

# TOTAL GALAMITY

BY M.J. ANDERSEN

**T**HE SCIENTISTS got together in California recently to talk about what to do in case a big asteroid comes hurtling toward us. I picture them sitting in folding chairs, and somebody giving them handouts. The scientists say this asteroid possibility is not even funny: the odds of a big chunk slamming into our planet are much better than is desirable. The big chunk could wipe out civilization, which would ruin any long-range plans, such as training for the Olympics or organizing a class reunion.

I think these scientists are sincere. Still, I would have had one thing to say if I had been at that conference: don't make me laugh. If there is one thing I know, it is how dicey it is to live on this planet every day. A person focusing on the big chunk could get blindsided by a lot worse things at home, and it would not be funny.

My notions along these lines began forming early, with the spectacle of my dad pulling something Saran-wrapped from the refrigerator and sniffing it with suspicion. His brow would furrow with concern, and he would lift his voice to my mother, calling, "Jo? Is this good?" Dad had had food poisoning once, and once was plenty.

At school our teachers brought up additional hazards lurking, incredibly, in our quiet and responsible town. We were warned against getting into cars with anyone who did not have proper ID, and instructed in all things that could lead to fire. Oily rags beneath the sink were the worst: oily rags could wipe out an entire family of four.

Moreover, we could be struck by lightning or electrocuted by sticking a fork into a socket. We could climb into abandoned refrigerators and suffocate. If we stuck an arm out the car window, even for a second, it could be torn off by a big semi truck coming the other way. Under no circumstances were we to touch cold metal with our tongues in winter. A child at our school proved how right this was: she placed her tongue against the swing-set frame one day. A teacher had to rush out to the playground with a pan of water to free her, pouring a little water and a little more till the tongue came loose. For many days after that, we gathered near the swings, soberly regarding the pole where we were sure we could still see a shred of Debbie's tongue.

I was not much older when, at Thanksgiving dinner with the Scandinavian branch of our family, tales of domestic and farming disasters were told, one after another, all ending in terror, mayhem, or death. "And then that Mrs. Pedersen," Aunt Marie said. "Her stove exploded." We sat transfixed, scarcely able to swallow our turkey.

Evidence of a perilous universe kept accumulating. I thought an idea of mangoes and turquoise seas would prevail after my trip to Hawaii, in 1978. Instead, any mention of the place never fails to evoke a certain avenue of trees that I was told were replacements, planted after a coconut palm lightened its load by one and ended the prospects of a

baby being wheeled by in a buggy.

It may be that certain minds are simply prepared to be impressed by such calamities. It may be something we have inherited. The last time I visited my young nephew, I sensed the emergence of a kindred soul. At 5, already alert to the riskiness of our world, he had taught himself to read, very likely to arm himself with as much information as possible against disaster. His parents had just purchased a set of Childcraft encyclopedias, featuring articles about all the things that are supposed to interest children (the planets, the way things grow), but that never do. Eric cared only for the adults' supplemental volume, which catalogued all the possible childhood diseases and provided grisly photos of the symptoms. One evening, he and I sat in a chair together, and leafed through. "Look," Eric said darkly, pointing to a picture of a mottled infant. "Thrush."

In other pages we noted the varieties of common plants that are poisonous if eaten. Poinsettias and irises are a direct threat. "Mom?" Eric called, his voice heavy with dread, as we focused on the pictures. "Do we have these in our yard?"

**M**EMBERS OF my family are not alone in perceiving that calamity threatens everywhere. Friends aboard buses in Latin America have reported brake failures and near-lethal journeys down scenic mountains. Newspapers offer accounts of people gaily backing over dogs or best friends in the driveways of tranquil suburbs. My friend Voltaire saves these stories in a folder, catastrophes being a special interest area for her. One of her more arresting clippings describes how two bus drivers in an obscure land attempted to give each other high-fives as they came at each other on the road, precipitating a crash that finished them off. "And how about that fatal relief package?" Voltaire noted last spring after our dithering planes dropped heavy bundles of supplies in Iraq, killing a few refugees.

Voltaire takes pains to distinguish catastrophes from tragedies. She has thought about this topic. To her, calling any of the events described here a tragedy would imply that someone is shuffling the deck — that there is some point in mind. Whereas according to her evidence, the runaway bus is a truer model of the universe. If she is correct, it is not wrong for scientists to concern themselves with the big chunk so much as beside the point. Even if they could design the world's biggest catcher's mitt, let's say, or levers by which they could get our planet to bob and weave, something else is bound to come up. Because, as Aunt Olga summarized at that soberest Thanksgiving, "We're in constant danger." If you don't believe it, take a walk on the wild side. Take a look under the sink. ■

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