was the day Elvis showed up at the Dubuque *Wal-Mart* that we knew something big was happening. Things just sort of went to hell for a while then. People went nuts and panicked, buying up milk and bread the way they do before a snowstorm back east. (Oh, and cat litter, even if they don't have cats.) Other folks tried desperately to cling to their routine, going to work and eating lunch at noon like always (although not with bread because the panickers had bought all of it out, even that weird Pennsylvania Dutch potato bread that tastes really good but is sort of an unnatural color of yellow).

I was one of those who decided to live in the middle. I didn't see the point of showing up at my going-nowhere job at the video store, but I also wasn't going to waste my time looting the Seven-Eleven for pork rinds and beef jerky to go with my *Big Gulp* (or sitting in my dump of an apartment with bread and milk and cat litter). So I settled back with my best friend Eric in his mom's basement--she even provided her normal accompaniment of "When are you two deadbeats going to get off your asses and do something?"--and waited for what would come (sort of like those guys in *Shaun of the Dead*, harpy mom and all, only no cute girlfriend in sight).

We waited.

And waited.

We learned later that we were the lucky ones. In other parts of the country, stuff just started to wink out. I don't mean the lights went out. I mean the place that was, say, Eugene, Oregon just suddenly didn't exist. At first they thought there was a sort of order--Ephrata, Eugene, Eureka--and it was being perpetrated by some "E"-hating terrorist. But then Manassas disappeared and shot that theory to hell.

Some scientists thought the terrestrial black holes were to blame, and a bunch of people went down to take readings near the Bermuda Triangle. But then Key Largo vanished and so did the scientist's base camp and they came home really fast.

After that, no one wanted to go anywhere. What was left of the television and radio services had people on all the time, trying to predict what area was going to go next. They'd say Brooklyn was a goner, and then BAM! Honolulu was history. No one knew what to expect, and me and Eric pretty much sat in his basement drinking Bud and watching what was left of life, and even his mom quit bitching at us and started to ask us if we wanted something to eat.

It was pretty damned depressing.

Some Christians commandeered the local access channel and said it was the Rapture. Then another group came on and said they were smoking weed or something, 'cause the Rapture just meant people were going to be taken up, not entire chunks of the country. And then the Vatican got on somehow--I guess if the Pope wants to access Channel Eight, he can--and said it was because our country was so sinful that it was being destroyed piece by piece.

We all were feeling pretty picked upon as Americans. And I had a hard time seeing that people in Ephrata were any more sinful than those partiers in Venice come Carnival time. They may not show body parts for beads like we do here, but they don't call it a revel for nothing. But then everything changed, and the Pope stopped telling us how bad we were 'cause the Pope up and disappeared along with everything north of the toe and heel of Italy and south of Austria.

It was a little scary seeing that big a hunk of the world just taken off the map the next day on the TV news. In fact, all over the map there were huge chunks of land just gone.

We weren't sure if it was scarier to have to wait for it to happen or to be the ones who were yanked out of existence.

That was the next series of debates: "Where did they go and what did they find?" "Is there any there there?" People tried desperately to understand what was happening. They turned to physicists first. But like always, each of them had their own idea and no one could agree. So they brought them all together onto one stage near Biloxi to hash it out, and that might have worked except the stage and most of the Gulf Coast disappeared. So maybe they're hashing it out in the other dimension. Or maybe they're just dead.

The only thing we know for sure is that we're running out of beer. The Bud is long gone, and we're down to a case of malt liquor we found in Eric's mom's basement. She's a recovering alcoholic, and God bless her, she's still off the sauce. Me, I'd be running down to the Glow Room for a pick-me-up, but she's sure the Lord has a plan for us.

I bet the Vatican thought that, too. And the Mormons--before Salt Lake City was swallowed up by nothingness. Mecca and Jerusalem are gone, too. The Ganges is still pretty much intact, and people are bathing like crazy.

"Dude!" Eric comes running down the stairs and I'm sure he's found beer finally. I look up and he's got this weird look on his face. "You have to see this."

He leads me upstairs, and his mom is cracking open a cold one and sucking it back, so I know it's bad. And we stand on his front porch and look into...nothing. It's not just dark. It's thick and it smells like empty houses, and it's cold like an open refrigerator door when you've been staring in thinking about what you want and your dad (before he died, anyway) yells at you to close it 'cause you're letting all the cold air out.

Eric's mom sits down on the porch step, her bare toes almost touching the nothingness, and starts to cry. I look on either side and see Eric's neighbors out on their yards and porches. Suddenly a bird flies right into the darkness. It's eerie. We hear it coming, making a weird, happy-sounding noise, and it flies right by my head so I hear its wings clear as day, and then it's just gone. No flapping noise. No happy song. Just...nothing.

Mister Jessup, who lives two houses down from Eric and has always hated us, looks our way. He waves, a pretty sad little wave with his hand just sort of sitting there, as if he's not sure what to do.

"You got everything you need, sir?" I yell out to him, even though I hate the old coot.

"I'm fine, kid. Thanks." Kid--even after nineteen years of chasing us off his property, he still doesn't know my name.

