

**ONCE AGAIN ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD**

A Short Story

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'You're afraid!' Galya said.

'No, I'm not!' Dobromir replied. 'I'm just not...'

'You're afraid, and it does you no credit,' she interrupted. 'Admit it to yourself at least!'

'Ohhh. I really don't want to talk to you when you start doing this! Please hear me out for once.'

She stood there, arms crossed, and looked away.

'It's not like I don't want children, I just don't know if now is the right time. You see the crisis that's been wreaking havoc for so many years now.'

'Yeah, right,' Galya exclaimed. 'I've heard enough of your excuses. If you don't know what you want from life, you can always find an excuse.'

'Oh, come on!' Dobromir bowed his head and clasped his forehead in his hands.

'We could have this conversation another hundred times, but I just can't see where this relationship is headed! You can sigh all you want.'

She paused for an instant.

'You're making me think about things I really hate thinking about.'

Hands in his pockets, he cast a reproving look at her. They both grew silent. Galya stared at her hands, Dobromir felt a knot in the pit of his stomach.

He didn't like these moments, not one bit. He knew he'd better do something about it. He actually wanted to. He'd pondered this over and over so many times. He understood her very well – she was a beautiful young woman. He loved her very much and she loved him no less. It was high time they had children – he was thirty, she was twenty-eight. It was definitely too late for both of them to start a new relationship, and pointless – they were perfect for each other. In other words, everything was just the way it should be, and yet...

And yet, the world around them wasn't the way it should be. Dobromir felt terribly insecure and, as much as he hated to admit it, was really afraid. If only she would understand him...

He took her by the shoulders and gently caressed her cheek.

Her eyes were still looking away.

'Let's give ourselves just a little more time...' he began.

'Yeah, yeah, just a little more time, so we can hit fifty and die happy!' This time she started crying. 'Frankly, I don't understand you in the least any more. I can't figure out how it's possible you didn't grow a bit in those five years we've been together! Not only is it I who's going to have to bear the grunt of it – you won't have to breastfeed, or change the nappies – but to cap it all, you're sabotaging me...'

'I'm not sabotaging you...'

'Let go of me!' she said, throwing her hands up in the air and stepped away from him.

Dobromir covered his face with his hands and sighed.

'I just don't know what to think any more,' she went on. 'You go on doing your complicated men's calculations that have no effect whatsoever. I'm no longer having this conversation with you, I'll just be making my own conclusions. I can manage life on my own, you know...'

She gave him a meaningful look and headed for the door.

'Alright, look,' Dobromir said, trying to stop her leaving, 'let me tell you something...'

'I don't want to listen to you!' she waved a dismissing hand.

'But it's not fair!' he exclaimed.

'Alright, what?' she tossed her head. 'What are you going to say?'

Her warm brown eyes looked at him passionately and endearingly. He felt her both helpless and omnipotent. Divinely beautiful and earthly warm and benevolent. As if she wasn't capable of hurting him, even if she wanted to. At the same time he felt he was killing her with his reluctance to satisfy her overwhelming desire to have children.

Dobromir felt terrible but he knew that unless he did something right away, the ramifications of his fears and anxieties would be far greater. He could not afford to lose her, nor could he keep scorning her feelings. It was as if he were crushing his own heart. He swallowed noisily and spoke:

'Let me return from this business trip.' She tried to say something but he stopped her with his hand: 'Just one week! The Austrians are chasing our tails now to deliver the project, and we're a bit over the deadline, and I'm very nervous at the moment.'

She appeared to be losing interest, so he spoke emphatically:

'But! Next Wednesday we're going to make our baby.'

She glanced at him a look of mixed feelings.

'Here, I said it! Rest assured, I'm not going to back out.' He ran his fingers through her hair. 'Right?'

She was still quiet.

'I'm really quite stressed out from work right now, and I don't want you to conceive in a hurry like that. I only need two days to release the pressure - and parents we shall be.'

He uttered those last words with a broad and brilliant smile, embracing her. They kissed long, a kiss she only interrupted with an innocent 'Remember you promised!', to which he responded with the usual 'M-hm'.

