

JOHN WARNER

HOW THE UNIVERSE IS GOING TO END

HEAT.

Or cold. It depends on who you ask. No one agrees around here on that particular issue.

If you ask Oliver, the answer is cold. “We” are slowly leaking heat and eventually it will become impossibly cold. He says: imagine the biggest balloon you can with the tiniest hole, then double the size of the balloon while halving the hole, and then again, and that’s about what’s going to happen, not exactly, but close enough.

If you ask who “we” is, he says, “everyone, everything, duh.”

But if you ask Norman, the answer is heat. He says: imagine the biggest pot of water over the biggest burner you can, and a giant hand turns the giant burner higher and higher at a speed so slow as to be nearly undetectable, then double the size of the pot, the burner, the hand, halve the speed of the turning, and the whole thing again, and you’ve got some idea. Not much, but some.

We all wear lab coats. The hallways are very quiet, maybe because as the heavy lab doors close they make a noise that sounds like shhhhssssshhhh. Norman smokes endlessly, dropping ash into his keyboard. He carries a long knife velcroed to his leg and if you sneak up on him he will grab the knife and wheel on you and toss it from hand to hand while inviting you to make your best move, mother sucker. Oliver drinks something that looks like seaweed for lunch every day and endlessly exercises his arms with an iron bar stretched between two concrete blocks. He promises that he could quite easily make Norman his bitch, knife or no.

Twice yearly we get together to testify before the government, sharing these things we don’t really know. We gather at a long table with microphones and pitchers of water. I sit between Norman and Oliver and do most of the talking.

I speak of balloons and boilers and wave my arms in a crude stab at hypnosis so we may be allowed to spend another year together.

So.

There are these things that Oliver and Norman agree on: The end is coming, and its scale is large, very large, impossibly large. The end is really too large to think about, if you really think about it. If you ask them why, why is the end going to come this particular way, they say they don't know and, really, you can only accept it is the end if you don't believe that it might not just be a new beginning, which it very well may be. Everything may simply collapse in on itself and then explode into something new that looks very much the same, but also is different in very important ways. If you ask them when, they say they don't know that either, but it is for sure happening, someday. None of us will be around to see it, of course, but the end (or the new beginning) is inevitable, the numbers and the projections are quite clear.

Somebody is always right.

Where there are beginnings and ends, there are also middles.

This is the middle.

My wife lifts her shirt and pulls down her sweatpants and points to a purplish stretch mark that arcs from belly to hip and then points at our son who smears yellow mush on his bib with his thumb and forefinger.

"I used to be a beauty, you know," she says to him. "You couldn't tell by looking at me now, but there was a time when I could work some magic, feelings-wise, on the men." She grabs at her haunch, pinching a wad of flesh and sweat pant and sticks her tongue out. "Blech," she says. Our son smiles at her, showing the gaps where there are no teeth. He waves the spoon, which he never seems to use, always favoring the free hand for grabbing food.

"It was that final summer on the Salt Flats," she says, "though no one could have known that at the time of course. At the time, it was simply where you went if you wanted to drive a car faster than anyone had driven one before." She dabs at our son's face with a towel and swaps the yellow mush for the green. "But we just ran out of room after that summer. We went too fast."

"It was Gabelich and Johanson, Johanson and Gabelich, oh, there were others, but we knew it would be one of those two to break the record. They had the money. They had the cars. The rest were plenty fast, but Gabelich and Johanson were the fastest and that's what I wanted, the fastest." She sighs in a girlish way. "I wore my hair long down my back and had a way of tossing it around that got some attention." Using the spoon, our son spreads the green mush down the length of his arm. She barely notices.

"I didn't even need to pick, they both wanted me so badly," she continues. "Gabelich painted my name, Maribelle, beneath his cockpit window in a fancy cursive. For Johanson, though, I posed, stretched out on a towel, head back, one knee raised, and he embossed my profile along the tail. 'With me, I carry you,' he said. I got a bit of a burn that day, holding that pose." She pauses and smiles at me like she's just realizing that someone else is there. "Those cars were something," she says. She squeezes my arm at the wrist, briefly, which is nice, actually.

"We camped all summer right on the flats, singing songs every night until we were hoarse, and at dusk if you laid yourself down, it was so flat you could see the curve of the Earth, and you could watch every night as the sun buried itself and every morning as it pulled itself again from the ground."

