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Collapse

The cathedral was the last building to burn, its towers standing like monumental torches illuminating the plain of the devastated city, its ashes filling the night like the echoes of great bells silently tolling, even though everyone had believed that, built of granite quarried from the nearby mountains on a steel and concrete matrix, the cathedral would withstand the hottest fire, but the interiors of wood and velvet, silk, canvas, the white oak pews, the linen altar cloths, the high nave banners, the varnished doors and wood-panel paintings and coffin-like confessionals, the plaster-of-Paris virgin and child near the narthex, the arrays of candles flickering in the lady chapel and fronting the reredos near the tomb of the city's first pastor, the curtains between the choir and the priests' robing room, the cheap plastic religious figures and objects thronging the shop—diminutive madonnas, St. Christopher medals (still popular despite his demotion to pious legend), crucifixes, rosaries, devotional shrines and statues of the saints—made certain it would be consumed by the flames that climbed the sky all that final night, and the sexton, last of the clergy to remain behind, the cathedral's now useless keys still in his cassock pocket, was seen, kneeling in prayer and weeping, near the ruined consistory,

it had taken an entire week to burn the financial district, which surprised even the attackers, but paper had long been in disuse, in preference for locating virtual documents in the nowhere and anywhere of the cloud, which it took an unexpectedly long time to hack and delete, find and destroy, the hardware—from laptops and smartphones and landlines to notebooks and tablets and desktops—melting in the fires only at the very end as the cheaply constructed walls of stucco, rebar, drywall and ceilings and roofs of soundproof paneling, tar, creosote paper and hardwood crumbled under the intense heat, and the skeletons of chairs, lamps, desks, lobby sofas, water coolers, microwaves, reception and security guard kiosks and the like stood starkly like the burnt skeletons of animals caught surprised in a conflagration racing over them like a herd of bison stampeding across a burning plain, the employees had fled long before, though it is believed some had joined the attackers, or may even have been sleeper cells of the invading forces or rebels,

the mall was besieged early on the first morning, there was some controversy whether demolition explosives had been planted earlier, as its destruction seemed too sudden and too complete to have been entirely the result of mortar attacks, bazookas shouldered by young invaders or rioters (to this day, historians are unable to determine which), grenades, and a flotilla of drones carrying lightweight smart bombs, Target was the first to go up in a dazzling display of fireworks, followed closely by North Face, Eddie Bauer's, Bloomingdale's, Abercrombie and Fitch, and the multiplex, which had been showing the latest Bollywood extravaganza, a slasher film, an animated jukebox musical, an indie transgender romantic comedy set in St. Louis, and the final installment of the Star Wars franchise, the ruins of the mall were picturesque, "ruins porn" (as it was called at the time) at its finest, against the sunset of that first day, reminding some of how the Roman forum may have appeared after the sacking of the Eternal City by Alaric on the fateful day that officially ended the western empire, the marauders (or perhaps locals or a combination of both) looting amidst laughter and dance music (for some reason, the mall's muzak system kept playing at full volume far into the night) as they vlogged about in Donna Karam, Tommy Hilfiger, Ermenegildo Zegna and Prada knockoffs that they believed were originals, the food court's plunder—a gourmands' delight from Ethiopian to Filipino, Ukrainian to Vietnamese, a Quebequois bistro, a sushi fusion taqueria, a Salvadorean pupuseria, and a Costa Rican maggots and grasshoppers bar—fed the looters for days,

historians have never been able to decide the immediate cause of the city's collapse: an invasion, a revolution, a seizure of the financial system, an explosion of an arsenal or fuel depot, a rebellion by the poor or revenge of former natives, or even a natural disaster: an earthquake, hurricane, flood, plague, famine, tsunami (the city lay on a low river plain only a mile from the coast), there were signs of any and all of these, none conclusive,

entire careers were devoted to explaining the city's sudden fall after centuries of a thriving civilization, careers that usually ended in the bitter feuds that dominate so many theoretical discussions, libraries of forgotten books, and meteoric but inevitably almost immediately lost reputations, but, inch by bitter inch, they were able to reconstruct at least a plausible sequence for the collapse, and even the personalities of some of the inhabitants during those final days,

