

Last Sunset

By Jack Morris

Kate answered the doorbell, and she and Steven stared at each other in awkward silence. Their two-year separation had rendered them almost strangers.

“Come in,” she said after an uncomfortable pause. “Would you like a coffee?”

“Sure,” he replied. “Black with one.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t remember that?” she said.

“I was just kidding,” he replied, and they exchanged nervous smiles.

“Come into the kitchen,” she said. “I’ve got it already brewed.”

Steven followed her to the kitchen, sat on a stool at the breakfast bar, and watched on as Kate poured the coffee. She had aged in the 2 years since he last saw her. At only twenty-seven, she’d developed a few premature grey hairs which contrasted with her shoulder-length straight black hair. She had some worry lines on her forehead and around her eyes, and she was noticeably thinner than when he last saw her. He noticed her dress was knee-length, whereas she always wore dresses and skirts much shorter, to proudly show off her long shapely legs. Yet she was still an attractive woman in his eyes, and she had a beauty and elegance that transcended appearance.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” he said as she placed the cup on the bench in front of him.

“You always were a bad liar, Steven.”

He grinned. He too had changed quite a bit in the space of two years. He’d lost interest in training at the gym, and his once-toned body had reverted to its previous unremarkable shape. A slight paunch replaced his ‘six-pack.’ He’d been shaving only once a week due to laziness and a lack of interest in his appearance, but he made sure he shaved for the meeting with Kate.

The TV was on in the living room, and the news theme caught Kate’s attention. She moved closer.

“Is there any point in watching?” asked Steven.

“Yeah, well, who knows? Maybe the situation’s changed. Maybe they were wrong with their calculations, and it’s not going to happen after all. There must be a reason they’re still broadcasting the news.”

“I think the reason they’re still broadcasting is that TV journalists are victims of their own egos. They live for ratings. They’ll broadcast until the very end, just like the band on the Titanic kept playing while the ship went down, only for different reasons.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “There may actually be a sliver of truth in that,” she replied, “but you never know. We can’t give up hope yet.”

Steven rose from his stool, taking his coffee with him, and stood next to Kate, where they both could see the TV. Melody Fyfe stood in the studio, dressed in a short, tight black skirt and white, puffy-sleeved blouse. Her mid-length starched-blond hair and red stilettos completed the image. Behind her was a large screen depicting a computerised image of a huge rock at one end, and a tiny Sun at the other. The contrast in size was grossly exaggerated.

“Thanks for joining us for this special edition of KGYO TV News. I’m Melody Fyfe.” She turned to the side as a different camera picked her up from another angle.

“As the giant cosmic wrecking ball, dubbed ‘Goliath,’ bears down on our solar system, the world’s hopes are pinned on the survival ship, ‘Noahs Ark,’ which was launched just over five weeks ago, in what has been an historical joint project between the world’s superpowers: Russia, USA and China, who, until now, have been embroiled in a cold war since 2023. Six couples, three of the women already pregnant, have been chosen from the three countries for the continuation of the human race, amid protests from smaller nations that none of their own citizens were considered for selection, which they claim will be tantamount to a gross act of genocide, citing that the original Noahs Ark took a male and female of every species and subspecies on board. China, USA and Russia have refused to comment. KGYO TV was the first to report exclusively on Goliath back in March this year. Goliath was first spotted by amateur stargazer, Ronald Whitely, who raised the alarm.”

“It still doesn’t seem real, does it?” said Kate, without looking away from the TV.

A young man with an acne-rich complexion appeared on the screen, being interviewed by Melody. The date stamp on the screen indicated it was recorded 3 months earlier, on March 7. Melody asked the usual inane questions; ‘what went through your mind...is this the biggest discovery you have made...what did your parents think when you told them? Will this discovery change your life?’

“Nothing new,” said Steven. “The same old shit until the very end. In a minute they’ll have the main story- cat rescued from tree by 10 firemen. Meanwhile the house burns down around the corner, unreported.”

“Still so cynical, Steven,” said Kate.