The plane for Vienna took off at half past six, so Dobromir had to get up rather early. His baggage had been packed the evening before. He was far from being as organised as to get everything sorted and ready so he could be off to the airport first thing in the morning. When he was little, he kept turning up late at school for this precise reason. Galya, however, was quite pedantic and had packed his suitcase the previous night, she'd made him a sandwich so that he didn't have to spend money at the airports, and she'd posted a note on the door reminding him to not forget his passport. She felt good taking care of somebody.

He insisted she didn't rise in the morning to see him off. It was half past four after all. They said goodbye in bed - with an inkling of emotion from yesterday's conversation.

Dobromir put his clothes on, prepared himself an instant coffee, picked up his baggage and left. Galya's eyes followed him - she was standing by the window in her pyjamas. She waited for him to get into the taxi and then for the car to disappear behind the corner. She knew he didn't want her getting up because of him and she'd rather he didn't know she was worried every time he had to be somewhere, yet she always saw him off her own way.

The flight from Sofia to Vienna lasted an hour and a half and she'd already got to work when he arrived at the university hall of residence. Over the past two years he'd been here so often it felt like a second home. This huge scientific project, the fruit of Bulgaria's European integration, was finally going to be completed in a few days. Dobromir would be satisfied but he was

going to miss the project. The work, the constant meeting and communicating with new people, the trips abroad...

On the other hand, he was going to have a child!

He sat up in the bed and rubbed his eyes. He had to go to the institute, he had no time to think about it now. Last night he'd promised to reconsider it all during the flight but he'd dozed off, and somehow he didn't really want to dwell on this too much. He knew he did want to have children but he could never make up his mind when exactly. Perhaps it was for the better. Anyway, he'd already promised and couldn't back out.

He put his backpack in the wardrobe, took the laptop bag and the diagrams tube, and headed for the universe of scientific thought with a resolute stride.

The student hall of residence was situated in the courtyard of an enormous research complex with many labs, testing grounds, lecture halls, and other technical-progress-required premises. Everything was very well kept, and quiet, parks and gardens between the buildings, creating a rather pleasant environment. He had at his disposal a bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom, fully furnished and serviced, like a hotel. These residences were not used by students, but were intended solely for guests of the numerous institutes. He often wished he lived here instead of in Bulgaria.

The research institute where Galya and Dobromir worked didn't receive sufficient funding and, generally speaking, didn't have much work to offer. Galya was glad he'd managed to find an external project to be working on for this long now. She thought she had better seek something similar and not let her career hit a dead-end for lack of money. She'd made up her mind, and was determined, though, that it was high time she devoted herself to the most important job in her life – her career could wait for a few years.

She truly hated having to push Dobromir like that. She could see him struggle and she definitely did not enjoy using her female powers on him of all people. She loved him an awful lot and he was so helpless against her charm. She only had to look at him to know how terrified he was of raising children in these uncertain times, but men are terribly indecisive – and there simply is no such thing as the right time to become a parent. Unfortunately, however, she saw no way to explain this to him, and waiting was no longer an option.

She let the day go by idly and then went back home. Household chores always soothed her so she did some of those before sitting on the sofa to watch some TV, where she lingered a little longer than usual. It was Saturday tomorrow so she could afford to lie in bed a little. Too bad she didn't have anyone to cuddle.

Dobromir definitely did not enjoy working on Saturdays but this didn't feel as painful a task here as it did in Sofia. He got up feeling sanguine and headed for the kitchen, first passing through the bathroom. Last night he'd bought some nice and interesting stuff for breakfast. He'd risen early and he had ample time, so he spent a full hour in the kitchen. It gave him pleasure to look through the window. On the way to work he wouldn't have to take the bus and inhale the polluted air of dust-covered streets. It was just fifteen minutes from the hall of residence to the laboratory through the park.

Galya did not get up too late after all. She loved a morning lie-in but she didn't like staying in bed for too long. She brewed some coffee. She'd decided

to go for a walk in the park with her best friend, and maybe they could go to the shopping centre together. She felt she had a lot to discuss Milena and she loved a lengthy chat. She'd leave the household chores for Sunday.