There is a picture of my wife with Gary Gabelich, the legend of land speed record driving, just after he made the run that broke 610 MPH for the very first time, the fastest anyone had ever traveled without leaving the ground. His car, the Blue Flame, (not really a car at all, a 37-foot-long wingless, natural-gas-hydrogen-peroxide-powered jet) smolders in the background. As he jumped from the car, Gabelich had bounced his helmet off the ground in joy leaving it forever suspended in the air (in the picture at least) next to him. He grips her around the waist with one arm and lifts her from the ground as she kicks one shapely leg behind her. His pit crew slaps him on the back, but he smiles only for her. Later that summer Gabelich topped 622.407 MPH, the average of two back-to-back runs down the ancient dead lake bed. Thirteen years later the record was broken by someone else, an Englishman, and a week after that, Gabelich died when he lost control of his dragster motorcycle and rammed himself part of the way through a tree.

But for now, this is really her story, and it's a good one.

"As you could imagine, our lips were always dry and I had to be ready to lick them quickly if either of them wanted a kiss, which was often." She draws these last three words out as she winks at the boy and hands him his sippy cup which he bats around the tray with his clumsy hands until he can lean over and reach it with his mouth. She gathers up the bowls of different colored mush and carries them to the sink. She throws a dishtowel over her shoulder and begins rinsing.

"Johanson was Swiss, and he talked a little funny, sure, but I found that those things they say about European men are pretty true. He was gentle. He'd say things like, 'may I put my hand on your thigh, miss,' asking, but in a way that made you think it was very important that you let him. He never worked on the car himself. He wore these lambskin gloves everywhere and his hands were very soft." She momentarily stops her scrubbing and waves her hand under her face, "Ooh, I think I'm blushing. Am I blushing?" She turns and I shrug in reply.

"He would do anything for me, really," she continues, calling back over her shoulder. "I remember once how I remarked to Johanson that spending all that time out in that wasteland got a little depressing for a girl. Oh, it was beautiful in its own way, like the moon is beautiful. No place you'd want to be for very long, but you don't mind looking at it for a bit. But that next day I'll be damned if a delivery truck didn't pull right up to my tent and out came a dozen dozen roses. It was awfully sweet. 'For you, I make the desert bloom,' he said."

Finished with the dishes, all of them tucked into their washer slots, my wife removes a tray of cupcakes that had been cooling from the oven and cracks open a can of store-bought chocolate icing. "But Gabelich," she says, "Gabelich gave me what I most wanted." She spreads a small dab of icing across each of the cupcake tops, stroking it carefully towards the edges.

"Gabelich was a real grease monkey, always tinkering around. One night, towards the end of that summer, I snuck up on him as he hunched over the engine. Johansson was off camp, schmoozing sponsors at some dinner or some such thing. (Money was really the difference between driving fast and driving really really fast.) The sun was almost gone, for the night, just a sliver glowing in the distance, and I was sure he couldn't see anything inside that engine, so what he was doing, I don't know, but Gabelich liked to feel around in there anyway, and I tiptoed up to him super quiet — I was going to goose him good — make him jump to the sky, but when I jabbed my fingers in his sides..." Here my wife stabs the knife towards us for emphasis, dropping a bit of the frosting to the tile. "...he didn't budge an inch, not in the slightest. He was that cool a customer."

She stoops with a rag to wipe up the small mess, and it gets hard to hear exactly what she's saying for a moment, but I know the story well enough to have an idea. "Well," she says, "I started pouting a bit, since he'd killed my fun, but Gabelich turned around and smiled and wiped his hands on his overalls before squeezing my shoulders and lifting me up onto my toes. He had a grip, I'll tell you. He held me tight and he said, 'You wanna go for a ride, gorgeous,' and boy did I."

"We climbed in and he sat me on his lap, and I wish I could describe the rumble," she says, standing again, to grab the sides of our son's chair. "It was like every molecule in your body was knocking into the one next to it." Here she jiggles the chair, scraping the feet on the tile. Our son laughs and throws his hands over his head. "Yes," she says, "exactly," and returns to the cupcakes to place a birthday candle in the middle of each one.

"He didn't even latch the canopy, and of course he couldn't fire the afterburner, or there'd be hella trouble, but it had plenty of get up and go anyway. Fast fast faster we went and as we raced along, the sun set completely and only the rocket glow behind us lit the way and we

looked like a comet on Earth. At first, I squeezed the wheel along with Gabelich and he whispered, ‘steady, steady,’ into my ear until he finally let go of the wheel and that was me grooving that rocket along at what, two-hundred, three-hundred miles an hour? How many people can say that?”

