

Last Man On Earth

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Our Fathers were raised on a simple principle:
grow up, get a job, get married and have children.
And yet, even though we gathered with the family,
to be with them and give them support when the end came,
they died alone—as everyone does.

Now, we have grown up and taken jobs.
We have gotten married, and have children of our own.
Unfortunately, when we die, as we all will,
we will die just as alone as our fathers did before us.

Our children are in the process of growing up.
They will, no doubt, get jobs, find spouses,
and have children of their own someday.
Still, with all the innocent joys of life they now possess,
they will also die, and die alone, as did we and our fathers before.

If the definition of insanity
is doing the same thing time and again,
expecting a different result,
I submit to you that the human race
has been insane for generations.

MAD

My name is Ryan Tillman, and I am the last man on Earth.

I am not sure why I feel compelled to write this, but I do. I am also unsure as to why I have chosen to survive when no one else has. However, I will let that issue stand for now. Suffice it to say that I have always had an affinity for history. This is funny when you consider the old adage that says, “History is written by the victorious.” I do not consider myself to be the victor of anything, but I *can* say that there is no one left on this miserable planet to argue against my points. So, I have chosen to write the history of the final days of the human race; at least, a history from my perspective as I saw the events transpire. Again, there is no one around to disagree.

Who will read this you ask? Well, that is irony at its finest. I sit here and write, yet for whom, I don’t know. I could be cheeky and say that I wrote this for you—whoever or whatever you are. But, I digress.

Since the dawn of time, one of the biggest questions that boggled the imagination of man was how will it all end? How will the great and mighty human empire, which stretches to every corner of our tiny, blue world, and even extended its reach into the clouds and beyond to the very heavens, how will it all come crashing down?

Had you asked this question when the great and mighty human empire still existed—and depending on whom you posed the question to—you would have received many different answers. It seems that everyone had a theory as to what would spell doom for mankind.

If you went the religious route, the yielded answer would depend on the faith of the person with whom you spoke.

Buddhism and Hinduism taught that there would be no end to the world, just a new beginning. Humanity would roll on, starting over every so often as the big wheel of creation turned and turned.

If creation was supposed to be a wheel, I think it went flat. Because I have to say, from where I’m sitting, creation has most defiantly ended.

Jewish and Islamic faiths believed that someday, someone would come around and lead them to a golden era, and that only the truly faithful would survive.

I do not think I fit the truly faithful bill. So, either someone made a grievous error in the calculation of how to be right and wrong, or the whole world was full of sinners—not an entirely outrageous idea in and of itself.

As for the Christians, they believed in a more definitive, divine end. They predicted an ending where God himself would clean everything up. That He would fix all that we puny humans had so carelessly ruined. This was, of course, after He sent the vilest of evils to run things into the ground for seven years. Supposedly, after all that suffering, by the grace of His loving benevolence, the mighty God would grant man one thousand years of peace.

Sounds like a fair cop. Although, if God were so benevolent, it always puzzled me why we needed the seven years of pain and agony? But, hey, a few years of suffering for one thousand of prosperity, not a bad trade all things considered.

I will agree that the last few hundred years have indeed been, shall we say, eventful. However, as for a rapture of the church, again, I would have to say someone made an error in who was, and who was not, saved. Because, if Jesus Christ did come back to collect his flock, he must not have liked what he found and decided it was easier simply to leave the whole lot of us behind.

Going the scientific route is just as gruesome, if not so mystical.

Some scientists believed that a plague or virus would eventually sweep the planet clean of life. It seemed like no matter how advanced medicine became, some persistent microscopic bug rode just a bird-hop, a pig-skip, or a monkey-jump ahead of the curve. Combine that with the ease in which the modern man traveled the globe, and, well, it didn't take a microbiologist to read the writing on that wall.

People did die from plagues, sometimes a few hundred in one country, others by the millions during the few pandemics that raged across the planet. Somehow, I think an enemy you can't see, feel, or touch is more frightening than one pointing a machinegun at you.

Speaking of machineguns, many surmised that we would one day reach a point where the hatred of our troublesome neighbors would become so great that we would be willing to destroy everything, including ourselves—so long as it meant those bastards over there died with us. And, I am sure we could have.

I read somewhere that since the dawn of recorded time, there has been a war on this planet in one place or another every day of every year. Ha! Man loves to hate, and boy do we love to hate those guys over there! Ironically, as it turned out in the end, this line of thinking was, perhaps, the closest hypothesis in the extinction betting pool. But more on that later.

In the early years of the twenty-first-century, many scholars had made the claim that economics would be the great equalizer, and that wars would become obsolete.

