

# Meanwhile It Was Nuclear War

by Smiley McGrouchpants, Jr-Esq-III

It was like a dream — bombs were falling from planes, falling like taffy, falling like *plaster*, falling like it wasn't *their fault* . . . “Stay calm, people!” they told us over the intercom. “Things will be *all right!*”

But they weren't all right . . .

Joe from Accounting sipped his coffee, and looked at me. I hated that. I knew something was coming. There was nothing I could do.

“Soooo . . .” he said, looking at me, in my starched blouse, pleated skirt, scrubbed and poofed and freshened! . . . for *what??* Here's this guy looking at me — and my pay's only \$27,000/yr.

“Looks like it's the end of the world,” he said over his coffee cup, like it just dawned on him, and he had to voice it, burp it up like a bubble.

“Looks *like,*” I said, wishing I had a coffee cup, tea, marmalade, jar of peanut butter to just dive into with relish with a knife looking like I *may* . . . something to hide behind.

Meanwhile it was nuclear war.

It *had* to be . . .

I sipped my coffee (it was a little later — Joe hadn't provided any useful information in-between, and in the intervening hush in the building, ominous and eerie in its unusual-ness, I had little else to do but make *more* . . . to do *something* — ), and Marsha (\$48,000/yr., pleated skirt — why does it not seem to *matter* much?? we might as well be all wearing *smocks* or *chef's costumes* — ) comes in: “Have you *heard??*” she said, smoothing her hands on her

skirt, like it would make any difference. Like if the skirt was *smooth*, we'd have no bombs falling, like if she kept her *legs* together, it wouldn't have *happened* . . . We women are like that. It's always *our fault*. "No!" Joe said, like Dudley Do-Right™ — spat it out like that, what a *jerk*, while the cup was *en route* — and, finishing his swig, with a gesture of his hand, open-armed sweep . . . "go on and *tell* us!!!"

(*"Tell her what she's WON!!!"* I couldn't help but think as we heard a PEEEEEEEEEE-YEW!)

*CRASH!* outside the window and we all jumped.

We all looked around at each other.

"Do you think anybody was *hurt*?" Marsha exclaimed.

*Do we think anybody was hurt* . . .

We didn't *know* —

And then all of a sudden the door banged open and Jim from across the hall said —

*"Quick* hit the ground!"

We all did.

The building shook.

Things fell down everywhere, but we were all right.

Things swayed from the ceiling.

There was dust everywhere.

Then we heard a *siren* —

By this point, enough bombs had fallen we were wondering about the tonnage (we were in the basement, now — when we heard the siren, we *ran*! We were joined by Bob from Upper Management, \$60,000/yr., so there were *four* of us now . . . *hmm* . . .). I sipped my coffee.

"Geez!" Joe said, crassly as ever, as though making a *point* of ignoring all beats of conversation, all consciousness of *minds* around him — let alone the *bombing* of our *city*. "You sure do like that *coffee*!" As though I was *alone* in it. It's funny — it could constitute hitting on me, except he always did it, to everybody, and it always hit the ground with a *thud*. Some people are good for some

things — in Joe's case, I really *wondered*. Even in terms of job function. Don't the people who *mop up* even contribute *more* — I sipped again.

“It's okay,” Bob said to me, consoling, Upper Management, but unable to turn it off, the world was falling apart, what was he supposed to do? Re-frame the situation? Have been consulted?? Gotten the (proverbial) *memo*?? “I'm sure they're straighten all this out!” He said, that, too, after the last corporate *takeover* — when a whole *tier* underneath me had been summarily *fired*. I feel like I'm in a video game, or a board game, like *Jenga*, some cartoon where the *whole floor* drops out from you, and you barely stagger on your two feet back to regain *footing* on the flooring that remains from what *dropped off* —

I sipped again.

And tried to *think* . . .

I'm at least a *college graduate*, right?? I should be able to come up with *something*.

