

“December 21”

Originator: G.S. Paxton

Editor: W. Rosenberg

webmaster@collectiveunconscious.org

Delicate waves of purple and hues of black washed the evening sky, erasing the remnants of the last day. Shaking hand tightly clutched, the man sipped a potent mixture of three parts Gentleman Jack to one part Coke. The television screen flickered as the signal cut out without grace or warning. Glancing through the window panes of his small farm house, he stared into the bleak dullness of an otherwise unremarkable night observing his land, situated on a ridge that overlooked the apple orchard his great-grandfather had planted by hand. Snow lay heavy on the barren branches resembling one of those awful Thomas Kinkaid portraits so commonly seen in mall displays in the late 1990's. For some reason or another, he remembered what his father had told him many years ago in their only conversation about spirituality: “It doesn't matter if you believe in God. As long as you do the right thing in this life, God will believe in you.” He smiled slightly, wondering if that was really true.

Adorned in strings of multi-colored and clear lights, the nine-foot Douglas Fir Christmas tree sat with pride in the nook of the living room. They always picked a beautiful tree, and always a live one. His wife deplored the fake trees. He agreed – there were more than enough fake things in the modern world, and it confused the man why people thought man-made representations of plants made any logical sense.

His eye caught the dull matte-finish of the Mayan-inspired art piece they had bought on their honeymoon in Mexico many years ago. The frame leaned to the left instead of being straight. The picture was an obtuse representation of a man with a snake head next to a vase. His wife liked it but he never understood it. With one hand he straightened the picture before moving from warm light.

The man sat his glass down on the island in the kitchen and proceeded to turn off all the lights on the first floor. After all, it was only fitting. Out of the darkness came life. When the lights finally go out for good the perfect, tenuous circle is completed. Bending over to pull the tree light cord from the wall, he paused and left the lights on. The soft glow comforted him, reminding him of childhood.

Feeling the smallest bit intoxicated by the Gentleman Jack and the stunning, frightening realization that every beginning actually has an end, he walked quietly up the stairs to his family. Stopping at the summit, he opened up his daughter's door and silently approached her crib. She slept in her crib with her mouth slightly agape in peaceful oblivion, her tiny nine-month old body moving up and down ever so slightly. Tenderly kissing her on her bald little head, his hand lovingly caressed her.

He closed the door silently.

Across the hall, he stepped into his son's room. The window curtains were open. The man smiled – last week was his son's first hockey game. His son's team had lost, but the man was so proud. Carefully, he drew the curtains closed, it was best he sleep.

Through the darkness, he leaned over and kissed his son's forehead.

Groggy eyes swam to semi-consciousness. “Daddy,” his son asked, “what’s going on?” He yawned. Clearly sleepy, he rubbed his eyes as he stared through the darkness directly at the man.

“Shh, go back to sleep. I wanted to make sure you had nice dreams. And I wanted to tell you I love you. You know that, right?”

With eyes now closed, the son yawned as his hands stretched backwards. “I know. I love you too, Daddy.”

“See you in the morning. I’m so proud of you,” the man said to his son who had already fallen back asleep.

He stood motionless in the dark until the delicate rhythm of sleep audibly embraced the boy. The hinge creaked as the maple bedroom door came to a close, silently shutting.

As he slowly walked down the hallway, the light from the master bedroom welcomed him. His wife slept on her side, facing the blackness of the television set, which would never again hear laughter or tears from emotionally gripping or mindless and empty programming.

They had been through so much together. They met at an awful college party after she had spilled beer all over his new boots. From the first moment he saw her, he thought she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen and fell hopelessly in love. She, feeling guilty about her faux pas, sat and talked with him amid a background white noise of the party. They drank warm beer and listened to terrible house music until the party’s end. Somehow they ended up in a nearby park. They sat under the swings and kissed in the dark until the morning rays licked the sky. They were inseparable since that day. The gift of their children only deepened the mutual bond of respect they had for each other.

Back in the bedroom, the man realized he had fallen in love only three times in his life – when first he saw his future wife, and when his son and infant daughter were born.

With the back of his hand, he stroked the hair from her face to better see the outline of her features. Even when draped in darkness her inner beauty shone brighter than anything else he knew. She sighed to herself as a slight, unconscious smile spread across her face. For a brief moment he allowed himself to embrace delusion – he thought about taking her to Bali for their 15th wedding anniversary.

He leaned forward, lightly kissing her right cheek in the manner of one spouse saying a final goodbye as the other lay motionless in a casket.

A single tear fell from his right eye. He made sure to cover the sounds his emotions made as he closed the shade and walked silently out of the room, but not before flicking the power button of the television set to “off.”

It was better this way. They did not need to know – nor would they ever – how this all ends.

Walking down the creaking wood stairs for the last time, the man had no choice but to come to terms with his life. The good, the bad and the indifferent choices he made in this bitter pill of existence. All the concerns he once held for politics or shopping or BPA-free plastic spoons, or his interest in rock bands were clearly inconsequential now. He wiped the remainders of tears away from his face.

