

Daybreak (an excerpt, read the entire story at rickohler.com/writings)
A Short Story by Alex Jones

Null: Blue Hour

I spent the last few minutes of the cool night staring thoughtfully at the moon, the one sacred signal that held the decaying world together. As its cool pale light shone down, it illuminated the ruins that were our home, a calm reminder of the safety we still had left – a fleeting reminder, but a reassuring one. As the moon slowly drifted away from the remnant we inhabit, the cruel reminder of our misdeeds began to take its place. A scorching reminder of the failures and sins we had committed. Daybreak. The end times. The great rapture. Whatever it became known as carries little importance now. With no media left to spread advice, or stories, or propaganda, what was the point of naming the great cataclysm that had left society in ruin? My family always calls it “Our Destiny,” as if to shed light on something that truly had no redeeming qualities. As I looked outside to see when my family would return from their journey, as I always do, I began my bitter goodbyes to the comfort of the night. A new day was soon to begin, and with it brought new trials of uncertainty and fear, as well as opportunity and hope. I shut my windows as to avoid any exposure or contamination. I began to pray to my family for their safety home, and went to gather my belongings to help pass the endless day. How I longed to travel outside myself, for my worry and paranoia grew larger with each passing day. I had to keep it together, as dawn approached.

I: Dawn

Crimson blood stained the skyline as the sun began to rise into the sky, bringing forth its heat and malice. As the oxygen ignited and the colors burned brighter than fire, I began to remember the beautiful days that predated the end. Bright blue skies, lush green trees, sprawling cities teeming with life. Recalling a much more beautiful and simple time nearly brought tears to my face. My dried, cracked, haggard face. What had only been a few mere years had aged me and the others who had survived for what seemed to be decades. I remember it like it was yesterday; the sun was shining, the breeze blowing gently, with the cool air serving as a brief reprieve from the sweltering heat...

“Hello?” a raspy voice crackled from my radio. The small sound sent me into a frenzy as I sprinted to the radio as my ears rung from the simple greeting.

“Yes, yes, is anyone there?”

A brief reprieve now long sought after to survive the blistering heat. I collected myself as thinking of times of old could only bring harm and pain to an already troubled mind. Bringing myself to my feet, I walked over to my “workbench,” or what was simply just a repurposed desk. I set down my radio which I had been carrying with me as I always do, and attempted my daily “ritual” of trying to make contact with my family. Turning the rusted dial in an attempt to crystalize the completely static nonsense my radio vomited out. After minutes of utter incoherence, I began to lose hope as I always do. I half-heartedly convinced myself that tomorrow would be the day as I set off to the limited food supply that still remained in our house. Choking down the blandest crackers and driest... meat (if one could even call it that) was a daily ordeal, but a necessary evil.

I replied, hoping and praying to elicit a response from the mystery voice that sat in front of me. I waited for what seemed like hours for the disembodied voice to call back out to me. Static buzzed as it jump started my heart after a long comatose period of nothingness. Crackles and faint murmurs echoed from the device I clutched tightly in my sweaty hands.

I couldn't make out any words until all of a sudden, "11.3493° N, 142.1996° E," I heard distinctly from my radio. My mind took moments to comprehend but then I realized what had just been presented to me. Coordinates. Hope. Someone. They were not far from me either, only a few hours away. At this point I didn't care who it was, just hearing anyone's call made me almost burst with excitement. I raced to the nearest pen and paper to write down the coordinates as they quickly began to fade from my clouded and confused brain. After scribbling down what I could remember, I knew I had to go. No matter the cost, no matter the struggle. I had to go as soon as possible as I dreaded the thought of arriving too late. I didn't care where, it could have been scavengers waiting to rip me apart and eat me alive for all I knew. But it was something, it was a light in the eternal darkness my life was heading towards.

There was only one problem in my way of what could be an infinitely better existence, or certain demise (an outcome which didn't faze me in that moment). The sun. As I glanced outside at the great anger and anguish stared right back into me with an unrivaled fury. I needed a plan. Fast.