She finished her breakfast, fixed an appointment with Milena on the phone and, thinking about what to wear, headed for the bathroom. Outside it was early spring. The weather was pleasant: warm but not too much. Sunny but not scorching. She moulded the idea in her head more or less and opened the wardrobe.

Dobromir finished his breakfast, cleared the kitchen table, and gazed at one of the diagrams on the bedroom desk. The method they'd discussed last night was indeed going to make it as optimal as possible, and they would be able to complete the project on time. He smiled. Perhaps, life wasn't that uncertain and unpredictable after all. Perhaps the baby was a good decision. He put everything he was going to bring along on top of the corridor cabinet. He reckoned he should take the jacket out of the backpack after all, noting it was colder here than in Sofia. He went to the bedroom and opened the wardrobe.

Shock can have an interesting impact on the human body and mind. Dobromir jumped six feet back and fell on his back on the bed that was facing the wardrobe. Cold waves rushed all over his panic-seized body and a brief groan escaped his throat. He crawled backwards toward the door, trying to grasp something that could help him along the way.

Galya fell on her back with a heart-rending cry. She went on moaning while her panic-seized body was helplessly dragging itself on the floor in a desperate attempt to get out of the room. Her heart pounded wildly as if it would break out of both her ears simultaneously. Every one of her chaotic movements spoke of utter inadequacy, while she, whining and crawling on the floor, finally managed to get out of the room. She had absolutely no clue what to do. The single thought pounded upon every single neuron in her brain: 'There is a dead person in my wardrobe!'

Dobromir could not remember how he had managed to get out of the bedroom and lock the door on the outside using the key that normally was on the inside. Now he was sitting on his laptop and folders that, a moment ago, he'd left on top of the cabinet in the farthest corner of the corridor. Every inch of his body was shivering and he was struggling, to no avail, to find an adequate response to the thought ringing in his head like an Easter church bell: 'How did a dead person end up in my wardrobe?'

Galya crawled to the corridor and closed the door leading to the living room and bedroom. She managed to stand up but was shaking all over. Her mind was slowly clearing and the initial denial of reality was becoming more solid.

What she had just seen was impossible and she knew this with absolute certainty. She knew exactly what she had to do, but her handbag was in the living room, on the cabinet next to the TV set, which stood right across from the open bedroom door. She glanced at the entrance door, then took several deep breaths, grasped the door handle with a trembling hand, and warily stepped inside the living room. Walking on tiptoes, casting feverish glances at

the bedroom door, she opened her handbag and it seemed to take her forever to fish out her mobile, which was usually on top of everything. She clutched at it like a drowning man will clutch at a straw, and then faced the gaping bedroom door. The wardrobe door was still open. She started to walk forward but her will and her self-control deserted her completely.

She stood there petrified, hand clenched around the mobile, not moving, not thinking.

Dobromir seemed to come to his senses. He knew not how long he'd sat on the cabinet, staring blankly at the bedroom door. He was still trembling all over, the palms of his hands all sweaty, soaking through his trousers where his hands rested on his thighs. He was beginning to think logically, shifting all sorts of explanations in his mind. First: this is impossible! He'd opened the wardrobe the previous day to put his backpack inside, then again in the evening to take out his clothes and toiletries. And he had never left the flat after that, so there was no way somebody could come, walk inside the wardrobe, and die in there, while he was asleep...

He realised he was up and circling the corridor but only in the part that was farther away from the bedroom door.

He halted for a while.

'Let's be logical about this!' he said to himself. 'There's no way somebody could come and lie down...'

He gasped. He had to check again. He simply wouldn't believe that what he'd seen was real, although he wasn't the kind of person to not trust his eyes.

Timidly, he reached for the door handle. His hand was shaking, big drops of sweat rolling off it.

'Get a grip, Galya!' her own voice echoed inside her head. She didn't know how long she'd stood there motionless.

'I have to do it, I can't just let it be like that!' she thought. 'Happen what may...' she added in her mind, hoping desperately this whole thing would turn out to be a nightmare, although she didn't know how it was possible to be dreaming and awake at the same time.