Picking up his drink back in the kitchen, he swallowed the remaining contents in two large gulps. Deciding instinctively that more is key, he left the glass to sit on the table as he

walked away. He opened the “Lazy Susan” next to the oven, quickly removing a sealed Gentlemen Jack and discarding the plastic wrap and cap on the floor where it landed with a slight clicking sound. Lifting the bottle to his lips, he took in two large swigs, immediately sensing a certain warmth coat his mouth, throat, finally completing the journey to his stomach. A small bubble of gas burned slightly as he burped.

He called to his dog that slept heavily next to the fire place, its soft flame casting a calming orange glow, coating the room. Hearing its master, he sheepishly and sleepily walked over. Years ago they had bought the dog from the local humane shelter when he was just seven weeks old; they both fell completely in puppy-love. The last of a litter of eight his mother was a miniature terrier and father, taking an educated guess, a mix of a Rottweiler and German Shepherd. This resulted in a neurotic, barking, loving and loyal animal that even at age nine was as loud as he had ever been.

The dog lazily waddled next to the man, licking the outstretched fingers of his master.

The man opened the cutlery drawer where the forks, spoons and knives waited to be of use. Fumbling in the darkness, and ever so slightly slicing his index finger with a knife, he found the old blue Bic lighter once used on warm summer nights to start family fires in the fire-pit situated in the backyard. Bottle and lighter in hand, he turned to the kitchen, to the room, to the house, to his family, to the life he had created and nodded silently to himself. He thought briefly, could I have been a better person? Could I have done more with my life? Had I given all to my family, my self? He didn't have an answer but felt he had given life his best shot. Shaking his head twice, he thought that, unfortunately, no such concerns really mattered anymore.

Licking the cut on his finger, and quietly sucking the blood, he opened – then closed – the door from the kitchen to the garage. The door shut with an audible snap.

Against better judgment, he flipped on the light in the garage causing his eyes to wince with both surprise and a touch of anger as his irises adjusted from dilation to constriction. Three steps down, his feet felt the cold cement floor even through the wool socks his wife had given to him as an early Christmas present. His black Ford F-150 sat shining strong and sturdy under the florescent lights. Rubbing his hand over the hood of his wife's Adriatic Blue Cadillac Escalade he wondered why they had squandered so much money on vehicles – vehicles which only took them away from the one place that ultimately mattered – home. That's what it was really all about in this short sweet life – love and family.

He opened the lower-right hand drawer by pressing the handle of his workbench. Although he had quit smoking fourteen years prior, each year on January 1, he would buy a new pack of Marlboro Lights from the Shell gas station near the court house and place it in the back of the workbench. Just one of those quirks everyone has. Never once since he quit did he ever open up the packs of cigarettes. He had promised his wife he would quit and quit for good. He has abided by this even though the visceral nicotine cravings would sometimes eat at him from the inside out. The one thing that prevented him from lighting up (besides his word to his wife) were the children. If they were to see him smoke, that would condone the self-destructive behavior. And that would not do. Both sets of his grandfathers smoked and died prematurely as a result. His offspring would not continue that pattern, no sir.

Now, he justified to himself, everyone will die prematurely.

He paused for a moment, took a breath and put the pack of cigarettes in his back pocket. The door of his truck squeaked as he grabbed his beaten but trusty brown Carhart as it was cold outside after all. The man did not want to take the chance to wake his family; the most important thing right now was that they sleep in peace. He walked out the back of the garage door. Standing in the shadow of the night he whistled lightly and the dog followed him into the clear but frigid night.

Looking into the dark sky he wondered about what could have been.

After unwrapping the plastic wrapping from the cigarette pack, he let it float off in the light wind. They walked – man and dog, dog and man – to the top of the hill overlooking the house and ridge. From the slight elevation he could see quite literally for miles. He stared at his house, his family, his life and collected memories. Looking into the window of the house, the tree cast multicolored lights onto the snow, immediately reminding him of one of his first Christmas memories.

A moment later, the lights on the tree abruptly ceased working as did the large light above the pole barn. He was slightly surprised they stayed on as long as they did.

The man pulled a cigarette from its pack, placing it between his lips. Bringing the lighter to his mouth, he inhaled. Breathing out the smoke through his nose, as he had so many times before in the past, he realized just how easy it would have been to go back to this. Like riding a bicycle.

He stared into the night sky; he could see Orion's belt quite visibly. Lights from the west caught his attention. An unearthly red glow was becoming visible. Turning to the east, the same glow was illuminating the sky like a quickly spreading cancer. He did not need to look north, but did anyway – the light in the sky was there too.

With cigarette pressed between his lips, he leaned down and patted his dog on the head; he had been a good dog. Trading the cigarette for the bottle, he took four large gulps of the alcohol. Breathing in the smoke, he held it for a moment, exhaling slowly into the sky.

