

Gang Aft A-gley - Paul Blake

The meteoroid streaked across the twilight sky, a dark smoky trail following, stretching across the horizon, breaking up the orange, red, blue and purple shades of the setting sun. Vehicles stopped, and people left their cars to watch it as it passed, they would be talking about this to their partner and children when they got home, and it would be the hottest topic on the nightly news shows and be on the front page of all the newspapers in the morning. It was already the trending subject on Facebook, and #asteroid had rocketed its way to the most used hashtag on Twitter for the year so far, as pictures and videos of the meteoroid were shared across social media platforms worldwide.

At the Planetary Defense Coordination Office in Washington, D.C., they were overseeing the path of the meteoroid.

‘At current, the object is following the prearranged path with only a 0.015% variance, which is within parameters, speed is at 9.6 km per second and slowing,’ Eddie Howes, the technician watching the progress on his monitor, said nervously into the microphone dangling from the ceiling.

The event was broadcast to, not only, the audience in the gallery: an intimidating spectrum of politicians, both domestic and foreign, and military dignitaries, but also via the internet to the President and various Heads of State across the globe, and their advisors.

‘At projected rates, the time of impact will be in six minutes thirteen seconds,’ Eddie’s supervisor, Liz Kendall, said clearly and confidently into her microphone, ‘This tallies with the estimated impact time given by NASA, allowing for a tolerance of plus or minus five seconds.’

‘Speed is down to 8.4 km per second, variance 0.018%,’ Eddie intoned as he tried to keep the excitement and nerves out of his voice, on this momentous occasion. It would not be a fine image to send to future generations listening to this moment to have his voice quavering all over the place for posterity.

‘Time of impact: five minutes thirty-five seconds’ Liz said, apparently effortlessly, much to Eddie’s dismay.

‘Speed is reduced to 7.5 km per sec...’ Eddie hesitated, suddenly thrown by the information displaying on the monitor, ‘...ond, variance 2.05% and rising.’ His tone and pitch rising.

In the gallery, above the control centre, there is sudden consternation and what had been a respectful silence, almost akin to a congregation at a sermon, changed as hushed tones of disbelief got louder as the realisation of a possible catastrophe occurring before their very eyes struck.

Back in the control centre, telephones were ringing; their insistent calling ignored as the various technicians were frantically tapping away at their keyboards, running diagnostics and replaying the last minute on their systems, trying to determine what had happened. Mission Controller Joseph Canton from the back of the room was asking what went wrong, but no one gave him an answer. Eddie could only continue his litany as the meteoroid veered off course. ‘Speed 6.6 km per second, variance 10.5%.’ He risked a glance at Liz and was unsurprised by the lack of emotion shown on her face, always the cool professional, he thought, with admiration, and strove to match his delivery to hers.

‘Impact in four minutes and fifty-seven seconds,’ she said assured and unperturbed. As she said this, she looked at Eddie and with a supportive nod urged him to continue.

‘Ummm...’ Eddie temporised, ‘Speed reduced to 5.3 km, variance at 17.65% and growing.’ He continued with more confidence in his voice.

‘Where is it going to hit?’ Caton asked, his voice rose to be heard above the cacophony around him.

‘Current projections are that the meteoroid is heading to Europe. We are trying to narrow that down further,’ a technician further down the line, spoke up.

‘Come on people,’ Caton cajoled. ‘We need to know this immediately.’

‘Speed reduced to 4.6 km, variance at 23%,’ said Eddie.

‘Time to impact four minutes three seconds,’ Liz added.

Eddie and Liz continued their readings on the course of the meteoroid at regular intervals. Aware of the commotion behind them, trying their best to block it out as they kept to their tasks.

‘Time to impact two minutes sixteen seconds.’

‘Mr Caton, we estimate that the meteoroid will impact with 5688.54 joules energy which is equivalent to 1.36 megatons. This is based on the diameter of the meteoroid, the assumed density of the rock and the estimated speed of impact,’ said Professor Robertson, of MIT. He was hunched over a table covered in sheets of paper with rough calculations scrawled over them, surrounded by the rest of the mathematical boffins, invited to attend this historic event, ‘depending on where the meteoroid strikes the casualty count could be enormous,’ he concluded.

‘Speed reduced to 3.2 km per second, and variance is at 27%,’ Eddie said shocked at what he had just heard.

‘Time to im...impact one minute and twenty-six seconds,’ Liz slightly stuttered as she too reacted to what she had just heard.

‘Where is it going to land?’ Caton demanded.

‘We’re working on it,’ Professor Robertson said.

‘Speed reduced to 1.6 km per second. Variance has slowed to 28%.’

‘Time to impact fifty-six seconds.’