II: Morn

I had gathered all of the possibly useful items in my house. As I began to put on the makeshift hazmat suit I had built from the spare survival resources around my house, I began to ponder what I was really up against. When governments were still trying to prevent panic and issue instructions on how to stay safe. They conveniently omitted any information on what the real danger truly was. Many claimed any exposure to the sun would result in instant death, others intense heatstroke, while some even went as far as to say it caused a sort of virus. I knew better than that, but I decided to be over-prepared rather than underprepared. Cramming my radio and the few food scraps left into my bag, I felt my stomach begin to churn. What if I never found what I was looking for? What if I was walking into a trap? What if my crude protection wasn't enough? What had initially seemed like an exciting opportunity, now felt more like a death sentence. But did I even have a choice? No. After arguing with myself for what felt like an hour, I knew I had to go. After wrestling with my makeshift suit, I was finally fully covered from head to toe. Grabbing my bag, I swallowed hard. The little saliva in my mouth slowly inched down my dry throat. I was already feeling the effects of heatstroke before even stepping foot outside. I approached my door, breathing heavily over what was to come. This was it. Destiny. Certain demise. Did it even make a difference? I undid the seemingly ancient, rusted locks upon the door, and kicked it open. Blinding light and blistering heat would be my only companion.

III: Noon

Immediately a wave of dry heat sent me stumbling backwards. My body was completely sealed from the elements and yet I still felt as if I were completely engulfed by flames. My eyes burned as desperately blinked in an attempt to rehydrate them. Every inch of

my body was in agony. I wanted to give up right there and then. What was the point of enduring this torture for what could potentially be nothing? I stumbled back into my house and I realized why my family had left at night so long ago. Somehow even though it had only been a few minutes our house had been filled with sand and rubble. It was almost unrecognizable. As my head began to spin from exhaustion and confusion I grew increasingly panicked. Had I been outside for hours and not realized it? How was my house so quickly ravaged by the elements when it had been fine mere moments ago? I felt sick. I wanted to throw up and I think I may have if not for the dryness of my mouth and throat. But as the initial panic slowly began to subside. The true fear began to creep in. The sense of dead one gets where their stomach drops and they feel hopeless and ill. I had no home to go back to. I either had to make it to the mysterious coordinates or die trying.

After a few more moments of dry sobbing, I began to rise to my feet once again. The heat was unbearable. Every step felt like it took all of my effort, and each breath sent pins and needles down my throat and into my stomach which only further worsened the nausea. I spent a few minutes plotting the proper route to take in order to reach my destination. I began my trek into the endless desert. Or at least, I thought it was endless, as I could only look down at what was near my feet, as looking anywhere close to the sun meant immense pain along with seeing bright blotches all over. There was no breeze; everything was uncannily still. My ears began to ring due to the sheer absence of anything to hear. My mind began to wander. I remember thinking about when this all began. I think I remember crying? Or at least hearing someone else crying. It had been so long and my mind was so hazy that I couldn't remember. All I knew was that I had to keep moving. All I had to focus on was taking one step after another. Don't think about anything else. Ignore the pain. The hunger. The thirst. The agony. The torment. Keep moving. Just keep moving.

IV: Evening

The stomach pain had become far too intense to bear; I needed to eat or I would pass out. I had thankfully planned for this as I stuffed some food in my gloves in order to eat while my suit was still fully on. I painstakingly forced myself to maneuver the food from my gloves to where my face is in some sort of contortionist dance. I must have looked like I was losing my mind. After choking down dry meat which tasted absolutely disgusting, I realized the heat must have rotted it in the short time I had been outside. It didn't matter, as it gave me the energy to persist. By now, my feet were soaked with sweat, while my mouth and eyes were as dry as the desert around me. The sun was now deep orange, as it cast the rest of its fury upon me before giving up to the moon. Looking directly at it would certainly spell disaster, as my eyes were so dry I didn't know if they would recover from the harsh glare.

Time passed.

By now I was beginning to grow worried. I should have been there by now. I was lost. I had overestimated my ability to navigate this endless purgatory I now was trapped in. Nothing around me but sand. The more nervous I grew, the more I began to deeply consider the theories I had often scoffed at before. Was there really a great rapture? Had everyone else ascended to another plane of existence? Was I left behind by some merciless god? Some

enraged deity punishing me to this seemingly eternal damnation for sins I had committed? Or perhaps it was even more chimerical than that. Maybe some all powerful cosmic entity had come down upon our planet and whipped out our population leaving me behind to bear witness to the end of humanity? Had the sun exploded and sent a shockwave that annihilated everyone else? Did some virulent disease spread and devoured the flesh and minds of all it touched?