(By then I was in a sub-basement with Jim — not but *itemizing* my *choices*, and what with two *daft* straight-laced office types, and a guilty-feeling woman, I didn't want to spend the last day of my *life* . . . the last day of the *world* . . . *alone* with those two — )

“When do you think they'll drop the *big one*??” I said, sipping my coffee (I'd brought it with me).

He was already ready with the hand-wave — *pish-posh!* “They wouldn't do *that* nowadays,” he said, as though reciting it from memory, a sort-of TV news item: “They learned *that* from the Cuban Missile Crisis in '62!!!” he said, and then beamed, as though he had “got it right.” But I hadn't questioned him, I hadn't *quizzed* him —

*Life* had, and —

*BOOM!* There goes *another* one.

All of a sudden, upstairs didn't seem to be a *safe* place to be.

We had to find a way *out* — there, through those  
*windows* . . .

*There* . . .

Ha.

*Voilà!*

And . . .

And outside.

And me and Jim were confronted by a phalanx, row after *row*, of armed guards — army guys! — all holding rifles and looking like *hockey* goalies, or a *SWAT* team. “HALT!” one said, and they all levelled their guns at *us*.

“What's THAT??” one screeched, letting his rifle *falter* — while he troubled himself to *point* at Jim's coffee mug, “*BOSS #1*,” which he'd brought with him. “*Uhh* . . .”

I'd left mine inside. (I'd finished my coffee.) Jim was a slow drinker. Helped him *think*, or something. Meanwhile he was a slow thinker. Meanwhile it was nuclear war. Meanwhile it was *almost* nuclear war, and . . .

They blew him away.

Hair-trigger, good thing I'd left mine *inside*, I didn't know what to say. What sides to *take*.

“You'd better get in the *lorry*, missy!” his superior said, as the young turk commenced a round of vomiting — he'd obviously never killed someone before, this war was taking everyone by surprise. I was feeling a little wobbly on my knees *myself* — I'd never killed someone before, either, but I'd been *near* enough to someone when it'd happened, the energy shock I know felt *awakened* bid unwelcome memories come to the surface. That tree . . . in the *South* . . . it was all supposed to be *over* . . . Like this, it was supposed to be over. Though a White Woman, I, too felt like Steve Martin, in *The Jerk*: “I, too, sir, am a *nigger*!” I honestly couldn't tell the *difference*, for all I'd been through, for all the *advantage* it'd supposed to have given me . . . and now here I was being called

“missy” again . . . “You’ve come a long way, baby!” . . . war does *that* to people, though, oh gosh, we have to *ration*, it’s so necessary, revert to old *forms*, I guess you’ll have to put us *up* for a while, I guess we’ll have to *requisition* this *house*, Sergeant, I guess we’ll have to *fuck* and I guess we’ll have to *die* —

I got in the truck.

It seemed *safer* in there, warmer.

It had a roof on it.

And so it *was*.

Riding along, jostling with the soldiers (I was the only woman! Boy what a score . . . except they were all exhausted, sullen, scared-shitless, and hostile — so, by *gum*, there was a *war* on . . . )

I talked to one, sitting next to me, like it was the *obvious* thing to do.

“Where’re ya FROM??” I risked, blurting it, like it was the obvious thing to ask. Asking like you’re in a war film sometimes *helps*, because it gives a *context*. Despite themselves, people start responding *accordingly*. And they are supposed to follow *orders*, after all.

“Sko-sko-skoKIE . . . !!!” he said, blurting it out, *haltingly* — he wasn’t supposed to be *talking* to me, he thought, but no-one had given him orders *not* to, and no-one had given him orders *to* respond to me. Like I said. So it came out like *that*.

“Sko-kie . . . ??” I said. “Skokie?”

“Yes, *ma’am*,” he said, politely, out of form of the current’, reverting to the *last* — at *least* it was a welcome reprieve from “missy.” Though I *guess* he [that guy] jst wanted to get me out of *harm’s way*. Someone had *died*, after all. “Skokie, *Illinois*, that’s where I’m *from*.”

