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Also by Scarlett Thomas

Bright Young Things
Going Out
PopCo
The End of Mr. Y

OUR TRAGIC UNIVERSE

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PART ONE

Organise a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no human life will be in danger (or one lapses into the criminal). Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible – in short, remain close to the 'truth,' in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricably mixed up with real elements (a policeman will really fire on sight; a client of the bank will faint and die of a heart attack; one will actually pay you the phoney ransom), in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real . . .

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

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I WAS READING about how to survive the end of the universe when I got a text message from my friend Libby. Her text said, *Can you be at the Embankment in fifteen minutes? Big disaster.* It was a cold Sunday in early February, and I'd spent most of it curled up in bed in the damp and disintegrating terraced cottage in Dartmouth. Oscar, the literary editor of the newspaper I wrote for, had sent me *The Science of Living Forever* by Kelsey Newman to review, along with a compliments slip with a deadline on it. In those days I'd review anything, because I needed the money. It wasn't so bad: I'd built up some kind of reputation reviewing science books and so Oscar gave me all the best ones. My boyfriend Christopher did unpaid volunteer work on heritage sites, so it was down to me to pay the rent. I never turned down a commission, although I wasn't at all sure what I'd say about Kelsey Newman's book and this idea of surviving beyond the end of time.

In some ways I was already surviving beyond the end of time: beyond deadlines, overdraft limits and ultimatums from my bank manager. I hit deadlines to get money, but not always to give it away. That winter I'd been reduced to cashing all my cheques in a high-commission, no-questions-asked place in Paignton and paying utility bills at the Post Office with cash. Although what did anyone expect? I was hardly a big-time writer, although I was still planning to be. Every time a white envelope came from the bank Christopher added it to the pile of mail on my desk upstairs. I never opened any of these envelopes. I didn't have much credit on my phone, so I didn't

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text Libby back; but I put the book down and got off the bed and put on some trainers. I'd vowed never to go out in Dartmouth on a Sunday evening, for complicated reasons. But I couldn't say no to Libby.

The grey afternoon was curling into evening like a frightened woodlouse. I still had fifty pages of *The Science of Living Forever* to read and the deadline for my review was the next day. I'd have to finish the book later and make sure I filed the review on time if I wanted any chance of it being in the paper on Sunday. If it didn't go in until the next week I would miss being paid for a month. Downstairs, Christopher was on the sofa cutting pieces of reclaimed wood to make a toolbox. We didn't have a garden he could work in, just a tiny, completely enclosed and very high-walled concrete yard in which frogs and other small animals sometimes appeared miraculously, as if they had dropped from the sky. As I walked into the sitting room I could see sawdust getting in everything, but I didn't point this out. My guitar was propped up by the fireplace. Every time Christopher moved the saw back or forth the vibration travelled across the room and made the thick E string tremble. The sound was so low and sad and haunting that you could barely hear it. Christopher was sawing hard: his brother Josh had been for lunch yesterday and he still wasn't over it. Josh found it therapeutic talking about their mother's death; Christopher didn't. Josh was happy that their father was dating a 25-year-old waitress; Christopher thought it was disgusting. It had probably been up to me to stop the conversation, but at the time I was worrying that I hadn't even looked to see what book I was supposed to be reviewing, and that the bread was running out and we didn't have any more. Also, I didn't really know how to stop the conversation.

Sometimes when I went downstairs I'd think about saying something, and then I'd imagine how Christopher would be likely to reply and end up saying nothing at all. This time I said, 'Guess what?' and Christopher, still sawing madly, as if into the back of his brother's head, or perhaps Milly's head, said, 'You know I hate it when you start conversations like that, babe.' I apologised, but when he asked me to hold a piece of wood for him I said I had to take the dog out.

'She hasn't been out for ages,' I said. 'And it's getting dark.'

Bess was in the hallway, rolling on a piece of rawhide.

'I thought you walked her this afternoon,' Christopher said.

I put on my anorak and my red wool scarf and left without saying anything else; I didn't even turn back when I heard Christopher's box of nails fall on the floor, although I knew I should have done.