WAS I THE ONLY ONE LEFT ON THIS WRETCHED PLANET?

These thoughts only further sickened my now diseased mind. I had lost all sense of purpose and direction. I now only wandered to find some sort of signal. Some beacon in the eternal darkness I was trapped in. The sun's harsh glare only further reminded me of my seemingly personal torment. As my mind began to grow numb to my surroundings, I lost my balance and tripped on a rock half buried under the sand. My mind went dark.

V: Dusk

I woke up lying on the sand. My suit was gone but my body lay untouched. I didn't know what was real anymore. Had that all been a dream? I breathed a sharp breath and took in as much oxygen as I could before stumbling to my feet. The sun was now a half circle slowly falling over the horizon, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. I looked around for any sort of sign of life. But I was alone. I had no other choice but to walk forwards. The sand now seemingly began to grip tighter at my feet and almost pull me under. I felt as if I were walking through thick heavy mud. I finally saw something on the horizon. It shimmered in the waning sunlight, almost like a mirage. I sprinted towards it as fast as I could. With each step it seemed to get further away, as I wondered whether I was actually moving or not. The sky began to transition from bloody scarlet to inky blue. I didn't know what lay ahead of me; I just knew I had to reach it.

Hours passed. Days. Weeks.

Or maybe mere minutes, how long it truly was I had no idea. None of that mattered anymore, as I had reached my destination. A large gaping black hole laid in front of me. About twenty feet in diameter, it seemed to have no bottom. Surely this was just a hallucination conjured up by the ever consuming heat that still plagued the air. But it felt different. It felt, real. After being so unsure of everything that had happened in the past day or so, somehow I knew this had to be real. Not only was I sure of its definite physical existence, I could also feel it beckon to me. It seemed so impossible, this huge gaping hole that seemingly had no sand falling into it. Even when I kicked sand into it, it just seemed to disappear instead of falling in as it normally should. Its oppressive aura terrified me, and yet put me at peace. At that point I knew this is where I was supposed to end up. Correct coordinates or not, I had reached my destination. I needed to be here. I began to think of my family, where were they? Were they long gone? Did they wait for me at the bottom of this hole? It felt impossible but true at the same time. I felt real tears stream down my face as I questioned my own existence. Had I really been called here? Was the radio signal even real? Did any of that even matter at all? Did I even matter at all? Somehow I knew the gaping pit before me could answer my burning questions.

None of it made sense, but that was okay. I braced myself. And jumped into the abyss, leaving the sun's gleam far in the distance.

VI: Twilight

I remained in bed. My family would come and check on me every day, but each time I saw them their expressions grew more grim. I couldn't see them, but I knew this to be the truth. I could hear them, and yet I couldn't speak to them. Day in and day out they would come in to see me, as I lay motionless. My body no longer ached, my soul no longer quivered, my mind no longer thought. The inky darkness surrounded me, but I could still hear my family speak sweet nothings to comfort me. They spoke somber elegies in my ear to remain connected with me, almost to keep me with them. Remembering the halcyon days long past, speaking stories of memories I no longer had. Day after day they returned, until their voices became less frequent and more anguished. I had become the source of their grief, yet I did not know why, nor would I ever. I fell further into the pit, as the light at the top began growing dimmer with each passing hour. I did not know what awaited me at the bottom, nor did I know what had existed at the top. All that existed was the black cold stasis I lay in, as I fell further and further into darkness. One day, my family would stop coming to my side.

Finis: Midnight

I sat at the bottom of the pit, unharmed. My mind was no longer my own. I only awaited the darkness. I could not feel anymore, and my ears had gone numb like my eyes. I wasn't afraid. I didn't feel anything anymore, as it was no longer my place to. Soon the darkness came, and I began to drown in the shadows. I sank to the bottom of the abyss. I didn't know, and I didn't feel, but almost as if someone had told me. The end was here. My body had been claimed, and so had my thoughts. Even the darkness soon would pass. The only sense of existence came from the cool pale light of the moon. But the sun would soon rise. It always did. I had to keep it together, as dawn approached.