Poky Mars—wearing a T-shirt that read “T-Rex”—had laboriously climbed, shortly before dawn, all the way up the hickory tree in the Howards' small farmyard, against her parents' explicit commands, her neighborhood was at the eastern edge of the city, where the cornfields began, awaiting harvest, and she had snuck out to see if the raven's eggs had hatched yet, and to watch the sunrise over the eastern hills, but, as she straddled a bough and luxuriated in the fragrance and silence of the late spring morning, daydreaming about the clouds as the sun slowly rose—one cloud looked like a pink bow, another a great ballerina pirouetting across the sky, another the face of Miss Smythe, her crazy phys-ed teacher who had had gender reassignment surgery six times—her attention was caught by the sound of a detonation and what looked like a fireworks rocket shooting over the high school playground half a dozen blocks toward downtown, the office towers looking, in the vague dawn, like a bunch of pathetic girls at an all-night party where the boys had failed to show up, it was a Saturday and there was no school but it was nowhere near July 4th or Chinese New Year or Columbus Day (Indigenous People's Day it was called now, though the Italians seemed to shoot more rockets than ever, and what did “indigenous” mean anyway?), so why would there be fireworks? a black cloud formed above the high school and her jaw dropped: a school on fire! at first she felt a little disappointed it was not her elementary school, half a mile in the other direction, but then it might not be such a good idea to reduce school, however hateful, to ashes without at least taking a poll of the student body, it might have serious consequences for her own neighborhood, especially when she heard more detonations and saw more rockets whizzing by uncomfortably close, so she climbed down after peeking into the nest a last time to see how the eggs were doing, then ran as fast as her legs could carry her home, which she found had been lifted and turned upside down like a spoiled cake and replaced by a big hole lined with the wreckage of the basement rec room, laundry room, family car, clothes dryer, a scattered set of blocks of a small-scale city she had spent weeks building, and something her father had always insisted on calling a doll, though it was not a doll, it was a Wonder Woman bobblehead, its face melted into an illegible mask, an explosion went off several houses down, and the air blast nearly knocked her over, there was no one nearby and she wandered off in shock, momentarily deaf, through a silent landscape,

the entertainment district was laid waste that first Saturday night: dance clubs, saloons, trattorias, cafes, concert spaces, movie theaters, a combination lounge and swimming pool called The Oasis, a multiplex disco called Glashaus, an all-night bar called The Living End, with, at its outer reaches, rave warehouses, “secret” party spaces with closed guest lists, marijuana dispensaries, and drug and sex clubs—crushed under the weight of the attack and burning in the silence after the pleasure-seekers were caught in their revels, the streets lined with the gutted contents of the costume department of the city’s main theater: faux Victorian top hats and Edwardian deerhunters, plastic medieval chainmail and dacron Elizabethan hose, gangster fedoras and oceans of nineteenth century crinoline and taffeta enisled with berets and flapper togs, newly fashionable hats and old-fashioned shoes, expensive purses and cheap pocketbooks, dancers’ tights and power bras, elaborately laddered jeans and ripped shirts imprinted with nonsequiturs like “Obey,” “Guess,” “So What,” and “The Antisocial Social Club,” tea roses sold by ancient crones under midnight street lights to shy teenagers on their first dates, carnations ripped by passionate fingers from youthfully formal lapels, and Technicolor bouquets of artificial flowers, to say nothing of a trash of plastic wine glasses, party favors, broken anklets, lost nose rings, popped ear flares, smashed DJ mixers, kicked-in loudspeakers and kliegs, and a salmagundi of party debris, and fled in panic in growing arcs of terrified young people (both young and would-be young) just out for a good time after a hard, pointless week at a poorly paid job that never will pay off their student debts, their mortgages or their credit cards, working for bitter, middle-aged men and old widows who spent their days drooling over online stock accounts and waiting for decrepitude and death,

Max Sheffield, a small, obese watchmaker with a dyed mustache and lachrymose eyes, and one more year before retiring, watched in horror from the barbershop where he was having his imaginary leonine mane trimmed by a discreet graduate of Vidal Sassoon, as jewelry store row, his own store among them (its walls covered with a myriad faces of clocks from all countries, in every style, from every era; Max often felt, without quite thinking it, that every clock face was as unique as a person’s, and that the more clocks a man owned, the more he owned time), with its long lines of glittering storefronts displaying coruscating sets of precious stones set in precious metals: rubies, emeralds, sapphires, platinum, silver, gold, and some of the most prized diamonds in the world at the time, was overwhelmed by machine-gunfire in an apparently well-prepared attack, perhaps (it is theorized) in a drive-by shooting from a fleet of trucks causing a wave of smashed glass and jewelry and the remains of Max Sheffield’s clocks to sweep the narrow street, the fire that followed melting down the jewels and metal and glass, in the frenzy of the moment or in contempt for the rich city and its baubles, into a great, useless lump among the charred remains of the stores, Max ran from the barbershop before his haircut was finished, disappearing in the smoke that swelled over the street wreckage and leaving nothing behind to be remembered by but a modest pile of hair clippings,