“Really??” I said, kind of surprised. “I went to school at the University of Chicago and I’ve *never* even *heard* of it.” I paused for a minute, kind of perplexed — the same kind of “*rapture*” of thought U of C is supposedly famous for getting us to *spin* aloud,

deepening your thoughts *into*. As it *were*. “Skokie, *Illinois* . . . Skokie, *Illinois* . . . Why I *never* — ”

I was reverting to [previous-century] thoughts, too: *Well I never! Land's sakes in all my life!*

“Well, *actually* ma'am — ” he seemed trying to tell me something. The guy must have been 18, 19 at most.

But the lorry had stopped.

*Haltingly.*

We all almost *fell over*, some of us almost *threw up* and then we heard —

“PEEEEE-YEEEEWWW”

That sound I was getting to know better and better — that *doppler* effect —

We all hit the *dirt*, hit the *bottom of the truck* and —

*KA-BOOM!*

When I *woke up* in the hospital, the doctor said, “You're lucky to be alive!!!” The nurse smirked. She pointed at him, mouthed the words “HE SAYS THAT TO EVERYONE” and then shook her head up-and-down several times, did the sign for “SCREW LOOSE!” by whirling her finger around her ear, and then went “*WHEW!*” with her hand in an “WHAT I HAVE TO PUT UP WITH!!!” sort-of way, and went about picking up the sheets and bedpans from the next bed over — an *empty* one, but a happy case, it seemed, there wasn't any blood or mess about, who knows what kind of hospital this was, who *knows* —

The doctor cleared his throat, like he didn't *catch* any of the nurse's conniving — or chose *not* to. They were a regular comedy routine, yes sir, these *two* —

“Sooooo . . . Paperwork.” I was at the front desk. He smiled at me. I couldn't help looking around — “What *is* this place — or rather, . . . ” I started to ask. “What did it *used* to be . . . ??” he chimed in with me. We laughed. Part of a comedy team ourselves.

“Yeah, it used to be a museum . . . or *something*.” He said, doing a full 180° around the room, looking as if impressed. Then he yawned, stretched. I thought there'd be more, but there *wasn't*. “Yup, a museum . . . of *some* kind . . . ” he looked around, as if half-obligated, half-intrigued, a schoolchild who's been dragged along on a field trip, and can't help but admit it's kind of a *neat* thing — but just *that*. “Yeah, it's a bit *weird* to see all these IV drips and broken bones — ” he laughed; I laughed *too*, but I had to *fake* it, I'd hoped he didn't *notice*, but he was too *busy*, he wasn't paying attention, THANK *GOD!!!* “ — but with me just out of the *hospital*, halfway through doing my *internship* . . . ” he shrugged again. “You know — there's a *war* on!!!” he half-barked, to mock the seriousness of it, while invoking it, sort of. He scratched his nose. “Hopefully it'll all be over by next week, and we can get back to *normal*.” He examined something he'd found of interest by the side of his nose, and then flicked it away. They must have *janitorial staff* here. Or a lot of *woman* patients. All of a sudden, I felt very unattractive, very sibling-like to this guy, for no rational reason — but, there's a *WAR* on!!! So I guess I'd have to make the best of it. “Do you need to see my *insurance* card — ” I started to ask, lamely.

He shrugged it off, waving his hand towards me as if to fan away the concern. “Naaah,” he said. “Obamacare'll take care of it.” He yawned, stretched again. “You're a monthly-paid, salaried employee.”

That was true.

“We're letting everyone else die.”

What?

“We might as well buy you *beer*.”

A heard another bomb go off — *peee-*

*YOOOOOUWWWW* — but it was far away, and I wasn't worried, so much as *concerned*. He looked around, as though his hackles had gone up, and then *shrugged*. A not-very-convincing way to shrug off the problem, but who *knew??* You never heard the one that *gets* you. That's what they *say*, anyway.