Melody reappeared on screen in the studio. “That was Ronald Whitely back in April, in a KGYO TV exclusive interview. So, what do we know about this intergalactic intruder? What is it exactly? Where did it come from? We know it’s the largest object, other than a star, we have so far seen in the known universe. It is approximately five times the size of our Sun. It is of an unknown but solid substance, and is travelling at

171,000 miles per second; almost the speed of light, which is the fastest speed known to man. It's expected that Goliath will clip the side of Venus, which had earlier raised hopes that its trajectory might be altered by the collision, and could possibly miss our Sun altogether. That theory was quickly discounted, due to the sheer speed and immense mass of Goliath. Today, June 22nd 2032 at 5:57 PM, Goliath will collide with our Sun. And sadly we know that, this time, there is no David to slay this Goliath. KGYO TV will be here to the end, keeping you informed of any new developments."

She turned back to the original camera. "In other news, crime around the country, around the world in fact, is rampant. An ever-diminishing police force is unable to control the looting, rioting, and murders."

Footage of riots and demonstrations filled the screen: overturned cars, rows of houses burning, scores of looters running from electrical and department stores, carrying large screen TV's and household appliances. Fly-blown corpses lay in the streets. Thieves raided liquor stores and loaded cars with boxes of alcohol and cigarettes. Religious zealots chanted on street corners, holding up placards: '*Judgment day is here,*' '*Time's up, sinners,*' and '*Behold God's wrath.*'

"Armed gangs rule the streets," continued Melody. "Brazen attacks and sexual assaults are widespread. Commentators surmise that borderline rapists and murderers, previously reluctant to offend, are now seizing their opportunities without fear of consequences. Domestic violence is out of control. Government and community leaders are pleading for calm. Ironically, this madness will only be ended by the coming of... not the Lord...but the violent, merciless fist of the intergalactic destroyer named...Goliath. This is Melody Fyfe, for KGYO News. Coming up after the break, we have..."

Kate picked up the remote and switched off the TV. They stood in silence for an extended few moments, still looking at the blank screen.

"My God!" said Kate. "How horrible. The human race sickens me sometimes."

Steven stood dumfounded.

"And what's the point of sending a ship of survivors into space?" asked Kate. "They have nowhere to go, do they?"

"I guess if they did nothing, that's the end of humanity," replied Steven. "If they can get them out of harm's way, there is always a chance, albeit a miniscule one, but there is no chance they can get far enough away. It's just an exercise in futility. Of course, the whole Noahs Ark thing may just be a hoax, political spin, so it looks like they're doing something. I doubt if even the efforts of three superpowers could build a survival ship in such a short time."

Kate upended her cup and finished her coffee, and then walked to the sink and placed her cup in the sink bowl. She squirted some detergent and turned on the tap.

“Help me wash the dishes?”

“Why bother?” he asked.

“Remember how we used to talk every night while we did the dishes? Come and talk.”

Steven picked up the tea towel. Kate scrubbed a plate and handed it to Steven. They worked in silence for a minute or so. Steven spoke first.

“I was surprised when I got your text,” he said. “I thought I was the last person you’d want to see. I thought you’d be with your parents.”

“I’ve stayed with them for the last week or so,” she replied. “We’ve said our goodbyes. I felt you and I should talk—make our peace while we still can.”

Steven nodded.

“So,” he said, “how have things been for you? Have you met anyone?”

“No, there’s been no one else. And you?”

“I haven’t been in the right headspace for another relationship,” replied Steven.

There was a silence, eventually broken by Kate.

“There were so many times I wanted to call, you know?” she said. “So many nights I sat, just staring at the telephone, trying to pluck up the courage to pick it up and call you, to hear your voice, wishing the phone would ring and it would be you.”

That revelation surprised Steven.

“Same here,” he replied. “We probably sat by the phone at exactly the same time, both too afraid to act.”

Kate spun around from the sink, and threw the wet dishcloth into Steven’s face. “Why didn’t you call?” she demanded, and burst into tears. “You bastard! Why didn’t you pick up that phone and fucking call? I would have answered it, Steven!”

Her outburst took Steven aback, and he wondered why the onus was suddenly on him. He hung his head. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“Just what, Steven? Just what?”