‘France... it’s France,’ Robertson called out.

Eddie and Liz looked at each other, their eyes wide, mouths open. Mirrored expressions of terror. ‘Oh God,’ Liz said.

Eddie could no longer read out the numbers; his vision blurred with tears. He wiped his eyes, blinked a few times. He looked over at Liz, her shoulders were shaking, and tears were streaming down her face. He took off his headset and walked over to her. He placed an arm around her shoulders, and she buried her face in his chest. He held her tight, watching the digits reduce.

The meteoroid passed over the Casbah in Agadir, the illuminated inscription "God, Country, King" in Arabic on the hill was obscured by smoke. It carried on its journey, flying over Marrakesh and then on to the European mainland. It flew past Malaga, Zaragoza, and crossed the Pyrenees mountain range. Hopes were raised that it would crash into Aneto, the largest peak but the meteoroid passed by twenty-two miles to the west. It crossed into France on a curved northerly trajectory, its altitude swiftly dropping as its speed fell away. It passed over the Cité de l'espace theme park, dedicated to the space and the conquest of space, just outside of Toulouse, It flew three hundred and fifty foot above the proposed site of the Occitanie Tower. If construction had been completed to schedule, it would have smashed two thirds up the building, spreading debris for miles around. The tower would have offered as much defence against the mass of the meteoroid as a blade of grass does against the plastic line of a garden strimmer. The meteoroid continued its way through the French countryside. It reached the eastern apex of the curve within sight of Lyon and continued its inexorable journey. It passed over the woods and lakes of the Parc Naturel Régional du Morvan, swinging its way round to its ultimate destination.

It ripped through the trees in the Forêt de Sénart, the ones it didn't tear out of the ground were set alight in its path. It struck land just outside of the Orly district. Four kilometres from the Aéroport de Paris-Orly. The impact of the 1.3-kilometre meteorite caused a seismic blast that was felt in the centre of Paris, sixteen kilometres away within three seconds. The blast caused buildings to crumble into rubble, shattered all windows in a twenty-five kilometres diameter, including the stained glass windows of Notre Dame Cathedral, and the glass pyramids of the Louvre museum. The Pont Neuf bridge, with its railings adorned with thousands of lover's padlocks, broke up and fell into the river below. The same fate happened to its brothers. The statue of Henry IV on horseback slid off its plinth and charged, echoing scenes from the Battle of Arques and the fight against La Ligue Catholique. The Eiffel Tower was jerked out of its foundations and crashed down, bridging the Seine, its tip ending up in the Jardins du Trocadéro. The Arc de Triomphe sheared into twelve great pieces crushing the vehicles around

the Place de l'Étoile that were already being tossed around like hot wheels cars by a toddler. The giant domes of the Sacré-Cœur Basilica tumbled down the Montmartre Butte, or hill, crushing the bodies of pedestrians, and vehicles already devastated by falling buildings. The immense 360-foot cube, La Grande Arche de la Défense, toppled and crashed through the ground into the A14 tunnels that ran below. The 14th and 15th arrondissements collapsed into the catacombs beneath, severing water pipes, gas mains, and electricity cables. One of the countless sparks caused by the blast — vehicles crashing together, cut electricity cables and a thousand other possible reasons — ignited the leaking gas and caused a forty-foot-high fireball to briefly illuminate the Paris skyline before the air blast of the impact struck the city, winds of up to 2000 miles per hour tore through crumpled streets still reeling from the waves of the seismic blast. This was followed by a great dust and debris cloud from the impact that shrouded the city in a layer, up to eight metres deep in some places; the coating was higher closer to the impact zone. Anyone that survived the seismic and air blasts slowly asphyxiated under the blanket of dirt, rock, and stone.

Paris, the City of Light, now just a mass of rubble and dust.

The impact was felt up to three hundred kilometres away from the impact zone, from Rennes to the west, Luxembourg, and Belgium to the east. The Channel Islands of Guernsey and Jersey were struck by metre-high waves that swamped the smaller islets around them. The south coast of the United Kingdom received waves of two metres in height, caused flooding across Kent, Sussex, and Hampshire. The Isle of Wight protected the port towns of Portsmouth and Southampton as it took the brunt of the damage to its southern end. The waves reverberated up the English Channel into the North Sea and struck Antwerp and Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

'Ladies and gentleman, the President of the United States of America,' announced Simon Feldmann, the White House Press Secretary. He left the podium, with the Seal of the President of the United States of America displayed front and centre. The Stars and Stripes flag of the USA was hung behind alongside the blue, white and red of the French Tricolour.