She could almost see herself peering inside the wardrobe and only finding clothes - hers and Dobromir's - inside. She pictured herself sighing and then laughing, then phoning him to tell him about this ridiculous incident. She could also relate it to Milena, though she was unsure of her reaction: Milena would even panic from the fact that fine wrinkles were appearing on her skin...

Galya realised she was standing in one place and daydreaming. She glanced around. Everything seemed calm. No noises or things that were out of the ordinary. Just their flat with a couple of open doors, everything looking as it usually does.

These wandering thoughts had soothed her a little. Now she was quite certain she'd imagined it. She trudged forward slowly, barely lifting her feet off the ground.

'I'll check now and that's it!'

'No, wait! It may be slightly ridiculous but...'

She typed the emergency number but didn't press Dial.

'Just in case! So that I'm ready.'

And somewhat more confidently, she advanced.

Dobromir grasped the door handle with his left hand, and with his right hand leaning against the casing he glanced at his feet. Standing firmly, he nevertheless felt unstable. He was going to do it abruptly. The wardrobe was almost facing the door and he had left it open. So, if he would swing the door open abruptly, he would be able to see straight into...

This sounded like a good plan.

He took a deep breath despite the trembling.

'OK now, on the count of three: one, two...' He hesitated, then pulled the door open abruptly, then closed it again. In this brief moment he was able to clearly see the dead body inside his wardrobe.

He leaned his forehead against the door.

'You're being such an idiot!' he thought, then opened the door wide and entered the bedroom.

His bowels seemed to jump. He felt an urge to vomit but managed to suppress it. In the open wardrobe, right next to his backpack, which stood upright, lay a stark naked person.

'Oh God, what should I do?' Dobromir thought, tears welling up in his eyes. 'Why me?!'

As much as he wished to deny reality, the dead body was an incontestable fact. Dobromir walked around the room, but without approaching the open wardrobe. He leaned slightly to take a closer look, then, face in hands, walked back into the corridor and shut the door. He pulled his mobile out of his jacket pocket, sat on the cabinet again, and stared at the bedroom door.

'Alright, I can't possibly be in trouble! I didn't kill him after all...' He groaned. 'I'll just call the police, and they'll take him, and I'll just give a statement...'

'Georg will simply expel me from the project, right at the home stretch! I'll never be able to win an external order again and, in general, my life is going straight to hell... I have no idea how I'm going to tell this to Galya! Damn, I should call her, too.

'Even if there's trouble, I didn't do anything! How the hell did this thing end up in my bedroom if I didn't even leave the flat? It's virtually impossible...

'An investigation will certainly be launched. I'll have to stop working and the project is going to go down the drain - and I'm the section manager... forget about money or further projects. I'm going back to Bulgaria to work as a teacher...

'Galya won't even share the same bed with me...'

The ringing phone cut through his brain like a knife. Dobromir jumped, threw his phone up in the air and somehow ended up standing on the cabinet. His heart was trying to explode in his chest as the vibrating phone dropped on the floor and slid to the bedroom door. It didn't seem to break.

Dobromir considered the situation for a couple of seconds, then climbed down from the cabinet and picked his phone off the floor. It was Galya.

'Hello.' His voice was hoarse and feeble.

'Hi, how are you?' the words shot out of the speaker.

'Hm, I'm fine,' he said hesitantly.

'Well...' Galya started but then went silent for a while. He was silent, too. 'Something very strange has happened here...' Another pause. 'Um-m, I didn't do anything...' Her voice broke into a sob.

'Honey, what's going on?' he asked anxiously.

'Well, nothing, it's just that when I got up in the morning, everything was fine, but then I wanted to get dressed and there was a...' She was crying.

'There is a person in the wardrobe!'

'What!?' Dobromir almost dropped the phone.

'No, it's not... There's a dead woman in our wardrobe!'

Over the seconds that followed, neither of them spoke. Galya was sobbing, and Dobromir didn't even breathe.

'You...' he began.

'I didn't kill her! I just wanted to put on some clothes and I opened the wardrobe and there she was...' She was barely managing to talk and cry simultaneously. 'They're not going to do anything to me, are they? I didn't... You believe me, don't you? I never touched her! Just...'