“Thanks,” I said, slinging my purse over my shoulder (I'd had it *with* me, the whole time — somehow, that confers *respect*. Both I seem *ladylike*, and therefore worth *preserving*, and perhaps like I've got a Pony *Express*<sup>™</sup> pouch over my shoulder — might be important *documents* inside. Neither was really *accurate*, but like I said, people revert to *forms*, and I was *playing* them so I'd have a chance at staying *alive* — so far, it'd *worked*, but then *again*, I'd been *doing* this for most of my professional *life*, and never *thought* that I'd *be* — )

“Whup!” he said, as a lorry pulled up in front.

“Here's your lorry.”

“Where're they taking me?” I said, breathless. *Worried*. “Do I need to sign any forms??” Did I *ask* that already?? Do I *need* to ask that —

“No,” he said. “*Nah*.” More curtly. Some soldiers came tromping into the room, all too *glad* to do so, in a way that makes one *nervous*, unless one is safely *ensconced* — up a *cliff*, watching them down *below*, say, or seeing a *parade*, for Chrissakes. “Hup! one! two! three! *Hup!*” etc. trounce-trounce-*trounce*-trounce. A lot of *SWAT* gear, it seems like to me, all in line like the *Stormtroopers* from Star Wars<sup>™</sup> — and hopefully not the Stormtroopers from *Nazi*<sup>™</sup> *Germany*. These boys seemed a little *too* excited to be there. “Oboy, we get to *shoot* stuff!!!” kind-of thing.

“What was the *reason* for this war, again??” I asked the clerk. Like it'd help.

But it did: “Treaties!” he said, like he was proud — again, boys like getting the *answer* right. Particularly if it's day-off, *not-in-school* testing — like *bar trivia*, or television, or *something*. He'd pointed up in the air with his pencil to punctuate the remark, and *now* started promptly itching behind his *head* with the back end of it, the *eraser* end — he must have had a *lot* of itchy-skin surface, or maybe he was just stressed out. Maybe he didn't use *Oil of Olay*<sup>™</sup>. *Men*[1], you know?? “Like World War *I*,” he said, vaguely, like it was on the *memo* but he just didn't *read* it that clearly — they'd pulled him out of *bed*, you know, got him out of his *internship*,



and now he's got to *talk* to this broad, *me* asking questions, in this like, this like *museum*, for god's sake . . . *whatever*. Doing the best he *can*.

"Corporate *takeover*," he said.

"*Halliburton*, or something like that."

I left.

My car was *waiting* — or, rather *lorry* —

I was crammed in the back.

I was getting used to this.

The ride was *bumpy*.

Finally, the door opened.

Again, I was the only woman. Something seemed in store for me, but what was weird, was it didn't seem like *rape* — woman's perennial fear — but it seemed like *the boys* were hungry for *war* and didn't *notice* me. They were *thrilled*. It didn't seem like I'd be *needed* for, for lack of a *better* word, *secretarial* services either, or a *waitress* or an *assistant* or something . . . again, I'm *grasping*, but somewhere between being a *princess* and being a *salaried* employee and being a *graduate* of a *top* school (that'd be 1 in 100 people, senior year, the year I graduated — was it that *big* a *dea*[2]??), I became a *vaunted* figure —

I don't know.

But this *guy* showed up —

"This *guy* showed up."

"Yes. This *guy* showed up — "

"And."

"And . . . here I *am*!!!"

I looked around — vaulted roof, lots of art all around.

"Here I *am* . . . "

*for post office winter  
promises to keep  
amen*

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[1] "Can't live with 'em, can't ... " Right. You know the *drill!!!* — ed.  
[2] I don't know. I really don't. Don't ask me. They won't let me out  
of this place. Still, I eat o.k. And I meet all the men I want. So. You  
won't hear v complaining! Etc. — ed.

