

# Routine

By Jonathan SMITH

The world ended today, and I didn't give a damn.

You might question how this could be. How could I not give a damn? It would be a difficult thing to be apathetic about, wouldn't it? It's not as if you could just ignore it, or flip the channel and see what else is on, or change the radio station. Well, it was actually much easier than you might think. The reason I didn't care was because I was no longer there when it ended.

It started as a pretty routine day. People went to work, and the lines at the Tim Horton's drive-thrus grew longer by the minute. Children got on the big yellow buses to go to school, where they would open their books and continue on from where they had left off the day before. University students hauled themselves out of bed and walked, ran, or drove to their first classes of the day. A pretty routine day indeed.

I was wandering to my first English class of the day, and my thoughts were far from that subject. Instead, they were on Karen Dolworth. They had been about her a lot lately, especially since she had phoned me up a week earlier and excitedly told me that she had met someone.

"I'm so excited, Eric!" she had said, "I can't wait for you to meet him!"

"Great..." was all I could say.

"He's hilarious, and his sense of humour's right up your alley!"

"Really ...?"

"Yeah! Oh damn, I've got to go. Roommate needs the phone. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

Then she had hung up, leaving me listening to the dial tone and wondering what I was supposed to do with myself. Now don't get me wrong. It wasn't as if she had been my girlfriend and then dumped me for some jerk who had my sense of humour. No, Karen was simply a friend of mine, or so she thought. I had thought so too, but lately my feelings had changed.

I had considered telling her how I felt. I would've, if the time had been right. But that time never came, or else I had just missed it.

English class was useless, as usual. Reading some book about a guy and a white whale. Who the hell becomes

obsessed with harpooning a white whale anyway? It's not like I wanted that course. I had to take something to go with my degree. It was either an English course or something even more horrid like Philosophy. If a tree falls in the woods and it doesn't make a sound, what's it matter? My friend Bill, who's into that kind of crap, once told me that Socrates was some guy who had been executed for corrupting kids or something. I think it was probably because he bored them to death.

Bill found me later in the campus bar, nursing the same beer I had when he had left an hour and a half ago to go to some other class. He sat down beside me and adjusted his glasses for the hundredth time that day.

"Cheer up, man," he said, "At least she's still your friend."

At least she was still my friend. At least I had that. I would hear the great stories of what's-his-face, the great jokes he told that day, the funny things he did...

"Your other option," Bill said, "is to tell her how you feel and take the chance. Don't leave things unsaid. You'll regret it."

Gee, thanks, Mom.

"At least meet the guy," he said, "Maybe if he's half-decent you won't feel like you lost out so badly."

"Fine." I sighed, too tired to care all of a sudden.

"That's good, because she invited you, Tara, and me to supper with her and Robert."

Robert. So that was his name. Wasn't a bad name. Didn't sound like a jerky name. Maybe it would work out. Or maybe, Robert would be hit by a bus on the street tonight and I would have to comfort Karen. Maybe she would realize that I meant more to her than Robert, now nothing but a smear on the pavement. Maybe... Jesus, I was appalled at myself.

"Okay, I'll come."

"Good. Afterwards, maybe Tara and I will take you out for a drink or two."

He got up and walked out the door, leaving me to stare into my beer.

We ended up going to a steak place that I had never been to before. We sat at a round table, with Karen at my right and Tara at my left. Robert was on the other side of Karen. He wore one of those, "I'm-trying-to-make-a-good-impression" faces. He shouldn't have worried. It wasn't me he was going to impress. I decided that

the minute I saw him. Petty, I know, but I wasn't in the mood to be open-minded.

We had our meals, and we chatted about classes, the new movies that week, who said what to whom. Silly superficial stuff. Finally Tara asked what I knew she would.

"So, how did you and Robert meet?" she asked Karen, as if Robert wasn't sitting right next to her. Karen chuckled to herself.

"It's kind of a funny story. You see, he and I were in the same class and..."

I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to know if he had fallen out of the sky on top of her, or if he had saved her from giant rats. I just tuned it all out. I heard laughter, but I wasn't paying any attention. Suddenly knew I had to get out of there.

"Well that's great," I said, just as Robert opened his mouth to speak, "I'm going to step out for a second, all right?"

They all nodded, and I headed to the front of the restaurant and out the door. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment and just watched the street. A couple walked slowly past me, so involved in each other that they didn't even acknowledge I was standing there. A few cars passed by. Somewhere, a dog barked.

I wandered down the sidewalk for a moment before I turned down the alley beside the restaurant. I leaned back against the cold brick wall and stared up at the sky. Through the haze of the city sky I could see the stars. There were so many of them, yet each looked as lonely as I felt.

Suddenly I had the sensation of a moving light off to my left.

I looked over to see a ball of shimmering light, about the size of a basketball, slowly coming down from the sky. It hovered over the alley for a moment as if it were searching for something, and then came down closer to me. I just stared at it, convinced that my feelings of gloom had given way to lunacy. The shimmering sphere moved toward me until it was only a few feet away. It was so bright that I had to shield my eyes to look at it.

Greetings.

The words were in my head. Oh great, voices in my head.

"Hello?" I answered meekly.

We are the Gatherers. We travel the universe and collect representatives from worlds that are about to undergo a cataclysmic event. We have found you, and

ask if you will be that representative. With us, you will travel the stars and see what you have never dreamed of.

The Gatherers? What the hell was up with a name like that? Sounded like some movie.

Hurry, there is not much time.

I was about to tell them to kindly shove off, but then I heard Karen's voice behind me.

"Eric, I've been looking for you!"

I turned around to look at her. She was standing at the opening of the alley, a look of concern on her perfect face. For a moment I forgot about Robert, but it was only for a single, wonderful moment. But then the truth returned. Without thinking, I turned and raced towards the sphere. As soon as I made contact, there was a flash of blinding light, and then all went black.

About ten minutes later, the asteroid that had been stealthily heading towards the Earth suddenly entered the atmosphere and impacted in the central United States. Nobody had seen it coming. All of our space surveillance had been outdated and useless. They tell me all the funding had gone into satellites that would broadcast "Survivor" and "Are You Hot?" to all four corners of the globe. I guess nobody will know who won the million-dollars or who was the hottest.

Maybe it's all a dream. Maybe the world is still turning, the cars are still lining up at Tim's, the kids are still learning how to regurgitate, and the students are still walking to class. Maybe I'm not really travelling through space, my physical form left behind and my mental state now a part of a big shimmering ball of energy. I'll leave you to your own conclusions. Wow, that was philosophical. Maybe I could've passed that course after all...

Rest easy.

## City Cinema

Playing this Week:

**The Quiet American  
and  
The Hours**

Times and Descriptions at  
[www.citycinema.net](http://www.citycinema.net)  
**368-3669**