'I believe you, honey, I love you. Calm down now, everything is fine! Just calm down... You haven't told anybody yet, have you?'

'Well...' She was somewhat startled, then added in a hesitant voice, 'I called the police.'

A brief pause.

'Good!' he said. 'That's the right thing to do. You did right.'

'I did?' She seemed to brighten up. 'I was wondering, but I just...'

'Yes, good. They said they'd come, right?'

'Yes, they did.'

'Good, they will see. They will investigate the situation and everything's going to be alright. You didn't do anything, did you?'

'No, I didn't!' she cried. 'I just opened and...'

'Good...'

'... I was terribly frightened!' Big teardrops started rolling down her cheeks. 'I don't want to do to jail...'

'You won't, honey, everything's going to be fine. Just wait for them to arrive and you tell them everything just like you told it to me. They know it's not your fault.'

'Good...'

'I'm coming back right away, I'll be back today. I just need to talk to Georg and I'm coming back today. Calm down.'

'OK,' she said, weeping still. 'I love you!'

'I love you, too, honey, calm down, don't worry and wait for them to arrive.'

'OK, I'll call you again.'

'Call me, by all means, when you know what's going on.'

'Good...'

He hung up and stood there, in the middle of the corridor, not knowing what to think. Reality had overwhelmed him.

He paced back and forth for a while. He had stopped shivering and worrying. The panic and terror that had gripped him were also gone. The only problem was he couldn't decide what to do in this situation. He still had to go to work. It seemed odd that no one had called him yet.

He opened the door and entered the bedroom. Everything was exactly as he'd left it a few minutes ago, the person in the wardrobe still lay there undisturbed.

Dobromir approached slowly and sat on the bed, facing the open wardrobe door. He stared at the body. It belonged to a man not more than thirty years old. He had a childish look on his calm and affable face. His skin was slightly pink, no blemishes anywhere on it, with a head of auburn hair.



He was lying on his left side, facing the door. His left hand under the head, the right was covering his groin. He looked like he'd lied down for a nap and was about to wake up any moment now.

Dobromir was confused. He looked at the body a while longer and then got up from the bed. It was like he was still waiting for the alarm clock to go off, to wake him up, and for all this to turn out to be just a dream.

He turned to face the wardrobe.

This was no dream. This was a fact.

'OK, let's be logical about this!' he began out loud. 'The guy must be dead because his chest isn't moving, he's not even fluttering an eyelash. He looks like a stuffed animal, but at the same time so fresh! On the other hand, his toes are bright pink, like the rest of his skin, which means he must have died literally minutes ago, and that means this must have happened while I was having breakfast!'

He turned to face the wardrobe again, juggling in his mind the ridiculous deduction he'd just made.

'This is impossible!' he almost yelled at the body. 'Who are you?'

There was no response.

Again sat he on the bed and realised that he had never before seen such a well-nursed human body. The human was definitely an adult, yet looked like a newborn.

An all-too-insane thought dashed across his mind like a missile, and he jumped off the bed and walked around the room quickly. The palms of his hands broke out into a sweat. Should he really try to...

Any way you look at it, it all seemed too surreal up to now. He walked to the open wardrobe door and knelt nervously near the dead human body that continued to not look dead but just very, very still. There was no odour and a strange warm tranquillity radiated from it. As if everything had always been just as it should be...

Dobromir tilted his head slightly to look at the face that appeared to be smiling faintly but was still motionless. The more he gazed at the lying person, the more he was engrossed by its odd tranquillity and easiness.

He vacillated and rose to his feet.

He made another anxious circle around the room and then knelt by the body again. He could furnish no explanation of the attraction he felt towards this person and he was unsure whether he was dead or not, but ultimately he was determined to try and wake him up before calling the police like Galya had done.

'And how come the same thing happened to her?' For a moment he was dumbfounded, then he put the thought aside for later and slowly reached his hand...

He gently put his trembling fingers on the person's shoulder and, as he touched it, a strange wave of quiet pleasure rolled along his arm and rushed into his chest. He was frightened, pulled his hand away abruptly, and got up.

