

Chapter 1- BEGINNING WITH THE END

Asteroid mitigation strategies are “planetary defense” methods by which near-Earth objects could be diverted, preventing potentially catastrophic impact events. . . While the chances of such an event are no greater now than at any other time in history, there is a very high chance that one will happen eventually. . .

Wikipedia - Asteroid-impact avoidance

It was sometime within the first few decades of the twenty-first century. How should we describe this particular time-period: Apocalyptic? Cataclysmic? Revelatory? To some people, these interpretations might be the consequence of misinterpreted Mayan accounts or ‘New Age’ Pseudo-science. Nevertheless, the criticism against weird prophecies based on ‘beliefs’ didn’t stop those ‘End of World’ doomsayers this time. Their dire predictions were fulfilled in their minds, as real scientific data materialized.

Let’s begin by describing this prophetic year from another point of view -- Henry Matthews’ house. Just before the sun rises, it resembles a typical suburban home with proper front lawns and manicured flowerbeds. When the sun finally does peek over the horizon to radiate its first light on the landscape, the truth shows its ugly head: weeds growing through the cracks in the asphalt driveway, one broken boarded up window on the second floor, the grass -- or should we say weeded lawn since it didn’t have much grass -- is cut every six to eight weeks or so, and the window sills and jambs are in desperate need of paint. You’d think the neighbors would be a bit fed up by the lack of reasonable standards on Henry’s part, but in this area at this time none of the neighbors were complaining. In fact, there weren’t even any neighbors living on Henry’s street this morning -- for a single solitary reason.

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The television came on . . . **way too loud!** Henry Matthews woke up and squinted at the digital clock on the end table. It was 8:02 AM Eastern Standard Time. The TV he heard was from the living room downstairs. Other than the annoying sound of it so early in the morning, the usual routine followed. He stretched himself in bed, glanced at the fifteen dollar light fixture on the ceiling he'd bought at Wal-Mart about ten years ago, and slowly got up.

"Hey dad, get up and come down here," Henry could hear John yelling from downstairs.

He pushed his 70-year-old body out of bed, dressed as quickly as he could, hurried downstairs, and stumbled into the living room. There on the couch sprawled John, his thirty-two year old son, watching the latest newscast on television about 'the asteroid'. It had been the leading news item for the past three years, and it was certainly dominating today's coverage. According to the report John was watching, it was still racing towards Earth.

As soon as his dad walked in he blurted, "It's about time you got up." He looked back to the TV and said, "Looks like it's official; it's gonna hit Earth in a couple of days."

Talk about an Aww-shit moment; this was the last thing Henry expected to hear as he sat in the armchair alongside the couch. They both listened to the newscast.

"This morning at approximately 2:30 AM Eastern Standard Time, the last of three attempts at sending missiles to destroy the asteroid, or at least move it off its path towards Earth, was taken. According to ODAA -- that's the Organization for Defence Against Asteroids -- the plan simply didn't work. This particular defence plan has been in the works for twelve weeks, ever since the previous attempt had failed, and was the last hope for solving this impending disaster.

“The biggest defensive co-ordination was between Russia and the United States with the support of most other nations around the world. Here is a clip from the news conference early this morning at about 3:30 AM EST. The President of the United States is speaking from NORAD headquarters in Colorado. Beside him is Major General Ernest McCuningham, the US representative in ODAA.”

Henry and John were completely focused on the TV report as the video switched to the NORAD headquarters in Colorado.

“I’m afraid to announce that despite all of the efforts at either destroying or changing the path of the asteroid towards Earth, we were not successful in our attempt. This is despite the great and valiant effort by all the people and nations of the world. We have done our best, and now it is time to apply the survival plans all around the world that most world governments have developed. I will now give the floor to Major General Ernest McCuningham who will provide you with a more detailed analysis.”

“Thank you Mr. President. I would also like to give my deepest appreciation to all my fellow colleagues for their valiant attempts at defeating this natural event from the solar system. Special gratitude goes to my esteemed colleague from Russia, General Tutonivich, who along with his colleagues in the Russian armed forces, have worked with us through thick and thin in attempting to find solutions to this imminent catastrophe.