a day earlier the airport runways had been pocked with mortar craters, the terminals first gutted by shelling, then rammed by armored trucks, the air control tower was blown up in a spectacular explosion seen a mile off the coast by a fishing crew on their way to the cod banks, Michaelmas Breed, captain and ship owner, crossed himself reflexively three times, though he had not been a practitioner of the faith since he lost all belief during Hurricane Ivan when his best friend was drowned trying to save his younger brother pinned under a bus during the September floods, the ship continued north and returned several weeks later past the silent coast, its hull groaning with cod,

the rich neighborhoods to the north were on fire fairly late in the apocalypse, a blanket of smoke, fuzzy gray and brown, covering the resplendent homes of the wealthy, the tongues of fire dancing like teenagers on a binge of detestation for school, parents, and the obscene world they were inheriting, yet the main library, on the opposite side of the city, had been attacked and razed to the ground a week earlier, which supports the idea that the fall of the city was caused by an invasion, however the discovery of the remains of amateurishly constructed Molotov cocktails and IEDs in the ruins of the downtown department stores suggests local rioting, though these may have been provoked by, or may themselves have provoked, an invasion by the city's envious neighbors,

the west of the city, where the ghettos began, is still believed by some, though the claim is controversial, to have been the true origin of the city's destruction, either because it was the last part of the city to fall, or because it suffered the worst havoc, as only the faintest remains of a vast collection of structures in themselves of modest size—small apartment buildings, modest homes with tiny yards, tatty shops, groceries and drug stores, barber shops and beauty parlors, diners, pizzerias, quick-loan vendors, a movie theater, a club, a motel, a gas station, two fire houses, a solid collection of bars and churches, and a large graveyard, the latter the only thing in the city apparently untouched—remained after the conflagrations swept across it, leaving behind an enormous emptiness where before there had been a large if not thriving community,

there is a counterclaim that the total destruction of the area was not because it was the source of the collapse, but rather its original objective, the inhabitants being the target either of invaders from outside or of rioters and vigilantes within, who sought the annihilation of the impoverished inhabitants as a blight on the city and a cause of the mysterious disaster that one day drove the rest of the city's population out of its mind with a lust for vengeance, even though it was the poor who had been the first, and the most deeply, to suffer from the city's evils, ironically enough this had been one of the earliest areas of the city to be settled (after its original founding as a colonial outpost, a century and a half before the revolution that led to the country's founding) by escaping

slaves from the south, over the generations that followed the city's fall, the footprint of this area looking at first like a great chess board swept clean of its pieces by the exasperated loser, was overgrown by grasses and manzanita-like brush and became a favorite haunt of quail, coyotes and wild deer, its nights echoing with the call of owls as they hunted for mice, the city's only living descendants,

Gregorio Espinosa (forty-seven, though these days he felt like eighty) witnessed the attack on the barrio, on Thursday afternoon, from his garage and junk business, as the neighborhood was bombed after being strafed by (in the belief of the scholarly consensus) fleets of old propeller fighters from the previous global war, his shop was on the main drag, and he was shocked to see (he and his neighbors had believed the invasion or riots were local, and would never extend to the barrio: what was there to steal here? *Nada, chingada!*) the streets lined with ruins of 99-cent stores, religious bookshops, restaurants serving posole and pupusas, Yucatecan and Salvadoran, Mexican and Peruvian cuisine, rags of chinas poblanos from second-hand clothing marts, the wreckage of lowrider and pimp cars (his main clientele, *Jésus Maria!*), the remains of a mariachi band—a black, silver-brocaded short jacket, two huge sombreros festooned with crocheted parrots and flowers, a cracked violin the color of lipstick with a broken-off finger board hanging by its strings, and a caved-in bass guitar—in an alley across the street the band had been running down to escape (Gregorio had seen them fleeing, half-covered with flecks of piñata ribbons from a quinceañera where they had been performing), the faces of the wildly colorful murals the neighborhood was becoming famous for even outside the city—celebrations of the native heritage, a beautiful and irretrievable past, the parade of history a promenade of ghosts, as well as bizarre and defiant evocations of the present and challenges to the future (these were partly what made Gregorio feel so old)—mutilated with bullet holes and blasted into fragments of plaster and brick by tanks (the signs of their treads left clearly on the soft tar of the streets) that invaded later, and the ground forces that fought from street to street (Gregorio hiding in his garage and watching cautiously through its filthy, long-uncleaned windows) until the entire area was subdued, the populace terrified into paralysis and silence, or death, the fires lit that would later that evening overtake what buildings remained standing, including Gregorio's garage and the neighborhood churches in ornate colonial gothic or more austere century-old styles, whose bells had rung in tocsin when the attacks began, though, as so often, too late, Our Mother of Guadalupe on the faces of several of the churches, in her long oval lapped in white, gold and azure, her mild gaze lowered toward her long-suffering children, the churches themselves blasted by shell and rocket to prove definitively there was no safety from destruction, there was no hope for escape,