The skin on this creature was sleek and warm! It was the most pleasant-to-the-touch human skin he had ever laid his hand on. He stood there, at a yard's distance from the wardrobe, staring down at the body, realising he was beginning to lose all control over his thoughts and desires. The person lying in his wardrobe was attracting him like a black hole.

He knelt again by the body and reached his hand, determined to give him a proper shake this time.

'Hey...' he began but was unable to finish.

The strange wave that had reached his chest before now rushed straight into his head. An inexplicable sensation of space and stars overwhelmed his entire body. It spilled throughout his brain like a sudden high tide, gaining momentum like a hurricane. He felt the space around him starting to shed its material bounds and fall apart like a sandcastle under the rushing waves. With the last drop of self-consciousness he had left, he managed to pull away from the body and fell on his back, drowning in sweat, breathing heavily.

What was going on and why? What was this person? Who was he himself? What was the meaning of these current events? All these questions dashed through his mind and then away because, simply, he did not care about them. His consciousness was completely overwhelmed by that place... If it were even a place! He was led there by the weird person who had come to lie in his wardrobe this morning.

Dobromir tried to rise but only managed to sit on the bed's edge, peering intently at the body. He was still panting for his breath. There was some fear inside of him that, however, seemed unnecessary. It was normal to be afraid of the unknown yet this particular unknown seemed too friendly, too inexplicable and definitely too vast for it to make sense to harm a small person like him.

His thoughts came to an end. Both the logical and the illogical, both the meaningful and the meaningless. Tranquillity and easiness were written on his face and it had the same look as that of the strange person who was lying in his wardrobe. He trod a light step forward and slowly laid both his hands on the body.

Galya felt calm. She definitely did not enjoy what had happened and was worried about the consequences, but felt sure that the authorities would understand the unusual character of the situation and that she was innocent. That's what they do, isn't it?!

She decided to take another look at the body despite the unpleasant sensation churning up in her stomach when she thought about it. She walked into the bedroom and sat on the bed, as far away as possible from the open wardrobe. She stared at it.

The woman that lay inside was beautiful. She did not look like a super model yet possessed some kind of natural child-like beauty. As if she had merely lain down to take a nap underneath the jackets and trousers.

Galya approached.

Her skin was sleek, pale pink, had no blemishes. Her chest wasn't moving, which was why Galya was certain the woman was dead, but why here of all places and why now?

She was lying on her left side, resting her head on her left hand, covering her groin with her right hand. Her legs were slightly bent, the nails well-shaped and trimmed. Her breasts were firm and had small nipples. She looked like a teenager but somehow one could tell that she wasn't particularly young. Her calm face, smiling faintly, radiated maturity and compassion.

Galya had the strange urge to wake her up! She felt embarrassed and walked out of the room. Less than a minute later she returned with tears in her eyes.

'What are you doing here?' she asked in a loud voice, sitting on the bed, this time very close to the wardrobe.

She sat there contemplating this strange human being and the desire to caress it grew stronger every second. Finally she gasped and reached out an insecure arm. This seemed to take forever. She had almost touched the woman

when the doorbell tore apart the silence and her brain tissue. Galya jumped in fright and ran to the door. She opened it abruptly and froze in confusion. At the doorstep was a man in a white gown holding a large doctor's bag.

'Good day!' he smiled affably. 'Are you Galya Ivanova?'

'Umm, yes,' she responded in a croaky voice, only now spotting the two uniformed policemen who were glancing bored looks around the corridor behind the doctor's back.

'Can we come in? We're here about the call you made.'

'Yes, of course. Come in.'

The thought suddenly flashed in her head that the doctor must be here to certify the death. She pulled herself together, closed the door behind the law enforcement officers, and was about to explain what had transpired half an hour ago when the doctor, who had already entered the living room, asked first:

'Do you live alone, Mrs Ivanova?'

'No, I live with my boyfriend. I'm still a Miss.'

'I apologise!' he said drily. 'Have you recently felt disoriented, dizzy or otherwise indisposed?'

'No!' Galya responded rather startled and stopped in the middle of the room. She noticed that the two uniformed policemen went about all the rooms in the flat without asking permission. Briefly, the thought passed through her mind that perhaps this is what they do when they arrive at a crime scene, although she was yet to explain that none of this was her fault.