Steven lifted his eyes to meet hers. "I just didn't think you wanted to hear from me again. I guess I was just too afraid you would hang up as soon as you realised it was me. I was afraid to know that you still hated me."

Kate looked at Steven through tear-filled eyes. It was her turn to lower her head. "I would have answered it," she repeated. "I never hated you, Steven. I'm sorry I made you feel that way. I treated you pretty badly when we broke up, didn't I? I know that. I was in a bad place at the time but I never hated you." Then after a pause, "I never stopped loving you."

"We were both in a bad place," he replied. "I think we were both so trapped in our own misery; both of us unable to see or feel the other's pain and blaming ourselves. How messed up is that?"

Kate nodded.

"Losing Abby like that," he continued, "it destroyed me, you know? It just messed me up."

Kate nodded. "Yeah, me too. Do you believe I've left the nursery just the same as it was? I haven't been able to go in there since she—" Kate was unable to finish the sentence.

"Can I see it?"

Kate studied Steven's face. She nodded. "Sure. Let's do it together."

Steven followed her up the stairs and down the hall to the room with the sticker of Dumbo the elephant on the door. Kate hesitated and, taking a deep breath, turned the knob and swung the door open. Her legs trembled, and she held Steven's shirt for support. They stood frozen to the spot and looked into the nursery, which sat untouched for 2 1/2 years. The unused change table was covered in dust. The crib was full of cobwebs, as was the mobile hanging over it. The small suspended elephants and bears patiently looked down at the spot where a newborn girl would never lay her head. They entered the room and looked around at the pale pink walls that they had together painted and decorated, at the new baby furniture, the stroller in the corner, and at the numerous toys. The room was now a shrine to a life never lived. Steven picked up a framed photograph from a shelf on the wall. His tear fell onto the black and white image of Kate's ultrasound—as much for the loss of their daughter as for their resultant failed marriage. He stroked the image with his fingertip. Kate put her arm around Steven's waist and hugged him before he returned the photo to the shelf. They left the room without a word, gently closing the door as if worried they might wake the baby.

They returned downstairs where they heard a commotion outside. A family gathered in the neighbours' front yard, and they were crying and hugging one another. One member, an elderly woman, knelt on the ground, weeping and hysterical. With her hands clasped together, she prayed to the sky.

“It’s really happening, isn’t it?” said Kate.

Steven felt no requirement to answer.

“It’s funny isn’t it?” she said.

“What is?”

“It’s funny that it took that... thing up there to bring us together today. Before all this happened, we couldn’t even pick up the phone to say ‘Hi.’”

Steven nodded. “I’ve been miserable without you, Kate. And being here with you now, I know that I’d rather spend just one more day with you than my whole life without you.”

“Oh, what have we done, Steven? We’ve wasted so much time, and now there’s so little left. What are we going to do now?”

Steven thought for a few seconds. “Whatever we want,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, let’s go out somewhere. Let’s have some fun, just you and me.”

“What are you talking about? You mean like a date? With all this happening around us? That’s ridiculous.”

“Why? Yesterday’s in the past. Tomorrow’s not coming. Let’s just have today, together. There won’t be another chance. Come on, Kate, let’s do it.”

She thought for a few seconds. “Alright, then,” she said, unconvinced, “but I don’t think it’s going to be much fun. I’ll get my bag.”

It was almost 9.00AM when they stepped out the front door into a perfect summer day. There wasn’t a cloud in sight, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves on the maple tree in the front yard. Kate scanned the skies. Steven opened the passenger door for her.

She hesitated as she looked at the neighbours. There were three children, quiet and sullen, five adults hugging, and the old woman still hysterical.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea,” said Kate.

“Come on, Kate,” said Steven. “We can’t help them.”