the richer neighborhoods to the north were besieged the next day, after the firestorms had leveled the ghettos and the barrio, almost as if the attackers had wanted either to terrorize the rich with the spectacle of what was coming or to lull them into false security before the inevitable wrath befell them, or possibly (as a third school of thought has it) for purely logistical reasons, as they could not destroy all of the city at once and had to prioritize, Gina Melodi, a doctor who had just moved into a flat in a handsomely renovated manor from the last century, on Sumter Lane, had gotten up late after pulling all-night duty at the ER of St. Stephen's Hospital, which had been taking in spillover from overloaded local hospitals, and was standing at her front window at noon in her bathrobe, drinking coffee and trying to wrap her head around what was happening to the city (all communications with the outside world, including the internet, had been cut off in the opening hours of the assault, the television and radio stations had been dead since last Sunday) when she smelled what she thought was burning wood, then opened the window and looked out, inhaling the curiously invigorating scent of scorched pine, before seeing to her alarm a tree at the end of her block lit like a torch and an amorphous wall of smoke rising between the flaming tree and the condo towers six blocks away that crowned Wendall's Hill, where many of the city's wealthiest people resided, an explosion shook the ground as she watched, and 789 Prince Street collapsed like a twenty-story tower of children's blocks, and Gina, startled, dropped her coffee down three floors to the eerily empty street where the liquid left a black stain like a premonitory charring and the saucer and cup shattered, frightening the neighbor's schipperke, which had been sleeping, oblivious to the destruction of its world, on the building's front stoop, the dog bolted off on its little legs, barking away, confusedly toward the burning tree, Gina hurriedly dressed and, gathering a few things she needed or treasured—her cell phone, her diary, and a commodious old college purse stuffed with “junk”—she fled her building just as the attackers were beginning a building-by-building search-and-destroy mission on her block, bursts of machine gun fire made her panic and she ran, losing her floppies and running barefoot through the terrifyingly vacant streets to the base of Wendall's Hill, where there was a park and a homeless encampment where she thought she might find either shelter or rescue: the destroyers of the rich would surely leave society's poorest and most helpless and destitute alone? she had treated many homeless over the last two years working in ER: surely some of them would recognize her and let her join them, let her help them, or at least hide among them? but when she reached the encampment, her feet bloody, her face smudged with drifting smoke, all she found was a waste of ashes under a forest of blackened trees and a single untouched bench, on which she crouched like a frightened, feral cat, she stayed there all day until late in the evening, in the night she heard a nightingale singing,

a theory held by a minority of scholars is that the city's destruction was caused by an uprising of the homeless against those they saw as their oppressors and the ultimate

causes of their destitution: the wealthy, the powerful, the banks, unscrupulous money-lenders, greedy landlords, and the like, or at least that the destruction began in one or more of the city's many homeless camps—because, even though the city was the most prosperous of any in that part of the world, it also contained more poverty and destitution, more misery and despair, than any other conurbation of comparable size, a common phenomenon of inordinate prosperity that historians and economists continue to puzzle over to this day, the principal evidence for these theories is that the major such camp, on the southwestern outskirts on the north bank of the river that cut through the city on its way from the eastern mountains to the sea, was the last part of the city to burn, possibly by counter-rioters or the last desperate holdouts of the devastated city,

the wharfs were attacked on the morning of the second Monday, Noah “Bluetooth” Kelly (called that because of his uncanny ability to suss out where the political winds were blowing—“It was as if Bill had a Blueetooth connection to the political machine that runs this city,” it was often said), a stocky Ulsterman and leader of his longshoreman's local, was holed up under the hatches of the *Star of Eden*, a freighter registered in Panama, owned by a Singaporean, manned by Yemenis, captained by a Dutchman, and trading between the city and the Côte d'Ivoire, a trade that was rumored to include refugees from the Sahel who were reduced to debt and sex slaves once they landed at their often unknown destinations, when sounds of shouting and gunfire swept the port, Kelly ordered his men (and one woman: Nancy “Sassy” Tate, a tough Mississippian with a roving eye and a vocabulary that could teach a sailor a thing or two) to stay below as he clambered up to the main deck to see the dock overwhelmed by the attackers, half the ships in berth already on fire, the container cranes lined up along the docks like white horses gazing toward the distant sea, he was hit by a rifle bullet moments after reaching the deck, falling down the hatchway and breaking his neck as he landed at Sassy's feet, the refugees in the belly of the *Star of Eden* (the rumor in this instance was correct), whom the longshoremen had gone down to release and help bring ashore while they still could (they had been forgotten for almost a week), began pouring out of the ship in a seizure of terror and hysterical hope, now that they had finally landed in the new world, engulfed, as it was, in the same insanity as the old: blood, fire, fever, guns, war, destruction without end,