'When did you last see your relatives? I mean your mother and father?' the doctor continued asking his unusual questions.

Galya gaped her mouth and tried to move her jaw to reply while wondering whether to try and remember when she had last seen her mother, or shout that there is a corpse in her bedroom, and that she wanted to cry.

'They are alive, are they not?' the man in white said, mystifying her completely 'Have you had a death in the family?'

'A-ali...' Galya started saying. 'Yes, they are fine. I saw my dad last week...'

'Wonderful!' the doctor interrupted her. 'Come sit on the sofa and roll up your left sleeve please.'

'There is a corpse in my wardrobe!' she finally burst through her tears. 'Why are you fooling me around? I've been panicking all morning! I wanted to explain everything to you, and you're making me sit on the sofa! Aren't you going to take it away from here? Or should I just keep it in my wardrobe?'

'Calm down, Miss, there is no corpse in your wardrobe. You are having a mild nervous breakdown that can be treated but you will have to come with us for a few days.'

Galya goggled her eyes like someone truly insane. This morning's events had been a little too much. She wanted to grab the vase and hit the doctor on the head but noticed that the two policemen were in the room now.

'Take your identification documents with you please,' the doctor continued in a calm tone, 'and, if you would like to, you can change your clothes. We'll wait for you in the corridor.'

'O-o, mmm, yes!' Galya exclaimed with extraordinary enthusiasm and leaped across to the bedroom. 'Change my clothes I will, here...'

Her heart literally stopped.

She stood in front of the wide-open wardrobe where, uneventfully, her dresses and Dobromir's trousers hanged. And a few tiny specs of dust on the floor, and that spot, which had been there for a long while now.

A dull hanging closet, no different from any other in the city.

Even if there had been something inside it, it had disappeared just as inexplicably as it had appeared, leaving not a single trace of its presence there.

The remainder of events blended in her head like a smooth grey fog, against which she made not even a single grumble.

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The twenty-first of December two thousand and twelve was a sunny and cool day. A scattered cloud was seen here and there. The winter was warm and the little snow that had fallen melted quickly. The end was nigh.

The winter of human civilisation had begun a long time ago, just no one had noticed it. It had sneaked in silently but persistently and indefeasibly. People did not like to think about it. They only enjoyed speculating about its potential presence. That is why it had not cared to notify them of its slow and steadfast consumption of the whole of society.

Time went by.

When tomorrow came, it was simply today.

Emil was sat on the small porch, leaning back comfortably in the creaking chair, just like he was every evening. He observed the slow ebb of the oncoming emptiness with his habitual indifference. He felt no need, nor desire to do anything to save himself from the impending apocalypse. The end was absolutely certain. He enjoyed contemplating it, though. It was somehow... interesting.

Slow and solemn music was heard from the small radio that he had left blaring in the room. He was waiting for the news broadcast.

Television broadcasts had ceased a couple of months ago. Indeed, radio broadcasting as a whole had been terminated due to interferences and lack of employees, but radio enthusiasts had appeared who were broadcasting radio programmes of their own creation on official frequencies.

There was no danger of them being held responsible for it.

Emil was rocking in the chair, wrapped in a blanket, staring at the weirdly distorted sunset.

The host's eccentric voice was heard on the radio:

'Hello to all of you small, big, and even bigger sinners doomed to eternal suffering. The Lord and I are praying for your souls. If there's still anyone listening to the righteous Word, the evening Mass was about half an hour ago...'

A brief giggle followed.

'... But if you're still alive in the morning, you can hear the morning Mass. To this end, stay tuned to Apocalypse Akhenaten Radio. The only radio that will be with you till the very end...'

A botched-up bumper echoed.

'And now for the news broadcast.'

The same bumper was played back.

'A series of mass suicides came to an end yesterday. According to official sources, the number of people who decided to help nature and put an end to their own life is seven hundred sixty-three.'

(God bless their souls. Amen!)

Z-z-z-bang-ding-a-dong.

'According to witness information, the bodies of those nearly forty million people who went missing without a trace a year ago can be found in a marsh in Western Europe. The few remaining police officers have promised to check on these reports, if they can find the time. For the time being, the location of the bodies is kept secret.