Kate got in, and Steven shut her door and went around to the driver’s side. He fired up the Nissan pickup’s engine and reversed out of the driveway. He noticed Kate’s look of sadness as she watched her neighbours in their grief. He screeched the tyres and pumped the throttle in and out to make the car jerk along as though he couldn’t work the clutch properly. Kate squealed as the car jerked down the street. “Stop it! What are

you doing, you idiot! Stop!” she shouted. Her head was thrown back and forth; her hair falling across her face. “Stop! Stop!” she shouted, trying to punch his arm, but Steven just laughed. Finally, after about 50 yards, he held the car smooth and steady, and Kate fixed her hair. She stared at Steven with a deadpan expression.

“What’s that look for?” he said, releasing the steering wheel to raise his hands in innocent surrender. “You knew I was a bad boy before you got in the car.” He replaced his hands on the wheel.

Kate chuckled and slapped his arm. “You idiot. You never really did grow up, did you?”

“That’s what you love about me,” he replied, looking at the road ahead. He didn’t see her subtle nod, as she looked across at him with a familiar fondness.

“So, where are you taking me?” she asked.

“Somewhere special.”

Their route took them through the centre of town. Being a small coastal town, it had escaped much of the lawlessness and violence of the larger cities, but there were still broken shop windows, jimmyed doors, and vandalised, burning cars. As they crept down the main street, Kate saw a car on the street in front of a house with a hose pushed onto the exhaust. The other end entered the car through the passenger window, the gap sealed by duct tape. Slumped against the window in the front seat were a man and woman, aged in their forties, in a rigid embrace, and a child of nine or ten in the back.

Steven touched her shoulder. “Don’t look, Kate,” he said, and she turned away.

Five minutes out of town, the Ferris wheel came into view.

“You’re taking me to the amusement park?”

“That’s where we went on our first date, remember?” he replied.

“Do you think it’s open?” she asked.

“We’ll soon find out.”

They entered the large carpark and saw only four other cars. There didn’t appear to be any activity in the park itself. Steven parked the car near the entrance, went to Kate’s side, and opened the door for her.

“Let’s go, Babe,” he said.

“Babe? You haven’t called me that since we were teenagers.”

“Well,” he said, “today we’re teenagers. We’re on a date, remember?”

Kate’s face glowed, and she took hold of Steven’s hand. “Come on then, let’s go,” she said.

A balding, gruff looking man in his sixties sat in the entry booth.

“I wasn’t sure the park would be open,” said Steven as he approached the window. “I thought everyone might be spending the day with family or friends.”

“I got no family,” he replied in a gravelly voice, “just this place. I was hoping that I’d get a few more customers today, see a few people laughing, but there hasn’t been many.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Steven. He pulled his wallet from his pocket, but the old man pointed to the sign in front of the booth.

Kate read the hand-written sign aloud. “Everything free today. Normal prices resume tomorrow.”

She looked up at the old man. “Oh, that is so bad,” she grinned, shaking her head.

“Hey,” he shrugged, “what can I say? I always wanted to be a comedian, but I made a better carnival operator. So, here’s the deal. Everything is free: food, rides, ice creams, everything. I’m the only one working today, so just help yourselves. There’s only one rule. If I see any frowns or tears today”—he pointed his thumb toward the carpark—“instant ejection from the park. By the way, do your parents know you’re out?”

Kate laughed. “Funny guy. I like you.”

“You’re the second woman to say that. The first was my mother.”

Steven held out his hand. “I’m Steven, by the way, and this is Kate.”

“Benny,” he replied, and they shook hands.

“Thank you, Benny,” said Steven.

“You’re welcome. Have fun.”

Kate took Steven’s hand and dragged him on. “What first?” she asked.

Steven spotted a burger stand. “I’m starved,” he said. “You want a burger?”

“Mm, yes, please.”

Steven went behind and threw some patties onto the preheated grill. He prepared the buns while they cooked.

Kate leaned on the counter and watched. “You missed your calling in life,” she said.

Steven handed her a burger on a napkin, and a Coke. “Here, take this to Benny.” He watched her as she walked toward the booth and wished they had reconnected sooner. A lifetime was too much to pack into one day.

The famished pair finished their meal in no time and strolled down Sideshow Alley.

