

99 Hooker
Vinegar Lake

April 15, 1994 – RIP

Of the two, the apocalypse had been harder on Thad's wife, Evelyn. She'd been more the social type—a real *people person*—back when there were people. Evelyn was eternally missing a party, a new line of clothes, and immigrants with their novel ways of spicing chicken at that one spot in the mall which was forever turning over and featuring new novel ways of spicing chicken. The last culinary surprise had been in the early post-historic days when she and Thad had found a can of *America's Best Stew* in a backpack resting atop a disjointed skeleton featuring the skull of someone who had once worn a red, green and black flag bandana.

"A Jamaican!" said Evelyn.

"Doubtful," said Thad. "Probably one of those Little Lord of the Fly Fauntleroy from up the hill. Look at those plaid shorts."

Evelyn replied, "Perhaps he strayed too far from that prep school."

"They probably ran him off because he couldn't stop coughing."

"Maybe he was a loner." Evelyn picked out the can of stew and dropped it in her Gucci pigskin bag.

Evelyn hated to admit it, but, if she thought about it, she missed the daily pop of meaningless factoids from the media: which country drank the most alcohol per capita; how many Americans believed in angels; what was the longest running Broadway show without a child actor. There was no news, no fads, no take-out, and little fun since the world had ended.

The rare person who found Thad and Evelyn's stone and plastic cottage tended to be either a doom and gloom type or holy roller—neither known for their Pictionary enthusiasm. 99% of Evelyn's days and 100% of her nights were spent with Thad, a man, who after twenty years of marriage and eight years of survival promised few surprises.

A mahogany bookcase spoke of a different world full of travel, mystery, romance and self-help. A 1930s radio on the mantle was the least sad media memento because it still worked. Hardy, radiated hermits had sprung up like mushrooms, dotting Old New England with ham operators. A framed Pink Floyd record cover hung on the wall. A computer mouse had been playfully snapped into a mouse trap too many years ago to be noticed.

Evelyn was bored and a little down.

Thad on the other hand secretly enjoyed the quieter landscape. Before the apocalypse, Thad had been a man born out of time. Modern life had been too lively, too demanding. Thad enjoyed looking at the calendar which forever marked *April, 1994* with its close-up photo of a weirdly bumpy, hyper-colorful hummingbird. The peaceful rows of empty Sunday through Saturday boxes beneath the bird's long curved proboscis relaxed Thad. What could be better than nothing to do? Thad had always thought—and the apocalypse had just sealed the deal—that people, by and large, were a pain in the ass and that most of the stuff they used to do was just stupid.

Thad had never understood what on earth kept Evelyn hanging around the butt end of parties or author events. What childhood trauma had conditioned her to think that other people could give her whatever it was she needed? Before Thad had learned to keep such thoughts to

himself, he might have moaned, “Evelyn! Can’t we just go home? The whole thing’s been over for an hour!”

“Just wait,” replied Evelyn, “I’m just killing some time before I have a chance to ask the author why she set her detective novel in that part of Alaska.”

Once upon a time Evelyn might have added in her gentle condescending voice, “Thad, I know people test your patience, but you might realize one day that some of these folks might know a thing or two that you don’t.” But Evelyn had also learned to keep her thoughts to herself. Their marriage had been a slow refinement of silence, a tacit agreement of mutually assured discretion. Even when Evelyn had been confrontational, Thad would not have deigned to unravel the insults buried within her Midwestern aspirations to culture, aspirations he found symbolized in her love of shrimp cocktail, lamb with mint jelly scooped from its jar into a miniature silver-colored serving bowl, and baked brie with grapes scattered about a plate like so many misaligned planets. No. Thad had had no need to understand Evelyn’s disdain for his indifference, for his failure to aspire to some better self. In Thad’s opinion, it was the world that needed to ratchet down its ambitions. Like a secret everyone knows, like a proxy war, like a pyramid scheme, like an all-you-can eat diet, Thad would simply wait for the truth to be revealed and be proven right. The wave of calamities now referred to as The Apocalypse had more than proven his point. Moreover the gravitas of a ravaged planet suited Thad’s sense of import and rendered the opening of a local sushi bar as impossible as it once had been ridiculous.

(Vinegar Lake continues in J Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1, spring 2012)