'(If you remember, dear listeners, last year, about point five per cent of the population of the planet vanished without a trace within a month. This caused a hell of an uproar! They never found any evidence whatsoever. No suicide notes, no nothing. Stranger still was the fact that some two per cent of the population, close relatives of those who had vanished, were hospitalised with severe mental disorders. Most of them claimed that they had witnessed a brutal murder. It was never confirmed if those murdered were the relatives in question.

'However, no bodies have been found. We'll keep a close eye on this case but if you ask me, that was divine intervention plain and simple. A sign of what was to come!

'A-ha! The next piece of news.)'

Z-z-z-bang-ding-a-dong.

'Following yet another charity event, most Hollywood celebrities have sent coats and hats from their own wardrobes to the various regions of Central Europe that were hit by a sudden spell of cold weather.

'Um-m, I think that's it for now. I've got a couple more things but I'll save them for the morning broadcast. News is hard to find nowadays but the Apocalypse Akhenaten Radio team is working hard for you and will keep you abreast of events, till the very end of time.

'Amen!'

Z-z-z-bang-ding-a-dong.

Several chords of a song popular in the recent past followed, and then the broadcast was gone and a monotonous flat crackling sound was heard from the radio. Emil got up and turned it off. He didn't want to waste the batteries. It was going to be hard to find new ones. The sun had set but its light still illuminated the warped horizon.

He decided to go to sleep.

For now...

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Neema called out after her husband telling him to fetch some water from the river. He seemed to mumble something. One could not tell if he was going to do it or not. Normally, it was the tribe's women who did this job, except when they had a newborn baby they couldn't leave unattended.

This was her second baby. Another boy. She was very proud. Especially if one considered that Adanna from the next hut now had her third daughter. Perhaps it wasn't her fault entirely - her male had been prematurely born and a little feeble.

Neema smiled while breastfeeding. She was very happy that one of the most robust men in the tribe was given to her in marriage. The most accurate javelin thrower. The only one who had managed to kill a lion with a single javelin. This was, naturally, evident in her offspring. Her first boy was just three years old but was already running around throwing sticks like his father.

There was, however, something strange about him, too. He had started talking very early, at the age of one and a half, and had already mastered speech better than she or her male did. This scared her a little. All the more, he kept speaking about some kind of huge crocodiles that used to live a very long time ago. She was sure this was but childish fantasies, yet took him to the shaman some time ago.

The shaman spent the entire day with her son and told her that her child was possessed by the spirit of a prehistoric healer who had lived in these lands before the beginning of time. He also told her that she need not worry because he was sent by the gods to help their tribe become the strongest of all tribes that inhabited the land between the Eastern Sea and the impenetrable Western Jungles. He told her she should be proud of him.

She was proud for a while, but always kept her ear to the ground. Especially seeing how the women from the neighbouring huts shook heads and tried to stay away from her son who constantly ran around poking the ground with a stick.

The shaman, however, was content with this. This was the third strange child to be born in their tribe. The village in the next valley already had five such unusually gifted children. One of them, now eighteen years of age, had invented a new way to break stones that resulted in the stones having very sharp edges. Naturally, their shaman kept it all in strict confidence and had cast a concealment spell to keep the new technology within their village only. The hunters, however, were very proud and never missed a chance to brag when they came this way to trade hides. None of them uttered a single word about the making of these extraordinary blades, though. This seemed like a very strong spell.

The shaman secretly hoped one of his strange children would come up with something extraordinary that he could then trade for the valuable knowledge of the neighbouring tribe. For now at least the Council of Elders put their full trust in him regarding this matter.

The baby began to cry. Neema went to the crib and stared at her son. He was calm. Maybe he just liked having her close to him. Seeing her, the baby threw his hands up in the air with joy and smiled. Somewhere deep behind his grey eyes something strange and unfathomable yet warm and benevolent was slowly gathering strength. Quietly and inevitably, it emerged into the world from some very distant and very ancient abyss filled with space and stars.

Something that remembered strange days gone by.

Something that had so many stories to tell.

The End