“Win me that big bear,” she said, as they approached the sledgehammer strength tester. Steven looked up at the bell, high on the tower. “No sweat,” he said, and flexed his bicep. “I just hope I don’t break it.” He

looked at Kate and wiggled his eyebrows. She giggled. He drew the hammer behind his shoulders and struck with all his might. The puck didn't reach $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up.

“Winner!” he shouted, raising his arms in victory, and then handed Kate the stuffed bear. She shook her head and grinned. “Oh yeah... my hero.”

They filled the hours with shooting galleries, dodgem cars, carousels, and ice creams. Kate skipped and laughed like a teenager, and they swung their interlocked hands as they walked through the deserted park.

Benny called from behind. “Would you youngsters like to go up on the wheel?”

Kate looked up at the towering wheel.

“Yeah, sure.” said Steven. “Thanks.” They walked to the Ferris wheel's entry gate and as Kate climbed in, Steven discussed something with Benny.

“What was that about?” asked Kate.

“Oh, nothing.” He climbed on board and sat opposite Kate. The wheel started with a jerk, and they rose slowly into the air. The highway was visible in the distance, choked with traffic as far as the eye could see.

“Where are they all going?” she asked.

“Nowhere,” Steven replied. “It's just human nature to try and escape danger. All they can think about is getting away. It doesn't matter where. They're like mice, trying to scatter in all directions. Sometimes there's just no logic to peoples' thinking.”

The wheel did two rotations, and then came to a stop as they reached the top. Kate squinted at Steven. “So that's what you were discussing. Now I know why it happened on our first date, too. You told me it must have broken down.”

“At least this time I didn't have to bribe the operator,” Steven grinned.

Kate twisted her body to look at the view, and her dress rode up her thighs. Steven's eyes darted down to her legs. She pulled her dress down in a frantic effort to cover up, but Steven had already seen the scars. His mind went back to the earlier conversation in Kate's kitchen.

“This is why you were angry with me for not calling,” he said.

Kate looked away.

“I couldn't cope.” she said. “I felt dead inside. I just wanted to feel something...anything. Oh god, Steven, I'm so ashamed. I'm so ugly.”

She covered her face and wept. Steven prised her hands away and kissed her tears. Their eyes met. He tugged at the hem of her dress. “Please don't look at them, Steven,” she begged. Against her feeble protests, he

uncovered her legs and looked down at the countless scars. There was so many that there were scars cut across other scars in a haphazard, horizontal, criss-cross pattern on her thighs. He leaned down and kissed them.

Kate squirmed and let out an uncomfortable grunt. She felt violated and exposed, yet she wanted him to continue, to once again feel his love, to experience what she had lost. He patiently kissed every scar and blemish, and then brushed his lips upwards to the apex of her slender legs. Kate panted and lifted her legs onto Steven's shoulders, laid her head back to gaze at the cloudless azure sky, and gave herself over to him completely. Steven brought out the woman in her again and again.

Kate adjusted her clothing and Steven sat beside her. She put her hand on Steven's thigh, and rested her head on his shoulder. "This has been the best day of my life," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"I wish today didn't have to end," she said. She realised her faux pas, and blushed. "That didn't come out right, did it?"

Steven smiled. "Well, you know what they say," he said, "tomorrow never comes."

"Oh, stop it," Kate giggled, and slapped his arm. They exchanged looks and both giggled, and then laughed, unable to stop.

Kate's laughter subsided, and her eyes moistened. She looked at Steven, and her lower lip trembled.

Steven rubbed her shoulder. "It's ok," he said, and she suppressed her tears.

There was a long silence as they absorbed the sun's warmth.

"Steven?"

"What?"

"Where do you think we'll go, you know...tonight?"

He thought for a few seconds. "I don't know."

"I used to believe," she continued, "that there was a Heaven, that there was a place where everyone goes: our Grandparents, our old pets, our friends, that we would see them all again. Then I thought...wouldn't we all be naked? Why would our clothes go to Heaven? I don't want to see my Grandparents naked."

Steven laughed.

Kate elbowed his ribs, her expression sombre. "Cut it out. You know what I mean. I'm just saying: it doesn't really make sense, does it? What about Abby? She wasn't even born, but she was a real person. She was our daughter. If she was in Heaven, would she stay a baby for all of eternity?"