The hulking form of President Dwayne Johnson stepped out from the wings of the stage to a riot of flashing lightbulbs from the world's press assembled before the stage. The former WWE wrestler and movie star walked to the podium and stood behind it. He gripped the stand

with both hands, his face ashen underneath his natural tanned colouring, the result of his Samoan and Black Nova Scotian heritage. The trademark Hollywood smile absent from his face. President Johnson had recently celebrated winning his second term. He ran as an independent candidate in 2020, giving voters a 'third option'. He ran against the incumbent President Donald Trump and the Democratic Nominee of ... well, that was the problem, no one can remember. Their candidate was chosen to be as inoffensive to as many people as possible. However, by being so, they didn't inspire many people either. Trump's support faded when the much-rumoured Russian urination videotape was released. The tape showed Trump being urinated on by two black Russian pre-op transgender prostitutes. He may have survived if they had been post-op, or white, or not 'goddamn commies'. The trifecta of colour, nationality, and penis was too much, even for his base support to argue against. For the rest of America, the sight of Trump's Viagra-engorged raisin was enough to make them lay their vote elsewhere. President Johnson joined the race late on and swept America with charisma and charm. His first term as president was considered a success, and under his guidance America was returning to its former position as the world's leading superpower. Unemployment was at its lowest point since World War Two. Crime, especially gun crime, was lower than it had been in decades. The National Debt clock on 44th Street and Sixth Avenue in New York was actually running backwards as National Debt was reducing, albeit slowly. For his second campaign, he looked to build on this success and expand his purview to fixing the world's problems.

President Johnson looked directly ahead towards the main broadcast camera with its teleprompter.

'Ladies and gentlemen, it is with profound sadness I stand here tonight in front of the world and lament the loss of one of the great cities of the world. A city that inspired love and creativity throughout the ages. Its iconic skyline with the Eiffel Tower pointing to the heavens. My heart is torn with grief at its loss. Not just for the city, but for the whole of France. The devastation caused by the meteorite is unprecedented in the history of humanity. It is something that I am profoundly sorry for.

'The meteorite was supposed to land in Jackson Lake in Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. It was supposed to be the greatest achievement of modern science and technology. It was supposed to be the start of a new era. An era that ended man's dependence on fossil fuels and nuclear materials. Clean, free and renewable energy for the whole of humanity, not just those countries that could afford it, those countries that could exploit their natural resources the most

efficiently. Free clean fuel for every country. An era that would have propelled humanity to greater heights. Together.

‘The minerals and metals in the meteorite would have powered the New Earth for millions of years. Now, however, the price has been too great. Over four million lives have been extinguished, millions more injured and in pain. A nation gutted of its capital, a continent gutted of its jewel, a world gutted of its hope.’

President Johnson paused and took a deep breath. He wiped a hand across his brow, smearing the makeup there. He didn’t notice.

‘So what went wrong?’ The world’s greatest minds planned the mission. A global effort. We took samples from the asteroid Akiyama as it came into range of our planet. These samples were tested, and the discovery of unknown substances, metals, minerals excited the scientific community. A plan was put in motion to break off a chunk of the asteroid and guide it to our planet’s surface.

‘The asteroid was scanned, and a fault line within it identified. A series of holes were drilled into the asteroid and nuclear charges inserted. When detonated these split the asteroid causing the meteor to head towards earth. The remaining, much larger section of the asteroid was sent out away from the planet.

‘Through the use of rockets dotted across the surface of the meteoroid its trajectory and rotation were calculated and guided, allowing the air resistance of the atmosphere and liberal use of retrograde rockets to slow the meteoroid to reduce the impact when it hit the planned landing site in an uninhabited area.

‘The mission was proceeding as planned until five and half minutes before landing. A series of directional rockets received the command to engage three seconds after they should have. This interruption was caused by a solar flare that caused an atmospheric disturbance that temporarily affected the radio waves to the rocket series. A freak event. This delay caused the meteoroid to spin out of the pre-planned path. The computers that controlled the rockets couldn’t keep up with the information quickly enough to correct its path.

‘The meteorite landed near Orly, a suburb of Paris, creating a seismic blast rated 7.4 on the Richter scale. The devastation caused by this was compounded by 2000 mile per hour winds and a vast debris cloud. The crater caused by the impact is almost eight kilometres in diameter and five hundred metres deep.

‘My thoughts and prayers go out to the people of France who have lost so much. Their capital city. Their countrymen. Their families and friends. Much work will be needed to help these people over the coming months and years. I pledge to the French people that the United States of America is in your corner. We will take whatever means necessary to restore your country to its rightful place in the world. A place of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. I pledge to you that the City of Light will shine again.’

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Author’s note.

I hope you enjoyed this story. It and twenty-six of my other short stories can be found in my short story collection *A Few Hours After This* on Amazon - mybook.to/FewHoursEbook.

