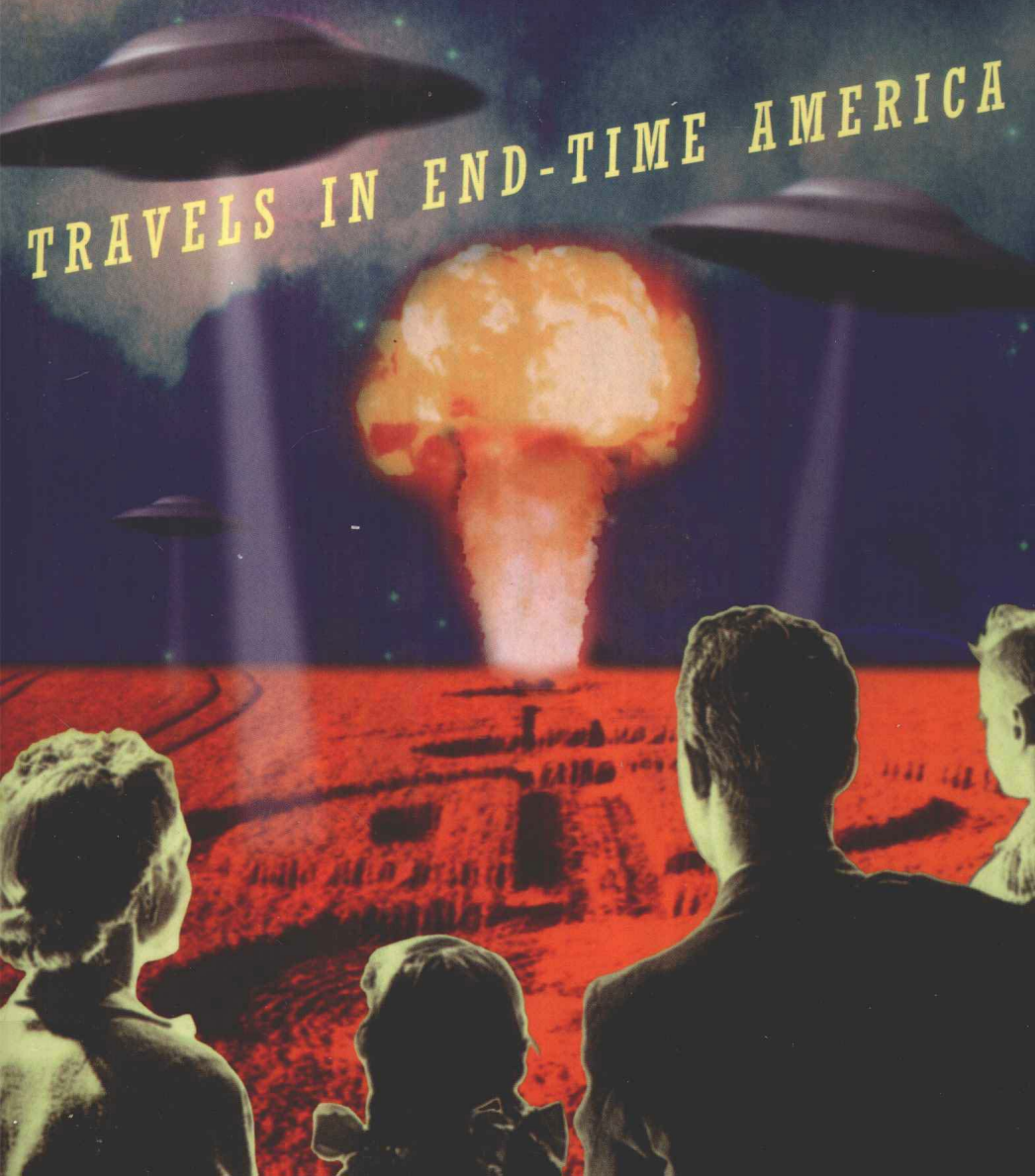


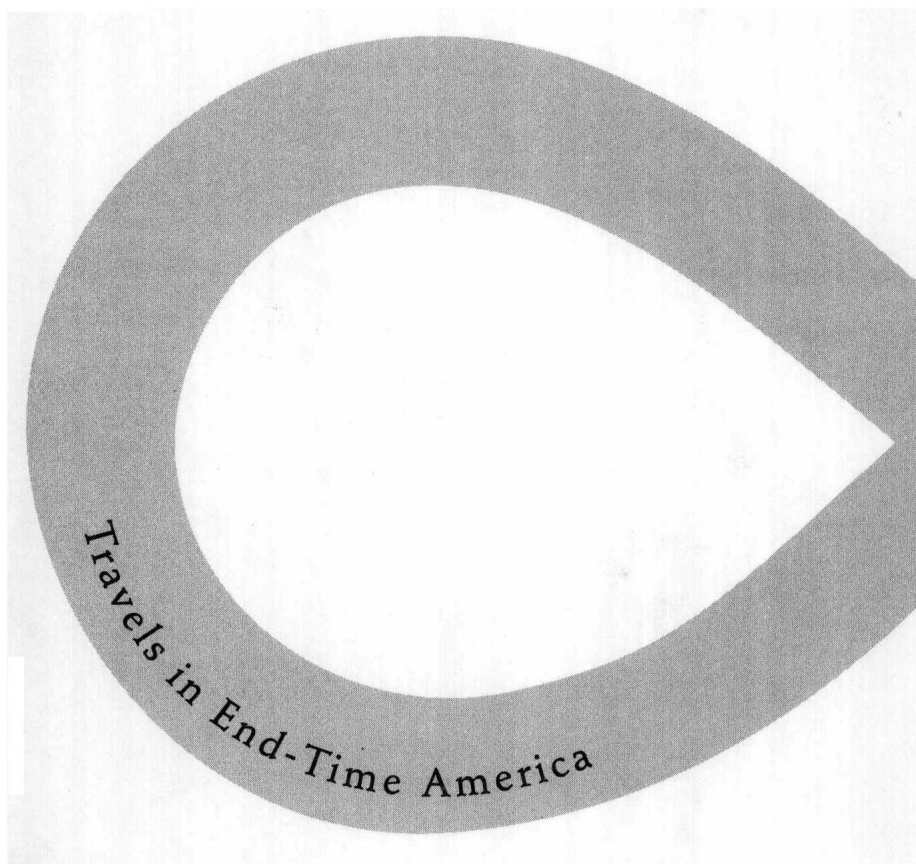
ALEX HEARD

Apocalypse Pretty Soon

TRAVELS IN END-TIME AMERICA



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Travels in End-Time America

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ALEX HEARD

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FOR SUSAN, WHO MAKES
EVERYTHING POSSIBLE



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. . . human beings have always experienced the world as a painful place. We are the victims of natural disasters, of mortality, extinction, and human injustice and cruelty. The religious quest has usually begun with the perception that something has gone wrong, that, as the Buddha put it, "Existence is awry."

—KAREN ARMSTRONG, JERUSALEM

. . . the cool world is an iceberg, mostly underwater.

—NED POLSKY, *HUSTLERS, BEATS, AND OTHERS*



Introduction:

An Eerie Tingling

*ANSWER ME THIS: HOW THE HELL DO I WAKE THE NATION AND TELL
THE PEOPLE THAT . . . WE CAN END ALL WARS . . . BRING ABOUT HUMAN
RIGHTS . . . AND ACHIEVE PEACE . . . THROUGH THE USE OF GOD'S
WISDOM OF APOCALYPSE SCIENCE!????*

—CORRESPONDENCE FROM KENNA E. FARRIS, "DIVINE FORERUNNER
PROPHET OF HORSE SENSE ECONOMICS," 1986

One day in the fall of 1985, I was sitting in an office in Washington, D.C., plinking away at a piece of journalism I hated—it concerned public-school reform in Texas, which I hackishly labeled "a process at war with itself"—when I experienced a sensation of hot, head-achy dizziness.

I figured this might be divine retribution for what I'd just typed, but then I realized it was the start of a nasty fever. I left work, staggered to the nearest bus stop, went home, flopped on the floor in front of a TV, and weakly tugged the knob. A rerun of *Gilligan's Island* was on, and I knew I was in trouble when the plot seemed too intricate to follow. As I lay there guppy-mouthed, gasping and half-asleep, for some reason I started recalling themes from Superman comic books, which I'd studied assiduously as a literacy-dodging ten-year-old. Every now and then the Man of Steel accidentally got exposed to Red Kryptonite—a substance that, unlike deadly Green Kryptonite, caused mysterious but nonfatal symptoms, temporarily turning him into Dumb Superman, Fat Superman, or Evil Superman.

When it happened, he knew he was in trouble, too, saying something along the lines of, “Hmmm, an eerie tingling . . .”

Not until weeks later did I find out what my eerie tingling was: viral encephalitis, an inflammation caused by a viral infection that manages to worm into the gray stuff. It’s a strange condition, almost always not fatal in someone my age (twenty-six back then), and there isn’t much you can do but ride it out until your body’s defenses kick in. Symptoms vary, but they can include terrible headaches (your brain swells), disorientation, loss of verbal skills, irritability, and wooziness.