Steven put his arm around her and kissed her cheek. “Wherever we’re going tonight, we’re going there together.”

Around 4 o’clock, they exited the park. Steven spotted a gaunt, greyish-faced Benny, slumped in the entry booth, now his tomb, and he diverted Kate’s attention before she could see him.

“Do you want to go down to the beach?” asked Steven as they settled in the car.

“A beautiful way to end a beautiful day,” she replied with a smile.

The beach was only a 15 minute drive and close to the tourist-town’s centre. A few people dotted the white strip between the dunes and the incoming tide. Steven and Kate sat on the sand and looked out to sea.

“It’s so beautiful,” said Kate. “I wish it could stay like this forever.”

Steven leaned in and kissed her lips. She responded by running her hand through his hair. She invited his tongue into her mouth, and panted as he squeezed her breast. Steven stood, unbuttoned and removed his shirt, and threw it onto the sand. He did the same with his jeans and underwear and stood there naked, looking down at his wife. She cast her eyes over his body. It was no longer toned and muscular as she remembered, but it was Steven: her man. He offered his hand. She took it and stood to face him. She didn’t resist nor care about any onlookers as Steven slipped her dress over her head and laid it on the sand like a blanket. She removed her underwear, and they lay down face to face. For the next hour and a half, they explored one another’s bodies, made love, searched their partner’s eyes and saw their souls. They realised the fragility of life and accepted the reality of death.

The sudden clanging of church bells all over town filled the air. Steven discreetly glanced at his wristwatch. It was 5:55. They stood and, still naked, walked to the water’s edge and let the cool salt water swirl the sand around their feet. They stood side by side and surveyed the horizon just as Adam and Eve might have, but Steven and Kate were at the point of extinction, not creation. The Sun’s rays created a path of light on the water from horizon to shore, to the spot where they stood, and the ocean glitter twinkled on the calm sea. The atmosphere was as the calm just before a storm. Kate put her arm around Steven’s waist, and he instinctively put his arm around her shoulder and drew her to his side.

In a last show of defiance from a doomed species, car horns joined in with the church bells, and fireworks exploded in the late afternoon sky. On the beach, a circle of strangers joined hands and sang ‘Auld Lang Syne’.

“Hold me, Steven,” said Kate, and they turned to each other. Kate rested her head on Steven’s shoulder, her back to the setting sun.

“Hold me tighter. Don’t let me go,” she said.

Steven wrapped both arms around her and squeezed her body against his, feeling her soft breasts press against his bare skin.

“Remember when we were first married, Steven? You used to sing an old Alice Cooper song to me.”

“I remember,” he replied.

“Sing it to me.”

He stared into the shimmering orange surface of the Sun, which was almost resting on the horizon. The blood vessels in his vision resembled road maps. Goliath’s gravitational pull caused the sea to undulate, heralding the silent assassin’s unseen approach. The tide suddenly retreated from the shore, the seas churned, and the waves rose higher and higher into the air, higher than Steven had ever thought possible. He rested his cheek on the side of Kate’s head, and she closed her eyes. Kate held him as tightly as she could, and they swayed together in a slow dance. Steven sang, almost in a whisper.

“Sometimes when you're asleep

And I'm just staring at the ceiling,

I want to reach out and touch you,

But you just go on dreaming.

If I could take you to heaven,

That would make my day complete.

You and me ain't no super stars.

What we are is what we are.

We share a bed,

Some popcorn,

And TV.

And that's enough for a working man.

What I am is what I am..

And I tell you, babe,

You're enough for me.”

Goliath appeared from the right, streaking across the sky at a phenomenal speed toward the Sun. The Sun's rays illuminated the front face of the object, giving it the appearance of a giant headlight. At the moment of impact, the explosion's intense flash burned Steven's retinas, instantly blinding him. The following blast of heat fused Steven's and Kate's naked bodies together in a final moment of unity, and a moment later, the fragments of Earth drifted through space like dust in the wind as a remorseless Goliath continued on in search of a worthy opponent.