

Where to be at the End of the World

by Chris Frank

There are two restaurants in New York City called *Philadelphia*. One sells very good cheese-steaks from a walk-up counter for slightly too much money; it offers three meager tables, and no one ever uses them. The other is a small cafe with an ostensibly French menu; it's not especially good, but it's very reasonably priced. One has been in business for only five years. The other has been around for longer than anyone cares to remember. Also, one was destroyed in the apocalypse, while the other is still standing.

Calvin Taylor was on his way to *Philadelphia*, the cafe. It was his favorite place for lunch, because of its mediocre food, terrible service, and bad coffee. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his friends did not think these were good reasons to like a restaurant, and most days he ate there alone. Not today. Every Wednesday, he ate with the one friend who thought as Calvin did: *Philadelphia* was a flawed establishment, but, unlike most of the rest of the world, it was flawed honestly and predictably. The food would not be great, but it would be inexpensive. The coffee would not taste good, but it would have caffeine. The service would not be fast, but he wouldn't be in a hurry anyway. At the bottom of the restaurant's dessert menu was printed: "You may not go home happy, but you will go home." Whenever Calvin read this, he did, in fact, go home happy.

Not today. Today he would not, in fact, go home.

He walked through the first of *Philadelphia*'s doors, which was, as always, wide open. The second door was, as usual, shut, and he paused in the small foyer to open it. All this required was a push, but he paused to think about the doorknob again: it was, and had always been, impossible to turn. It wasn't actually designed to turn; it was just a convenient place to grip while pushing and pulling, but it looked like it would turn, and this had perplexed Calvin for nearly five full minutes the first time he'd eaten here. Because he'd been unable to twist the knob, he'd assumed he would be equally unable to open the door, and it hadn't been until he'd hit the thing in frustration and it had pushed resolutely open that he'd realized the doorknob wasn't actually a part of any mechanism. Had the door been built with a simple handle instead, he'd have known this immediately.

He liked to sit near the window and watch first-time *Philadelphia* patrons undergo this same trial. So, too, did his Wednesday friend, who had already installed himself at the table nearest the window, the second door, and the street beyond it.

His friend was Leo Gallatin, who had dreams of becoming an architect, an astronaut, an physicist, a musician, and a university president. At age 34, he wasn't any of these things, but was keeping his options open. He spent five days a week

teaching high school mathematics, and seven days a week thinking.

Calvin sat down. "Strange day," he said.

"You, too?" Leo had been planning to tell Calvin of his own strange day, and was surprised to have been beaten to the punch. Calvin, however, was not at all surprised; given the nature of his strange day so far, it was perfectly natural that strange things would have happened to someone else. It also worried him deeply, and he hoped their strange days shared no causes or effects.

"Me too," Calvin said. "Who first?"

LEO

Me. I was making tea.

CALVIN

Shocking.

LEO

I was watching the water boil.

CALVIN

You had nothing else to do.

LEO

I was thinking about light. And water. How, in its different states, it treats light differently.

CALVIN

Continue...

LEO

Ice can be a prism. It diffracts light. Liquid water is a mirror. It reflects light. But then the water becomes steam. Steam diffuses light. It makes it hard to see.

CALVIN

So?

LEO

I have a sensitive palate. I put an ice cube in my tea. That means I need water in all three of its states just to make a pot of tea. And that means I can't make tea without bending, reflecting, and diffusing the light in my kitchen. It feels simple, but it's not simple. And yet, it is simple, because the complexities of the relationship between me, water, tea, and the light in my kitchen are just the sum of a few simple and discernible laws.

CALVIN

True! And true not just of human interaction, but of all human reasoning. What is reason but the conception of a sum? In mathematics, we add numbers, in speech we add words... our interactions are sums, and so is our understanding.

LEO

Yes!

CALVIN

There's one thing I don't understand.

LEO

Of course. At least one.

CALVIN

You made tea, and came to some conclusions about it. That's good. But it's not especially strange.

LEO

No. Certainly not for me. I think all the time.

CALVIN

Yes, I know. But you said your day was strange, and you were going to tell me about it. So far you've told me about tea.

LEO

Oh yes. The lampstands. The lampstands were strange. When I came out of my kitchen, with my tea, I found seven golden lampstands in my dining room. They hadn't been there earlier. At least, I hadn't observed them. But I was in the kitchen for a long time. You know, playing with light and water. Someone could easily have put them there. My neighbor, maybe. He's moving. Are they a gift?

CALVIN

Do you not lock your doors?

LEO

I do.

CALVIN

Not a gift, then.

LEO

No. Probably not. But then... what?

CALVIN

Strange.