the city's Chinatown was demolished that Wednesday amidst the sounds of lamenting in Sei-Yap, Mandarin, Tibetan, Uighur and a dozen other dialects from the Middle Kingdom as the festoons of Chinese lanterns floated, unanchored, into the sky like the tail of the Great Dragon that had failed in the end to protect them,

the art school and the music conservatory were attacked at dawn the following day, followed by raids on the modern art museum and the museums of natural history, of

crafts and decorative arts, and of the state historical society, all of these institutions clustered together in the same downtown district as the result of some folly of city planning concocted in a delirium of optimism two generations before, the observatory, the anthropological museum and the university were invaded near the end of the second week, by which time they had long been vacated and stood, abandoned, and defenseless, as the attackers moved from building to building on the neo-gothic campus, torching them one at a time, including the magisterial library with its unique collection of the country's founding documents and original manuscripts of some of the nation's greatest thinkers, writers, composers and poets, its two hundred thousand books, many unique copies, in three and a half hours of leisurely but thorough demolition, the city's parks were not spared and, as they were covered with brush as dry as kindling after the recent drought, were burned to the ground, churches, synagogues, Buddhist and Taoist temples, pagan ritual sites, spirit meadows, zen gardens, the druid lodge, and the Wicca center, all were leveled with what seemed to be especially malicious zeal, the local television and radio stations (which had been captured and taken off the air, perhaps by sleeper cells or sympathizers of the revolution, early in the collapse), the opera house and the symphony hall were among the last structures to be razed, the auditoriums of the latter exposed to the air like the meat of an egg or a dead heart exposed to a brutal light, followed by the Roman-styled court house and the Beaux Arts city hall,

at the end of the second week the marauders swarmed the square that fronted the city's oldest and most prized edifice, its cathedral, which had been built four and a half centuries earlier on the city's first settled land, donated to the Catholic church by the city's first official settler, Averrhenius Frober, who had not in fact been the first European colonist to live in the area, that was a man whose name is lost in the obscurity of time, and who had settled, alone (if one does not include his horse, his dog and a sway-back cow), near the river some sixty years before the city's founding, three years later a second European, finding the soil and climate promising for cultivation, settled half a mile away, on the bank of the same river, the two men quarreled over the exact border of their property (a spring of sweet water that flowed into the river and frustratingly changed channels each year, depending on the mountain rainfall), which led to a murderous confrontation one night resulting in the deaths of both men, Averrhenius Frober came upon the remains of the two properties, and later of the two men in an embrace of death, each clutching the knife that had killed the other, and, taking over the properties after burying the nameless men in unmarked graves, turned them into a thriving farm and later an outpost for other colonists, settlers, trappers, and travelers into the interior of the still unexplored continent, a town grew up around the outpost and, later, a city,

the day after the burning of the cathedral, the city was a vast waste of ruins along the banks of the river dividing it, and the attackers or invaders or rioters disappeared with the

city, whether from mutual destruction or from mutual agreement, now that their task was accomplished, or by merely fading away into the surrounding forest and countryside and distant mountains, it is unlikely that historians will ever know,

at the end of those two weeks of destruction, the Howards' farm was little more than a lake of waste and ashes, as were the mansions on Wendall's Hill, and jewelers' row and the barrio and the docks, but the hickory tree, curiously, was untouched and stood for many years after the abandonment of the city, after much time had passed the city's ruins were overrun by brush and vegetation, so much so that the very existence of a city in that area of the continent was forgotten, but the hickory remained, tall and flourishing amidst a luxuriant forest that had grown up around it, until one day a great spiritual leader came by and, seeing the thriving tree after his fatiguing journey, decided to rest at its base, where, gazing up into the thick branches and leaves where a raven's nest used to sit, though blown away by the wind and the rain long ago, he achieved enlightenment, from which emerged a religion that, after apparently being ignored for several centuries, gradually came to dominate half the world for the next two thousand years, but not long after the spiritual leader died, someone cut down the hickory tree and burned it, using it to smoke a large salmon he had caught in the nearby river.

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