

FROM “YES, WE ARE DULY CONCERNED WITH CALAMITOUS EVENTS”

A STORY BY KEITH ROSSON

THE FIRST DEATH

Twenty-three days after the world kind of ends—or at least our part of it—we all watch as Human Resources Randy strangles the temp with a mouse cord. Right there in the hallway in front of the men’s bathroom door. If the tone hadn’t been set yet already, well. There you go. Jesus.

We stand there, this wavering ring around the two of them writhing on the floor. Someone quietly murmurs his name—Randy’s, not the temp’s; nobody can actually remember the temp’s name, even though he was here for a week before everything happened, and almost all of us are convinced that he’s the one that left the shitty, passive-aggressive Post-It note on the copy machine the day that everything went wrong—but that’s it. Just a murmured “Jeez, Randy” as the temp (with twenty-three days of sweat around his collar, still wearing his CONTRACTOR lanyard, still with that huge zit right in his septum, which really must hurt like a bastard when you thought about it) lies on his back and claws at the cord cinched around his throat. He knocks over one of the recycling baskets with his madly kicking foot. Human Resources Randy is above him, weeping. The temp’s face is so full of trapped blood it’s like a painted-on mask. His eyes look like if you found the recipe for “Sheer Animal Terror” and doubled all the ingredients.

The phone starts ringing in Reception. Donna stalks towards it with her hand covering her mouth. Jim Bledsoe, staring at the scene playing out on the floor, calls out, “Jesus Christ, Donna, you know what it’s going to say.” And it’s true. We’re all very familiar with the phenomenon of the ringing phone.

We stand clustered in the hall and watch Randy strangle the temp.

We cast horrified, pained glances at each other.

We wait for someone to do the right thing.

We’ve grown accustomed to waiting.

The temp dies with a last wretched click of his throat and the shocking, immediate stench of loosed bowels; it mingles with the ever-present fug of microwave popcorn like two lovers that are no good for each other. And it’s not like we can open the windows. People step back, some of us gagging, while Randy kind of leans, kind of falls over the temp’s body. Randy’s lips are pulled back to show his big horsey teeth. He’s not in good shape, Randy, and he’s gasping for air, still crying, his crotch pretty much in the temp’s slack face. There’s smashed popcorn all over the floor.

Over at her desk, Donna picks up the phone. Her eyes look like dusty glass, vacant and stunned.

“What?” she says into the receiver.

She doesn’t write it down, what the voice says.

Twenty-three days after the world ends? We’re past taking messages here.

Besides, we’ve heard it all before.