“The latest group of missiles did reach their intended target at 1:06 AM this morning and were successfully exploded. Considering the fact that some parts of the asteroid have broken off and are not heading towards Earth as far as we can tell, we did notice a slight change in the main asteroid’s disposition. But after

carefully monitoring it for about an hour, we concluded it did not alter its course any more than the first two attempts a few months ago. The main part of the asteroid has only changed rotation and is still heading towards Earth. At this point, the United States and Russia haven't any missiles left to help in this tragedy. I will now turn this press conference back to the President . . . Mr. President. . .”

“Thank you General. I am devastated by these reports. We have done our best along with Russia, the NATO countries, and other nations that have played an important part, such as the People’s Republic of China. I will now emphasize what needs to be done in the next twenty-one hours. I am going to ask all the television networks to dispense with their regular programming and broadcast the safety and survival methods that have been published and demonstrated ever since this catastrophic event began. This should be shown consistently, along with any news, until this tragedy comes to an end. I would also like to ask any healthy survivors to be generous in their aid to unfortunate victims.

“I will now turn this over to questions. . .”

“Yes,” the President pointed to someone in the press area.

“Mr. President, after depleting the inventory of nuclear missiles, is there any regret in not using that other plan that was proposed -- about sending astronauts to place explosives on it -- to try to change the course in a more definitive manner?”

“Er, no . . . There is no doubt in my mind that we did the right thing. I am sure this other option would not have worked. All the scientists and engineers working with us from other parts of the

world have come to the same conclusion. Sometimes you have to realize that despite the advanced technology and science we have at the ready, we are still not advanced enough to handle everything the universe throws at us.”

“Yes,” pointing to another reporter. . .

“Mr. President, what are the current plans of the United States to decide what to do about where the asteroid lands. I mean if it doesn’t land anywhere near the U.S., what will the U.S. do to help other countries?”

“The current information we have is that the asteroid will crash in about twenty-one hours right in the middle of the United States at about a 35 degree angle from the surface of the Earth. This will cause massive destruction going northeast right into Canada all the way past the northern part of the province of Quebec. We are one hundred percent sure about this. As you know, we have already put the entire armed forces of NORAD on alert to evacuate as much of this area as possible. Many other countries have been sending over large numbers of troops and equipment to help both Canada and us. We are grateful for this. Since a part of the asteroid was blown off, it appears that the mass heading towards us will only be about sixty percent of the previous estimate. This is a little bit of good news. . .”

The television newscast returned to the local real time news anchor.

“The press conference went on for another 10 minutes. At this time, we are going to switch our broadcast to the procedures for evacuating whatever local area you are in. These videos will be

repeated over and over again, except for interruptions of any significant news . . .”

“Well dad, this is just about the worst-case scenario we can imagine isn’t it.”

Henry’s depression deepened as he absorbed the gloomy details. “I can’t believe this. I thought for sure that last attempt would work.”

“So much for the military-industrial-complex coming to the rescue, dad.”

Feeling a bit down, Henry hunched over and placed his elbows on his knees with his face in the palms of his hands.

John wouldn’t let up on his poor old dad and continued adding to his discomfort, “All our neighbors vacated the area weeks ago; seems they were the better risk managers this time.”

“Okay . . . OKAY . . . I screwed up. . . Ya, I should have had some kind of contingency plan.”

“Dad, I don’t know what made you think about going along with this ODAA or whatever you call it. My own gut feelings told me to vacate the city just like most of our neighbors did.”

“John, will you please calm down . . . **just calm down!**” Needless to say, there was a lot of tension between the two. “Know something John, it was a tragedy when your mom died of a heart attack the day before the asteroid announcement, and I might have screwed up in trusting this organization to save us, but you didn’t exactly turn me down when I offered to move you back into the family home after she passed away and after you split up with Liz. And there was nothing stopping you from leaving along with all those neighbors.”

“So, what do you think we should do?” said John as he tried to lower the *temperature*. Henry pushed himself out of the armchair, and walked around the living room shaking his head.