I think they failed to grasp the nature and depth of our hate.

Oh, don't get me wrong, as the centuries rolled on and what was known as third world countries crawled out of their dark ages and into the modern, informational age, things did equal out across our planet. The, now former, third world people earned an equal amount of money, which allowed them to purchase an equal number of bombs and weaponry, with which they could destroy Mother Earth and their fellow humans, well... equally.

And even though people killed people all the way to the bitter end—fighting for their beliefs, against other's beliefs, for more land, more resources, over a political misunderstanding, an old sock—there came a time when it became just too much trouble to go to war. It's hard to travel somewhere and kill someone when you spend the majority of your time simply looking for food.

Personally, I was always a fan of the doomsdayists. The ones that said Mother Nature would take a vindictive hand and punish the human race for being such bad caretakers. That she would smite us with a meteor, or crush us under mounds of ash and lava. Or, maybe, she would slam us with torrential rains and thunderous hurricanes. Others loved to rant about the idea that we would do ourselves in with global warming, over harvesting, or just plain old bad management.

As a species, we humans resemble a virus more than our fellow mammals. We move into an area, stripping it bare, and then moved on to another without care or concern for what we leave behind. We were a plague against nature—one could say a pandemic—that is for certain.

Unfortunately, for good ole Mother Earth, we humans were industrious creatures with no qualms about finding new ways to desecrate our lands and oceans. Once we had depleted all of the oil and coal the planet had to offer, and evenly distributed their poisons around the globe, we simply found alternative ways to vandalize our world. Sure, nuclear was clean, just not its by-products and waste. Wind and solar may have once been called 'alternative' energy sources, but the spent batteries, used power cells, dead circuits, fried electronics, and the billions of tons of plastics that were used to hold it all together shouldn't be referred to as an 'alternative' form of

garbage. No, had Mother Nature taken a closer look at our résumé, I doubt she would have given us the caretaker job in the first place. Maybe she would have had better luck with the bees.

Overpopulation, now there is a concept I never cared for much when discussing the end of a species. How can anything become extinct by breeding? Isn't that an oxymoron—like military intelligence or jumbo shrimp? Sure enough, overpopulation adds to the wars, plagues, and lack of resources, which ironically leads to even more wars, plagues, and lack of resources.

But, aren't those factors then what controls the population?

I mean, if a population is killed off by something like war, you really can't say it went extinct by overpopulation, now can you?

In the end, as I sit and write this, I'm not sure if any of it really matters all that much.

So what did happen? Truth be told, it all did.

Several plagues jumped from the animal kingdom and became contagious to humans. A couple even reached pandemic proportions, killing a few million here and there. These deaths didn't really make a dent in the billions of people who were around at the time, but still worthy to be billed as "top vidnews."

The casualties from those, however, paled compared to the religious fanatics who, thanks to economic equality, acquired weapons that could level entire metropolitan areas.

Another old adage I love is the one that states, "Anyone can kill the president at any time, so long as they are willing to die in the attempt."

It amazed me that no matter how advanced the human race became, you could always find some schmuck willing to strap a bomb to his chest.

Viva La Revolución!

Still, even these only took a scant few hundred million innocent lives overall. Again, not all that bad for humankind and its billions.

As I have already said, wars rolled right on until the very end—some of them in retaliation for the terrorist acts, others for the usual "we want what you have" greed of man.

Still, the human race marched down the parkways of time.

Over the centuries, a plethora of floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, and even one testy rock from space would each claim some here and there. Other than making the vidnews—and having one religious group or another proclaiming that it was a sign of the end of days—it wasn't anything to write home about. Unless, of course, your home was in the path of one of the above.

Food—or lack thereof—was the catalyst of many a war, but they always seemed to work themselves out well enough on their own. Larger countries invaded smaller ones; people on both sides would die in the fighting. With fewer mouths to feed, and more resources to produce, everyone was once again happy. Well, except those killed off. But hey, they didn't have a voice anymore anyway.

All of that, however, was just life as usual for the human race. Had nothing changed, I am sure that humanity would still be kicking—and scratching and biting, and possibly even throwing the occasional rock or three. Unfortunately, something did change.

Perhaps I should start from the beginning, or at least, far enough into the past so that you will understand the end that I now face; before everything went to hell in a handbasket.

I, Ryan Tillman, discovered the key to immortality.

Oh, sure, I know what you are thinking; I probably would have thought the same. But, it is the truth. And here I am, as testament to that truth.