LEO

Yes, as I said when we started. But we can do better than that. They are there. I did not put them there, so someone else did. No one else was in my apartment...

(silence)

LEO

This doesn't sum well.

CALVIN

No. Strange, as I said.

LEO

As you said. Let's move on. You had a strange day?

CALVIN

I did. How often do you see warhorses on the street?

LEO

Seriously? Um, never.

CALVIN

One would hope, right? Today I saw four. One at a time, too, and nothing to suggest that there's any kind of parade happening today. I was on my way here, and almost got trampled to death by the meanest looking White horse I've ever seen, jockeyed by an archer. Then, a few blocks later, a bright red horse -- another first for me, a red horse, then a black horse whose rider was carrying scales, and finally a sickly, truly pungent green horse. They were all heading west, too, which is what really worries me.

LEO

Why does their direction worry you more than the fact that there are strangely colored warhorses roaming the streets?

CALVIN

I have a really bad feeling about what will happen if they all end up in the same place.

They were interrupted at this point by a severe earthquake from outside. This was unusual because a) there are no earthquakes in New York, and b) an earthquake doesn't happen "outside", it happens everywhere. Be that as it may, they were nonetheless interrupted by a severe earthquake in New York that left *Philadelphia* untouched.

A man who bore a remarkable resemblance to Thomas Hobbes of

Malmesbury stumbled off the street and through the first of *Philadelphia's* two doors, which he desperately and unsuccessfully tried to close.

He was unsuccessful because no one has ever been able to close the first of *Philadelphia's* two doors. The original owners had tried, hard, but after not much time declared it impossible and had simply worked around the problem by building the second door.

The man who bore a remarkable resemblance to Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury had no way of knowing this, eventually gave up, and turned his attention to the second door. He could not make its handle turn. He tried for nearly five full minutes, during which the earthquake ended, and after which he pounded the door in frustration and was surprised to see it push resolvedly open. He followed it in and slammed the door shut behind him, leaving him very near to Calvin and Leo's table and with his back to the room. When he turned around, he did so very slowly.

"What," he said to Calvin and Leo, while looking them both in the eye, at the same time, which was possible only because of the fiery urgency of the question, "is going on?"

Calvin and Leo could only whisper, such was the intensity of the moment. "He looks exactly like Thomas Hobbes."

"I know! And considering how today's been going..."

"I am Thomas Hobbes!" asserted the man who bore a remarkable resemblance to Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. He said this because it was true, and because it was one of the few things he was, at the moment, certain of, and it felt steadying.

CALVIN

Um. Well then please, take a seat. Have a drink with us.

HOBBS (sitting)

Please. What, in the name of God, is happening?

CALVIN

It's been a strange day. Some business about lampstands and horses. Then, as I'm sure you noticed, there was an earthquake. And now you, who I believe have been dead for more than three hundred years, have joined us for lunch. Beyond that, I have no idea what's happening.

HOBBS

Three hundred years?

CALVIN

Yes. It's 2006.

HOBBS

Odd. Here I sit, and, for my part, I think myself very much alive.

CALVIN

You look it.

HOBBS

Thank you. So... lampstands... earthquakes... horses... and I'm alive. Odd.

LEO

Oh, and the trumpets.

CALVIN AND HOBBS

Trumpets?

LEO

Yes, I just remembered. Seven archaically dressed men were running down the street this morning, all carrying trumpets.

CALVIN

Maybe there *is* some sort of parade happening later.

HOBBS (urgently)

You're certain they were trumpets?

LEO

Yes.

HOBBS

Oh no. Oh no. This is not good. More specifically, this is very, very bad. This may be the worst thing ever to happen.

LEO

What?

HOBBS

I was wrong. Horribly wrong.

CALVIN

Life must be truly wonderful if the worst thing that's ever happened is that you be wrong.

HOBBS

No, fool. Of course life isn't wonderful! And of course the problem is not that I was wrong; the problem is that about which I was wrong! The Bible, God, all of it! Books III and IV!

CALVIN

Books three and four of what?

HOBBS

Leviathan! I wrote a meticulous, comprehensive, manipulative exegesis. I turned the Bible inside and out; I mastered it; all to show that the only important part of Christianity is that we all live in one obedient, Christian commonwealth. To make peace. To save us from the war of every man against every man. Scripture was a tool, and I used it. But I never believed for a minute that it was true!

LEO

And I only ever read Book I.

CALVIN

You're saying the Bible is true?

HOBBS

Yes!

CALVIN

Literally?

HOBBS

Literally! Haven't you read it? The lampstands, the horses, the earthquake, me alive when I should be dead, the trumpets... don't you see what this means?