“It might be too late to escape our neighborhood or city. According to what I’ve heard, even though the vast majority of people have evacuated the area, there are still thousands of people trying to leave at the last minute by car, and they’re running out of gas and clogging up the streets. It’s total chaos out there since most gas stations can’t get their stocks refilled.”

“Great,” said his son in a condescending voice. *So much for relying on dad’s instincts*, he thought. “Did they get advice from you dad?” said John -- forgetting about lowering the *temperature*. Henry ignored the remark.

“Waaaait a minute; I just remembered something. Remember that doctor friend of mine . . . Frank Becaller.”

“Ya, I remember him. Wasn’t he here a few months ago about something,” John couldn’t remember why the doctor had shown up.

“He returned an item he had borrowed from me over a year ago and because this guy has owed me and your mom so many favors over the years, I might be able to wrangle a concession out of him.”

“What do you mean?”

“He mentioned something about the majority of local hospitals not being used -- despite the medical aid we will need -- because they’re within the outer edge of the asteroid’s explosion perimeter and probably won’t survive. He told me about an old bomb shelter that was secretly built underneath the hospital he’s associated with. He might allow us access to it. It’s located in downtown Toronto, and he figures since we’re far from the asteroid’s impact area, the wave from the explosion might not be strong enough to have any effect on this shelter. That’s where it could save us.”

“I didn’t know they made bomb shelters anymore,” said John.

“They haven’t made any since the 1960s, but this hospital was built around the time I was ten and because of all the nuclear bomb paranoia of the late 50s, a bomb shelter was placed there without the general public knowing anything about it. From what Frank tells

me, it was always used for storage, and everyone has forgotten what its real intent was.”

“What makes you think he’ll let us in?”

“Because he owes me big time.”

“Do you know where this hospital is?”

“I forgot to ask him when he was here last time. It never occurred to me I’d be going there. I’ll call him up right now.”

Henry called Frank on his cell phone, “Shit . . . he’s not answering. Let’s get the hell out of here and drive over to his office right away.”

As Henry went into emergency mode, there was an underlying current of remorse penetrating his psyche. He was leaving the home of both his childhood and the past twenty years of his life. He inherited the house from his mother and father who had passed away many years ago.

His late wife’s paintings were hanging on the walls; there were too many of them to bring with him. And where would he put them all? Numerous mementos were also being left behind: photographs, family gifts, personal items.

One of the most precious items he possessed was the small baby grand piano his mother had given him for his tenth birthday. Leaving it behind really saddened him. It was such a part of him that even when wives come and go -- two to divorce, one to death -- the piano had managed to stick with him his whole life.

If he had to move away from home for any long periods of time, along it came even when one of those soon-to-be-divorced wives didn’t. Henry was a career translator and part of his life was occasionally moving to different parts of the world.

Today’s events deeply saddened him.

Bearing all this in mind, they both felt compelled to move with lightning speed, pack minimal belongings in their backpacks, and scramble out of the house. Trying to find a bit of humor in their situation, Henry figured if there was a world championship in

stuffing backpacks, he and his son would be major contenders. Just before he closed the front door of the house, Henry took a long *last second* staring down the entrance hallway at what might be the last view of his home. He finally shut and locked the door. Despite the lump in his throat, it took him and his son less than two minutes to pack and get into the car.

Considering the tension between the two, they smiled at each other at how quickly their exit happened.

“If only Mom were here; she wouldn’t believe how fast we were.”

“What did you put in your backpack anyway?”

“I grabbed every bit of clothing in my drawers and of course I placed my laptop very carefully on top of everything.”

Henry laughed, “I did it the other way. I grabbed my laptop first, then my clothing.”

There was a lot of traffic on the way to the doctor’s office, but the heaviest part of it was going in the opposite direction, last minute procrastinators trying to get out-of-town. The doctor’s location was slightly to the south of where Henry and John lived, about a fifteen-minute drive.