How do you survive the end of time? It's quite simple. By the time the universe is old enough and frail enough to collapse, humans will be able to do whatever they like with it. They'll have had billions of years to learn, and there'll be no matron to stop them, and no liberal broadsheets and no doomy hymns. By then it'll just be a case of wheeling one decrepit planet to one side of the universe while another one pisses itself sadly in another galaxy. And all this while waiting for the final crunch, as everything becomes everything else as the universe begins its beautiful collapse, panting and sweating until all life arcs out of it and all matter in existence is crushed into a single point and then disappears. In the barely audible last gasp of the collapsing

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universe, its last orgasmic sigh, all its mucus and pus and rancid *jus* will become pure energy, capable of everything imaginable, just for a moment. I didn't know why I'd contemplated trying to explain this to Christopher. He'd once made me cry because he refused to accept spatial dimensions, and we'd had a massive row because he wouldn't look at my diagram that proved Pythagoras's theorem. According to Christopher the books I reviewed were 'too cerebral, babe'. I didn't know what he'd make of this one, which was a complete head-fuck.

According to Kelsey Newman, the universe, which always was a computer, will, for one moment – not even that – be so dense and have so much energy that it will be able to compute anything at all. So why not simply program it to simulate another universe, a new one that will never end, and in which everyone can live happily ever after? This moment will be called the Omega Point, and, because it has the power to contain everything, will be indistinguishable from God. It will be different from God, though, because it will run on a processing power called *Energia*. As the universe gets ready to collapse, no one will be writing poetry about it or making love for the last time or just bobbing around, stoned and listless, waiting for annihilation, imagining something beautiful and unfathomable on the other side. All hands will be on deck for the ultimate goal: survival. Using only physics and their bare hands, humans will construct the Omega Point, which, with its infinite power, can and for various reasons definitely will, bring everyone back to life – yes, even you – billions of years after you have died, and it will love everyone and create a perfect heaven. At the end of the universe anything could happen, except for one thing.

You can't die, ever again.

It wasn't the kind of book Oscar usually sent me. We reviewed popular science, however wacky, but we drew the line at anything New Age. Was this a New Age book? It was hard to tell. According to the blurb, Newman was a well-respected psychoanalyst from New York who had once advised a president, although it didn't say which one. He had been inspired to write his book by reading the work of the equally well-respected physicist Frank Tipler, who had come up with the idea of the Omega Point and done all the necessary equations to prove that you and I – and everyone who ever lived, and every possible human who never lived – will be resurrected at the end of time, as soon as the power becomes available to do it. Your death will therefore be just a little sleep, and you won't notice any time passing between it and waking up in eternity.

Why bother with anything, in that case? Why bother trying to become a famous novelist? Why bother paying bills, shaving your legs, trying to eat enough vegetables? The sensible thing, if this theory were true, would be to shoot yourself now. But then what? I loved the universe, particularly the juicy bits like relativity, gravity, up and down quarks, evolution, and the wave function, which I almost understood; but I didn't love it so much that I wanted to stay beyond its natural end, stuck with everyone else in some sort of coma, wired up to a cosmic life-support machine. I had been told once – and reminded of it again recently – that I would come to nothing. What on earth would I do with all that heaven? Living for ever would be like marrying yourself, with no possibility of a divorce.



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There were thirty-one stone steps down to the street. I walked with B past Reg's place on the corner and across the market square, which was completely deserted except for one seagull pecking at a flapping chip wrapper and making the sound they all make: *ack, ack, ack,* like a lonely machine gun. B hugged the wall under the Butterwalk by Miller's Deli, and stopped to pee as soon as we were in the Royal Avenue Gardens. Everything seemed to be closed, broken, dead or in hibernation. The band-stand was empty and the fountain was dry. The palm trees shivered. There was a smell of salt in the wind, and something seaweedy, which became stronger as we approached the river. No one was around. It was getting darker, and the sky above Kingswear was bruising into a mushy green, brown and purple, like the skin of an apple. The wind was coming in from the sea, and all the little boats danced on their moorings as if they were enchanted, making ghostly sounds.

I put up the hood on my jacket, while B sniffed things. She liked to visit all the benches on the North Embankment, one by one, then go around the Boat Float and home via Coronation Park. She was always slower and sleepier in winter, and at home I kept finding her balled up in the bedclothes as if she was trying to hibernate. But she still followed her routine when we came out. Every day we stopped to look at the mysterious building site in Coronation Park. The previous autumn Libby had heard from Old Mary at her knitting group that it was going to be a small, stone Labyrinth set on a piece of raised and landscaped lawn with a view of the river. But it was still just a hole. The council was funding the project because a study had said it would help calm everybody down. Dartmouth was a sleepy harbour where people came to retire, die, write novels

or quietly open a shop. The only people who needed calming down were the cadets at the Royal Naval College, and they would never come to the Labyrinth. My main worry was that the builders might cut down my favourite tree, and almost every day I went and checked it was still there. The wind tore across the park and I hurried B past the building site with its flapping plastic and temporary fencing, looked at my tree and then went back to the Embankment. This February was cold, cruel and spiteful, and I wanted to be at home in bed, even though it wasn't much warmer than outside and the damp in the house made me wheeze. B obviously wanted to go home too, and I imagined her curled under the covers with me, both of us in hibernation.