CALVIN

I was hoping very much that it wouldn't mean anything, and would just be a strange day. But I haven't read much of the Bible. Many people don't, these days.

HOBBS

Really?

CALVIN

Really.

HOBBS

Indeed.

CALVIN

Yeah, it's nice.

HOBBS

Yes. That would be nice. But futile! The lampstands, the horses, the earthquake, the trumpets... these, according to the Book

of Revelation, are the first signs of the Second Coming of Christ. They are happening. Here. Now. The Kingdom of God is imminent. One third of the earth is about to be burned. If we survive that, we shall be tortured by locusts. Then one third of mankind shall be slaughtered by two-hundred million of God's soldiers. Cavalry, no less. And then the unlucky few who are left will live under the rule of a hideous beast, Leviathan incarnate, until God decides to depose him of power and let Christ reign for a thousand years, whereupon the elect shall rise from the dead and live under Christ's rule. When the thousand years are over, the rest of us will rise and, if our names be in the Book of Life, be restored to state of sinless immortality that belonged to Man before the fall of Adam. Those whose names be not in the book will be thrown into the lake of fire.

LEO

Something is wrong here.

CALVIN

Well yes!

LEO

No, I mean incorrect. If the dead won't rise until after the God deposes the beast of power, then you, Mr. Hobbes, shouldn't be here yet.

HOBBS

That's true. Obviously, God has erred.

CALVIN

Doesn't our current circumstance imply that God is infallible?

HOBBS

The Bible, if it be the work of God, and not the work of men, must be the work of a fallible and imperfect God, so full is it of contradictions and inconsistencies. If the Bible be the work of God, we, then, are in trouble. I propose another round of drinks.

LEO

That could be a problem.

CALVIN

Well, it could be a while, at least. The service here is terrible.

LEO

You get used to it after a while. We've learned a sort of patient endurance. Learned to love it, flaws and all. You know.

HOBBS

No, I don't. What, then, shall we do?

CALVIN

Well, what happens to anyone who survives the apocalypse? I mean, if the dust settles, and all that is Holy is in the Kingdom of God, God's happy, Jesus is happy, and all the prophecies are fulfilled. That leaves what's left of the Earth on its own, right?

HOBBS

Yes, actually. I've written about that before. The wicked being left in the estate they were in after Adam's sin, may at the resurrection live as they did, marry, and give in marriage, and have gross and corruptible bodies, as all mankind now have; and consequently may engender perpetually, after the resurrection, as they did before: for there is no place in Scripture to the contrary.

LEO

Then before today, it would have been valid to assume the Apocalypse had already happened, and we were living in its aftermath.

CALVIN AND HOBBS

Yes.

LEO

So all we have to do is survive the apocalypse, and we're set.

HOBBS

Theoretically, yes. But, as we've seen, I have been wrong before. And truly, I don't think we can hope to survive the apocalypse.

CALVIN

Well what if we just stay here? When the earthquake happened, it happened outside. Even considering everything else that's happened today, that's still strange.

HOBBS

The earth did not shake in this room?

LEO

No. Actually it was quite peaceful. If it happens again, it would be a stimulating vantage point from which to consider plate tectonics.

There was a few minutes silence. Leo thought about plate tectonics. Calvin thought about the book he hadn't finished writing. Hobbes thought about the door he'd been unable to close earlier, as he'd stumbled in off the quaking street.

HOBBS

Why was I unable to close the first door to this restaurant?

LEO

It's always open.

CALVIN

Doesn't close. I've never seen it closed. Supposed to be impossible. I think that's why they built the second door.

HOBBS

Ah. This doesn't strike you as odd?

LEO

It does, but only when I try to close it. Which I don't.

CALVIN

I just walk through it.

HOBBS

How long has this restaurant been here?

CALVIN

As long as I can remember.

LEO

Me, too.

HOBBS

I have yet to see a waiter.

LEO

Yes, as I said, horrible service.

CALVIN

Patient endurance.

HOBBS

And the name of this restaurant?

CALVIN AND LEO

Philadelphia.

HOBBS

Fantastic! We're going to survive the apocalypse.

LEO

Oh, good!

CALVIN

How?

HOBBS

Revelation. The Book of Revelation. The Lord wrote to the angel of the church in Philadelphia: "Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut... Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming..." We are in the right place, at the right time.

A waiter finally arrived to take their lunch order. Calvin and Leo began to give Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury a history of the last three hundred years. The food was not great, but it was inexpensive. The coffee did not taste good, but it did have caffeine. The service was not fast, but, now more than ever, they were in no rush. At the bottom of the restaurant's dessert menu was printed: "You may not go home happy, but you will go home." They did not go home, but they were happy.

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