Henry drove into the driveway of the Doctor’s combination office and split-level home. As he came to a dead stop, he noticed the eerie silence in the neighborhood. No parked cars or other vehicles were noticeable anywhere. He jumped out of the car and rang the front door doorbell. No one answered. He knocked loudly and still no one answered. He did the same thing to some of the neighbors’ doors; no one answered there either.

Henry returned to his car and told John, “This place gives me the creeps; let’s get out of here and go to that hospital. I’m pretty sure I know which one it is even though he’s never told me.”

About twenty minutes later, they arrived at what Henry hoped to be the hospital of interest based on a few hints his doctor friend had given him over the last few months. As he rushed out of the car and headed straight for the front doors of the main building, John yelled, “Are you going to leave our belongings in the car? They might get stolen.”

Henry glanced at John with a slight ‘you gotta be kidding’ look. Although not a soul could be seen, Henry grabbed his belongings just to placate his son. Next, he went back up to the hospital’s front door and found it locked.

Now, there was a real sense of urgency in the air as Henry desperately said to his son, “Let’s check all the other doors and see if any of them are open.”

After attempting this, they got the same result.

Frustrated, Henry scrutinized the area and said, “You know something, there’s a few cars in the parking lot, and I wonder if any of them belong to Frank.”

“What does his car look like?”

“I don’t remember,” said Henry shaking his head.

John had an idea, “Why don’t we go and look through the windows of every car to see if we can find any personal belongings that you might be able to identify.”

Henry took a deep breath, shrugged his shoulders and said, “It’s a long shot . . . but let’s do it anyway.”

There were only five cars in the lot, and they examined every one of them.

“I bet this is his; there’s a stethoscope lying in the rear seat,” said Henry as he peered through the back window of a minivan. “Let’s break into it, check the glove compartment, and see if we can accurately identify the owner.”

“Wait a minute; you can’t do that. This is a hospital; you’re always going to find doctors’ vehicles parked around here.”

“So what would you recommend?” said Henry with a slightly irritated voice.

After staring at each other for two full seconds, they decided to break in and eureka: documentation in the glove compartment confirming it was Doctor Frank Becaller’s vehicle. How lucky can you get!

“Time to break into the hospital,” said Henry stressfully.

With a determined attitude, both Henry and John explored the area searching for the easiest place to break into. Before too long, they discovered a fire escape -- designed in the fifties no doubt -- that led to boarded windows made of ancient and unhealthy looking plywood.

“I wonder what the possibility is of there being an alarm system connected to those boarded windows up there. We might be able to get through without upsetting any security. If we get in, we’ll play dumb and pretend we’ve been there all along or have just walked in some doorway on a floor that was not locked, so how can we be accused of breaking in.”

“Ya . . . right dad,” John usually admired the practicality of his father’s thinking; in this case however, it was more fantasy-like. John found an old pipe lying around, “Maybe we can use this to pry the plywood open.”

“Let’s go.”

They both climbed the fire escape, lugging their backpacks with them, and reached a landing platform near the plywood-covered window. John took the pipe, dug it into a corner of the plywood sheet that was a bit rotten, and with little effort completely pulled it off. They worked quietly on removing the other plywood sheet. After entering the premises, the plywood was neatly stored at a far wall to appear as if there had been no tampering.

“Did you hear any alarm?” said John.

“Nope.”

“Now for the real adventure,” said John. As they walked around in an area clearly used for storage, they noticed a considerable lack of inventory.

“The bomb shelter might be in the basement somewhere, so let’s go down there,” said Henry.

As they walked down several flights of stairs, they heard people talking. Henry signaled John to stop and listen but couldn’t make out what they were saying. The people then stopped talking and walked into a large room that appeared to be a cafeteria.

Henry placed his baggage on the floor in a corner of the stairwell and motioned for John to do the same. As he walked towards the cafeteria, Henry signaled his son to follow and make it appear like they were part of the group getting refreshments. The plan seemed to work. Among the twenty odd people there, they weren’t even noticed. They both lined up to get a coffee and then sat down at a table with other people who were having snacks.

The discreetness didn’t last long.

“Henry,” he heard; his friend the Doctor was setting something up at a table that looked like he was about to give a presentation.