There was still no one around. Perhaps I'd been worrying over nothing all these months. Perhaps he didn't come any more. Perhaps he'd never come.

Upriver, the Higher Ferry was chugging across the water towards Dartmouth. It had only one car on it, probably Libby's, and its lights danced in the gloom. Things on the river tinkled. I stood there waiting for Libby, looking at all the boats, not looking for *him.* I listened to the *ding-ding-ding* sounds and wondered why they seemed ghostly. I reached into the inside pocket of my anorak. I already knew what was there: a scrap of paper with an email address on it that I knew by heart, and a brown medicine bottle with a pipette. The bottle contained the last dregs of the flower remedy my friend Vi had made me several weeks before. I'd been up to Scotland for Christmas to stay with Vi and her partner Frank in their holiday cottage while Christopher went to Brighton, but it had all gone wrong and now Vi wasn't speaking to me. Because of this, I was

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objectively lonelier than I had ever been, but it was OK because I had a house and a boyfriend and B, which was more than enough. I also had this remedy, which helped. Her handwriting was still just legible on the label. *Gentian, holly, hornbeam, sweet chestnut, wild oat and wild rose.* I put a few drops of the mixture on my tongue and felt warm, just for a second.

After a couple more minutes the ferry arrived. There was a thump as the flap came down; then the gate opened and the single car drove off and headed down the Embankment. It was Libby's, so I waved. Libby and her husband Bob had closed down their failing comic shop two years before and now ran Miller's Deli, where they sold all sorts of things, including unpasteurised cheeses, goose fat, lemon tart, home-made salads, driftwood sculptures and knitted shawls and blankets made by them or their friends. I made jam and marmalade for Miller's Deli to supplement the income I got from my writing projects. My favourite lunch was a tub of pickled garlic, some home-made fish pâté and a half-baguette, which I often picked up from the shop on winter mornings. Libby was driving slowly, with the window down, her hair going crazy in the wind. When she saw me she stopped the car. She was wearing jeans and a tight T-shirt with a hand-knitted, red shawl tied over the top, as if February was never cruel to her at all, and as if she'd never worn thick glasses, or baggy tops screen-printed with characters from horror films.

'Meg, fuck. Thank God. Christopher isn't here, is he?'

'Of course not,' I said. I looked around. 'No one's here. Why? Are you OK? Aren't you cold?'

'No. Too much adrenaline. I'm in deep shit. Can I say I was at yours?'

'When?'

'Today. All day. Last night as well. Bob came back early. Can you believe they diverted his flight to Exeter because of a slippery runway at Gatwick?'

'Have you spoken to him yet?'

'No, but he's sent messages. He was supposed to text me when his plane landed at Gatwick, which I thought would give me loads of time to get home and change and make the place look lived-in and stuff. When I heard a text come I just thought it was Bob at Gatwick – it was the right sort of time – and I was in bed with Mark, so I didn't look at it immediately. I mean, it's half an hour to get off the plane and out of the airport, and then another half an hour into Victoria, then twenty minutes across to Paddington, and then three hours to Totnes to pick up his car and then another twenty-five minutes to drive back here. So I wasn't exactly panicking. But by the time I looked there was another text saying *See you in half an hour.* Then another one came asking where I was and if I was all right. I almost had a heart attack.'

Libby was having an affair with Mark, a bedraggled guy who had washed up in Churston, a village over the river in Torbay, when he'd inherited a beach hut from his grandfather. He lived in the beach hut, ate fish and picked up any casual work he could get in the boatyards and harbours. He was saving to start his own boat-design company, but Libby said he was about a million miles away from that. Libby worked in the deli with Bob most weekdays, and spent the rest of her time knitting increasingly complicated things and writing Mark love letters in dark red ink, while Bob played his electric guitars and did the shop accounts. She had invented a book group at Churston