Or so I was told. I didn’t quite buy it when I finally got a diagnosis. After the initial bout of fever, I’d ached and brooded and moped for a few days and dropped by an emergency room once (helpful verdict there: it’s just fever, stop being a baby and go home) before I finally made an office appointment with a specialist.

I didn’t know this doctor and he didn’t know me, but he looked reassuringly chubby, pink, and wise. Tapping his fingertips together and squinting, Dr. Healthy listened to my gripes. I could read individual words and sentences but I couldn’t make much sense of an entire page. Without warning, even though I wasn’t “sad,” I would start crying these large, glycerin-consistency tears. And—here was the interesting one—I experienced waking periods of enlightenment during which everything in the universe seemed to come together with the utmost clarity.

“Clarity,” he repeated. “How do you mean?”

“I can’t explain it,” I mumbled.

He nodded and said, “I think you have viral encephalitis.”

Great. Could I get a head X-ray or an ectoplasmagram or whatever to verify it? Nope, said the doc. What I had in mind was a CAT scan. But that was very costly, and he didn’t think I needed it. “Trust me,” he said.

That was tough, since (a) the emergency-room doctor had been fulla crap when he said I “just” had fever; and (b) my other big symptom was a case of hooting paranoia. I squinted and frowned. How did this guy know that my skull didn’t contain a pulsing brain tumor the size of a whale’s eyeball?

But I shut up and went home, not wanting to whine. A few nights later things came to a bizarre climax. The trouble started when I picked the wrong rental movie to amuse myself with: “Ciao! Manhattan,” which stars Edie Sedgwick, the now-deceased Andy Warhol “superstar,” who was in the process of killing herself with drugs while the movie was being shot. Sedgwick staggered through her role looking like a flu-stricken zombie, and for some reason, seeing her in that deathly state (and thinking about the cold cruelty of whoever shoved her through her paces) sent me over the edge. Panicking and shouting, I ripped off my shirt and examined my own pitifully skeletal torso. (Already skinny to begin with, I hadn’t been eating much during the illness.) Right then I decided I was dying, and I flipped out, seriously and absolutely. I rushed over to the emergency room, where this time they paid attention. They sort of had to, since I was yowling and madly jigging in the reception area. Soon enough they slapped me on a gurney, where I flopped around like an eel on hot asphalt until they tightened the straps.

Ultimately, everything worked out fine. I was admitted and got blood tests, a painful spinal tap, *and* a soothing CAT scan. (A small, foggy patch showed up on my brain. Affirmation!) Still, I was regarded suspiciously. My roommate was a big, crabby jerk who kept complaining into the phone that he’d been paired up with a “nut.” At one point a neurologist came by and gave me a narrow-eyed interrogation. He obviously didn’t think the physical abnormality he saw warranted the fit I’d pitched.

I didn’t say anything, but I thought: Hey, Bud, you don’t know.

Something evil had taken my brain, chewed it, swallowed it, shat it, and drop-kicked what was left into a deep, dark hole. Maybe it would happen to him someday. Then he'd see . . .

But, in fact, I didn't care about his opinion. I was released and spent a few days in a state of raptural bliss about my restored sense of well-being. I actually wandered my neighborhood smiling at the sky and saying "hey" to the songbirds and sunshine.

Then something really eerie happened: I started having trouble remembering the precise feeling of any of it, the blissful highs or the hellish lows. A month later, it all seemed dim, gray, and distant.



What does my little Brain Burn have to do with that grandest of themes, the apocalypse?

Just this. The fever amounted to a personal apocalypse—that is, if you stick to the original sense of the word's Greek source, *apokalypsis*, which means an "uncovering" or "unveiling."

Among the truths uncovered for me by the illness: the fraudulence of my smug sense that I wasn't especially afraid of death, the fact that I had a pretty weak spiritual life (attempts to comfort myself with the Presbyterian "faith" that I'd lukewarmly explored as a teenager didn't add up to much), and . . . hmmm, what's the best way to put this? Oh yeah, that I hated writing about education, a role I'd sort of drifted into as a means to survive during my post-college career flailings. Thus, my first act after recovery was to sever my remaining ties with that field (ciao, Texas school reform!) and take my chances as a freelancer, concentrating as much as possible on the vast subject area that got me interested in journalism in the first place: weird people. After a couple of years, that focus narrowed into a special interest in millennial and utopian oddballs—that is, people who believe we're heading for a period of dramatic upheaval and change that will lead to a new and improved tomorrow.