“What are you doing here?”

Henry put his best poker face on and said, “I’m not sure what you meant Frank; you invited me to come with you to this hospital, so here I am.”

The Doctor glared angrily as he walked over towards Henry. “I didn’t ask you to come here Henry. I said it was a possibility and I would look into inviting you.” The whole room was quiet as everyone listened to what seemed to be a very upset and angry Doctor. “There’s a limited amount of space in this bomb shelter, and it can fit only twenty people. With you two guys, it will make it twenty-two.”

Henry responded, “Frank, I’m not fussy where I sleep or anything. Just give us the top of a shelf somewhere, and my son and I will stay there.”

Henry discreetly reminded the Doctor of one of several favors he owed him with the statement, “It’s like that sail-boat you parked in my dock when you thought I wasn’t going to come back for a few days. When I showed up, instead of getting upset with you, we both docked in a manner that appeared to fit into the limited space.”

Your move doctor, thought Henry.

John tried to hold back a smile. He knew his dad’s negotiating skills and cold reading techniques picked up over the years could do wonders.

On a personal level, the Doctor knew he owed Henry big time for all kinds of things. On the current logistical level of the bomb shelter usage, he owed the nineteen people sitting in the cafeteria.

With a slightly exasperated look on his face the Doctor said, “I’ll talk to you later; now let’s get on with this meeting.”

As the meeting went on, it was obvious that it was just a friendly get together to introduce one another and go over a few rules about the way things should happen and what to expect in the way of food availability, etc.

One thing Henry eventually realized was that everybody had been expected to bring their own food since there was none in the shelter. Since he hadn’t been briefed like the other people, he and his son hadn’t brought anything.

“Any questions?” said the Doctor. There was silence. “All right everybody, we might as well go down to the shelter.”

Everyone rose and proceeded to the stairway just outside the cafeteria. Henry innocently sat there with his son as the Doctor approached him.

“Henry, I know I owe you a lot, and I’m sorry if there was confusion regarding an offer to come here, but there are a limited number of people that can get into the room downstairs.”

“So what do you want me to do, Frank?”

Frank knew Henry had him; he was not about to let him and his son face sure death.

“How the hell did you get into this place? It was supposed to be locked up.”

“We had no trouble at all; there was an entrance somewhere to the south of the building that wasn’t locked, so we walked right in. I could show it to you if you like.”

Henry had guessed right about two things: one, Frank did not know everything about the hospital entrances and building structure, and two, he would not have the time right now to go and check it out.

“Henry, I have no time for that, so let’s get downstairs and see what we can do.”

They both picked up their respective backpacks, and as they followed Frank downstairs, John quietly joked with his dad, “You’d make a great game show host dad. I just haven’t figured out which one yet.”

When they got to the grimy basement area, John said, “Look at this place, miles of pipes, conduits, boxes and all sorts of containers, makes for a rather awkward walk.” After a good deal of dodging and weaving, they finally arrived.

“John, I think there’s enough room for two extra people, except we’ll have to depend on the generosity others to get anything to eat,” mentioned Henry.

The asteroid was due in about fifteen hours. Along the way, Frank commented that at least there wouldn’t be any radiation to worry about -- unlike a nuclear blast -- and they might only have to be down there for a couple of days.

Henry and John were shown where their little ‘headquarters’ would be, and it consisted of two large shelves with an assortment of boxes, cans, and bottles. After moving these items around to maximize space for themselves, the next few hours just drifted away. Some people quietly chitchatted, while others tried to sleep.

It was obvious to him that this bomb shelter’s normal usage was as a storage facility mostly for chemicals and strange liquids. As he

read the labels on some of the bottles, he wondered if any of them or even all of them were toxic. Hadn't anybody thought of that when they decided to use this place?

Henry placed his bag on the shelf, took some clothing out to use as a pillow, and lied down to relax. As he watched John climb up to the shelf above him, he thought about mentioning his concerns to Frank, but that would mean having to get up and right now, he was too tired.

“Dad, do you see all these chemicals? . . . Dad . . .”

Dad had just dozed off. . .