I shake my head and shrug my shoulders and seeing this, our son does the same. He is very good at this kind of mimicry. He watches me when I shave in the morning and when I see his face screwed into careful concentration, pulling his nose this way and that, I look at him and know myself a little better.

My wife laughs at us. “You are a pair,” she says, and grabs the matches and lights the candles on the cupcakes. Turning and presenting the glowing display, she asks, “Shall we sing?”

“We shall,” I say and we do, me poorly – why are the most frequently sung songs (Happy Birthday, Star Spangled Banner, etc...) always so difficult – and her beautifully, that hasn’t changed since that summer on the Salt Flats when she was the entertainment and inspiration. When she was speed.

We are a mess, my son and I. He is simply bad at eating and in sympathy I make a go at the cupcake without using my hands. When we are done, our tongues grab frosting and crumbs from our faces. By the end, most of the cupcake is scattered, fallen over table and floor, or smeared on our faces, and she laughs at us, a pair again.

Finished, we sit back in our chairs and shove our feet out in front of us and look around our little scene and it is great.

After a moment, though, the spell passes, my wife claps her hands and looks between my son and me and says, “I think someone needs a bath.”

But suppose.

Suppose that when I go to get my son from his chair to take him upstairs for his bath, I must crouch in a sound lifting position, back straight and knees bent, and tilt him forward so my shoulder presses into his belly. Suppose I grunt when I lift him up and pitch him over my shoulder because he is heavy. Suppose that there is a ticking in the back of my knee signaling tendon or ligament strain from this repeated action. You were thinking this child is a baby, you were, but suppose he is grown and this was something like his eighteenth birthday today.

His hands are big and knock against my back as I climb the stairs. His body is fleshy and un-firm. He makes “uh uh uh” sounds with each step higher.

Suppose too that he is quite extraordinarily hairy for a young man and that his yellow and green dinner mush clings to his arms and rubs off into his shirt when his arms tangle in the sleeves as he disrobes

(with my help always) for his bath. What he knows is that when I rub the wash cloth along his side, he is to raise his arms. He has also learned to lift himself so I can reach to wash *under there*. Suppose that afterwards, that as I pat his back dry, he likes to watch the water swirl down the tub drain.

Imagine his crazy, air-drying hair, and the wrestling match that is the putting on of pajamas. Picture that day eighteen years ago when the security camera swept across the entrance to our lab building and showed the bundle resting there where before there was nothing but dirt over sun-blanching concrete, and Oliver and Norman and I go to look and see the child, and Oliver throws up his hands and says, "not me, don't ask me, nuh-uh" and stalks quickly back to his lab, while Norman looks closer and asks if the little thing's head isn't just a bit too large for the rest of him?

Imagine a man who has only Oliver and Norman for companions and understands and even accepts the many reasons this is unlikely to change. This man might look on the bundle as a gift, large, lolling head or no.

Suppose the bed groans as my oversized son sinks into his overstuffed comforter as he asks for the book. One of his few words, "book." He means the book filled with the stories of the extraordinary people who have done, or in some cases, simply *are* extraordinary things. He likes to look at the pictures as I tell him stories.

We have an old edition. The tallest man ever is likely taller than our tallest man ever. And surely someone's fingernails have twisted into longer knots by now. Someone has run faster, driven farther, hiccupped longer. But we are plenty pleased with our version, the one with the picture of the man Gabelich standing in front of his car, the Blue Flame. In our version he remains the fastest ever. He holds his helmet under his arm. An elbow juts out cockily. In the picture, there is no celebration, no woman, only determination. Suppose that downstairs, the dishes remain scattered across the table, waiting for me, only me.

Suppose the best stories are the ones we tell ourselves.

Suppose that while Gabelich was real, Johanson, rather than being his rival, is maybe someone like a next door neighbor, most known (in our house anyway) for an endless battle with a warped screen door that always edges open, letting the bugs in to bother him as he reads the evening paper, his blood pressure eased by his wife's soft clattering in the kitchen. Imagine that the Johanson screen door spends most of its time off of its hinges, stretched across two sawhorses in the garage where it is measured, shaved and stretched and puttied, then re-hung, quickly found wanting and the same things are tried again and again and again. Before this endless door fixing, and evenings falling asleep in the easy chair as the bugs swirl around the reading lamp, waiting for his wife to enter and touch him on the shoulder and take the nearly

spilled nightcap from his hand and guide him to bed, mightn't this Johanson have been a man with an accent, a man with a penchant for lambskin gloves?

Probably not, but possibly.

Suppose when you were young and imagining your life, you were expecting something in particular, but something else, something large, simple, and finally sleeping, was delivered altogether.