Looking back towards the west, he saw the light had widened its grasp over the succumbing sky. It would not be long now.

It had taken Homo sapiens over 4,000 million years to evolve from the very first single cell prokaryotes to organically complex beings capable of destroying themselves in a matter of hours.

The man dropped the spent cigarette to the ground, quickly lighting another one with a shaky hand and spun his head in a three hundred and sixty degree motion. A vibrant, hellish orange spread wider into the sky from all sides. Clearly an optical illusion it seemed that the tentacles of light pulsated much akin to how boiling water appears as it splashes from an iron kettle.

Although it was only a little after 1AM, the sky appeared to be hinting towards dawn.

His dog, sensing something was wrong, whimpered quietly next to the man, leaning against his leg.

The man took a swig from the bottle, recalling how much his and the lives of his family had changed in a matter of moments. Just before the television transmission went dead, a visibly shaken reporter from the NBC affiliate outside of Denver interrupted a rerun of Late Night. Shaken to reality by a shrieking sound from the television, the man had only been partially

watching, being, then, half-asleep. As his brain embraced consciousness once more, the images jarred him from the solitude and pleasures of sleep.

What could only have been images and video from satellite feeds showed what could only be described as a planet-sized wall of fire spreading quickly across the globe. From what little information he could glean from the manic reporter with the wild eyes only one thing he heard for sure:

The end.

The reporter sputtered about a computer virus referred to as Stuxnet or something like that having caused irreversible infrastructure damage to military and civilian computer systems as it tricked the operating system into believing things were running correctly when, in fact, they were not. Missiles flew into the sky, one thing led to another. The man had not heard of any news reports earlier in the day pertaining to this. Surely there was a backstory, maybe some vast conspiracy, there but it was actually quite unimportant he realized.

There was no time. He thought about this for a moment and wondered if there really ever was enough time in the first place. Life was so short. The man had no time

He stared into the night sky as now it appeared to be day. Not the vibrant enriching light from the sun, but an expansion of dawns light that now had virtually erased what should be the cool, black night. For a brief moment he pondered whether this would truly be the end of it all, the end of everything. No, he thought, there will be survivors; perhaps the President of the United States and other important people living underground in bunkers - there have to be at least some contingency plans, right?

Taking another drag on his cigarette, he recalled just last Saturday when his wife, son and daughter had spent the day in the park enjoying nature, hot cocoa and sledding. Living in a bunker would be no way to live he thought to himself, shaking his head from side-to-side. Not like he had time or the resources to build a bunker even if he had known weeks before. He resigned himself that it was better his loved ones simply sleep through it all. Sleep forever.

Suddenly, it was the absence of sound, of the noise of life, which he noticed. No wind. No birds. No animals or car noise. Not even the sound of fridge buzz.

The light grew ever so large as the orange lit the sky from all sides. Where the horizon should be was only a sickly wall of yellow which twisted and morphed as it bubbled from all sides.

The lit cigarette dangling precariously from his lip trembled as small rings of smoke gently escaped the burning ember. The dog whimpered as it lay next to his master. Taking a final drag of the cigarette, he flicked it carelessly into the snow where it landed softly, butt-end down, smoldering.

Pulsations of light from the distance signaled the end. Although there was no sound but the light wind, the man likened the hum of destruction to the mechanical whimper of an eighteen-wheeler careening, uncontrollably, into a crowded sidewalk.

Sky burning, the horizon of yellow fire raced towards the man. He closed his eyes, wishing for just one more day. But that's not how it would work, he clearly knew.

Opening his eyes once more, he stared into the night. There was no roar of sound like abrasive sound of grinding metal. Bright, intense light pummeled him from all sides.

The man took one final look at his house.

A shadow, a movement caught his eye.

His spine tingled and his stomach turned into a knot as he gasped. The man dropped the bottle of whiskey to the ground, cursing to himself silently as his legs took to movement. He could plainly see his son, bundled in a parka and pajama bottoms, standing outside of the house with a look of purely confused wonderment and terror. He waved at the man with a puzzled expression bordering between confusion and insecurity.

The man screamed a guttural groan from a place deep down that he did not know existed. He ran towards the child, dog in tow, with legs pumping faster than he had ever thought possible. With legs trouncing through the soft but ice-laden snow, he fell once and leaped back to his feet, splitting his lip with his knee. There was no pain as blood trickled from the side of his mouth. Although the man did not think of it, he could no longer hear anything at all. The sound of nothing. All in his field of vision appeared to be as if he was watching a movie – reality was a plasticized representation of what-should-be.

For a moment the man was convinced time stopped dead much like in the cinema. He had made it.

His son – scared, confused and crying in his arms – clutched the man.

With eyes shut tight, the man prayed for the first and only time in his life, hoping his own father had been right so many years ago.

End