But he doesn't look fine, and then we hear a weird creaking sound (sort of like what the *Titanic* made in the movie before Cameron upended it and made the longest drowning ever, all so teenage girls could swoon) and suddenly Mister Jessup and his house and everything for the next half block is gone.

Eric's mom buries her head in her arms and makes noises that I think are prayers. I'm feeling sort of close to calling for some heavenly help, myself, only I'm not sure God can do anything. Because wouldn't he have done it by now? Or maybe he is doing it--maybe he's doing *this*? Maybe we are all sinners and this is judgment day?

"Boys," Eric's mom says, finally looking up at us. "You're good kids. I want you to know that. Damn fine young men." And then she stands up and dives right into the blackness.

I've never seen Eric cry. Not in my whole life. Not even when Mary Rittenauer kicked him in the nuts that time in seventh grade. He came close, but he didn't cry.

He cries now and suddenly I'm scared, and I grab him to make sure he doesn't try to follow his mom. But he doesn't try, he just sort of collapses into my arms and for a second I worry that someone will see us and call us gay or whatever, but then I realize there's hardly anyone left to see us. So I hold onto him and wonder if my old house is left, with the rose bush my mom planted before she got cancer and the swing my dad kicked to pieces after the funeral, just before he started the long job of drinking himself to death.

And then I start to cry, and Eric and I just stand there, holding on tight, and crying like two big girls until I realize there's this weird noise coming from behind us. And I look up, and it's like someone is re-making *The Birds*, 'cause there are tons of birds on the roof, staring at the blackness. And then one by one they take off and make that happy freakin' sound and just wink out of existence.

And we watch as more birds circle around until there's room enough to land, and they just keep flying into the hole in the world.

"You think they know something?" Eric wipes at his eyes, and he doesn't really look at me, so I know he's pretty embarrassed about the whole crying and hugging thing.

"Birds aren't exactly the braintrust of the animal kingdom."

"I know but...they sound pretty happy."

"When don't they?" But he's right. They do sound extra happy. I just don't like where he seems to be heading: a swan dive into the void.

"What do you think is out there?" We've sat in his basement for days and never talked about it. We've listened to newscasters and ministers and scientists, and occasionally made a sound that meant "Yeah, right," or "Hmmm, maybe." But he and I have never talked about it.

"I don't know." I sound pissed and freaked, and my voice jumps the way it hasn't done since junior high. "And I don't want to find out."

But then there's the creak and the birds all rise up in a big wave of blackness, the way they do sometimes when you're driving and you nearly go off the road watching them zig and zag in one big group-think motion. And the birds start the happy cry

again, and I look at Eric and smile (only my mouth shakes) and he smiles, too (and his mouth is shaking even worse than mine).

"Good times, huh?" It's the only thing I can think to say.

"The best, man. The best."

And I fling the can I'm still holding into the blackness, and I yell, "Okay, you son of a bitch. We're ready for you." And I'm glad I made it *we*, because Eric's my best friend in all the world, and if I'm going to have to die some weird death with spazzed-out birds, I'm glad he'll be there with me.

And I look at my watch, and as the cold hits me, I see the second hand stop just before everything goes black.

It stays black. For a second, anyway. My heart beats really fast, so I know I'm not dead, but I worry that I might be soon because it feels like my heart's going to pump itself out of my chest. Then the blackness is gone, just like a light was switched back on, and I see Mister Jessup still standing on his porch, and Eric's mom lying laughing on the grass below the steps, and the birds are flying all over like crazy things, only none of them poops on us.

"Is this heaven?" I ask Eric's mom.

She's looking up at us and shrugs, then she goes to get the beer can I chucked. And I look down at my watch and the second hand is moving again. Only it's running the wrong way. And I wonder if I'm getting younger suddenly, but I don't feel any different. I run into the house and turn on the water and stop it up so it collects, and then I let it drain. It's running the wrong way, too. And then I look outside, and the sky has gotten all dark and sort of orange the way it does in the winter just before a snowstorm starts. Only it was summer a few minutes ago.

Eric is looking out the window, and he turns and shakes his head. "You think it's summer in Australia?"

"Yeah, and maybe the water runs our way down there now."

He turns on the radio. The old mysteries may be solved, but it seems that where we are, what the hell happened to us, and how we'll ultimately be affected is now the biggest unsolved mystery of all.

"Weird, huh?" I look at Eric and we clasp hands for a second, and then I head out to see how my old house fared.

It's still standing, and the dog that lives there barks at me the same as ever. There are the roses my mom planted, and if time really was running backwards, I could stand here until she showed back up, and smiled at me, and ran her hand through my hair and muttered something about getting the scissors. But I don't think time is running backwards. I think it's just running different.

My mom's still dead. My dad, too. And I'm still me.

The damned dog's still barking like a fiend, too. The new owner comes out. His stare's just the same as ever, which is sort of comforting, and then he calls in his dog and shuts the door.

I think about my apartment and my job and all the things I probably should be doing now that there appears to be time for them again.

I could go back to school.

I could learn a trade.

I could do something--anything--with my life.

I turn and head back to Eric's and the news. I'll pick up some Buds on the way if I can find an open store. My future--now that I seem to have one again--can wait.