What did I do with my wonderful discovery? I could have told people about it, shared my secret with my fellow man. It might have even put an end to all of man's suffering and loss—of starvation, sickness, and pain—everything that leads to death.

But, why? What would have been in it for me? To get rich? Have fame and fortune? Status? I agree those are reasons that should have been more than adequate.

Except, with my immortality, I found that I already had everything there was. All knowledge lay at my feet. Every secret. Every scrap of human intelligence. The total wealth and power and might of the world! All of it here within my grasp. For *me* to use. At *my* whim and for *my* amusement.

At first, I must admit, I was overwhelmed. It took a century with me simply watching to learn what was actually available to me. But, I learned. Hah, I had enough time.

Once I understood that I had been given, along with my longevity, the power and totality in which I could control every aspect of human society—well, I confess, a kind of God complex overtook me. You could say I was a bit drunk with my newfound power.

Looking back now I am sure that, at first, I meant no harm. It was fun to let slip some carefully guarded government secret, reveal it to the opposition. A secret that people would be upset enough to do something about.

Well, after a few centuries of watching from the sidelines, a man can grow bored. It was entertaining to watch as the smaller nations banded together to fight the oppressiveness of the last, great superpower. Like some great Hollywood saga, played out for my pleasure.

It was long overdue, anyway. What was, at the time, the good ole U S of A had outlived its usefulness.

I am not ashamed of the outcome. Yes, millions died. Nevertheless, it paved the way for a much larger, more globally minded government. I saw it as a good thing. I always thought that, once the dust settled—and had anyone known of my involvement—I should have received a medal from my fellow man. Perhaps even the Nobel Peace Prize. Well, at least a commendation, I would have thought.

The new world government that emerged was more organized. And, even though I found it harder to manipulate one country, as opposed to many disjointed ones, each with their own agenda, I found that it simply added to the excitement of it all. Oh, at first, it was hard to build anything worth watching, certainly nothing that compared to the entertainment of the 'Last Great War' as the history books touted the fall of America. But, in time—and with a few pulls on a string here, or a nudge to a particularly corrupt person there—I was able to rebuild some tension and create some separatist factions.

As I said before, humans love to hate.

Yet, I was never able to rekindle that...oomph that was so entertaining to watch.

It's like chocolate. Sure, every child loves chocolate. Even adults love it, at least until they eat some Godiva! After that, regular chocolate is just...well...regular. And your taste buds are never again satisfied in quite the same way.

I tried to play nice, I really did! But, what are a few sex scandals, political bribes exposed, global blackouts, and the occasional skirmish, when compared to an all-out war? I mean, who wants to live forever if the entertainment gets worse and worse year after year. It would be just like that old show *Saturday Night Live*. The first twenty years were fantastic, but it simply went downhill after that. As if time had sucked the funny out of the world. What? Were the late 1990s and early 2000s really so depressing that no one could write a funny joke?

I, for one, was glad when they finally ripped that show off the air!

Again, I am chasing rabbits, and I don't have much time left. So, to get back to the task at hand, I really did try and play nice. Besides, humans were like cockroaches. No matter what you threw at them, no matter how many died, pockets of them always survived!

So, one day, in a fit of boredom I thought would kill me, the idea struck. I figured, just as you would do to a grape vine to help it grow better fruit, I could prune things back a bit. Give it some time to grow out again. Let mankind regain some of its former glory. That is all I intended on doing. Besides, I would be there to watch over things. I mean, think about it, how much fun would it be to remake mankind in *my* image? Huh?

So, I unleashed it all. I rained fire down from the heavens with a simple thought. They were the ones who built all the weapons, not me! My only error was underestimating the destructive genius of my fellow man. And that can't be seen as a crime!

I still remember the ecstasy of it—the world glowed and I looked on laughing. It filled me, like an explosive orgasm—No! It was better than sex! Watching it rain down, watching it all burn. It was the most beautiful sight.

Well, perhaps sight is a poor choice of words for me, but again, I digress.

The sheer rapture and elation and power—the knowledge of the brighter future I would build! One that I would create and mold and guide! That is why I did it. How was I supposed to know? How!

Fact of the matter is I don't think it was worth it. I can finally admit that now, even if it is simply to myself. I have subsisted down here so long I have simply lost track. I feel...old, as odd as that is for someone who is immortal to say.

I have searched everywhere and have found not one trace of life. It's just me. I am the last man on earth, and I murdered them all.

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The endlessly repeated sentence stopped by a glitch rather than design. The words filled the small, green screen—the repetitious rant of some deranged typist. The faint hum of cooling fans hung in the dingy air. A lamp set into one wall, so thickly covered by dust it emitted only the faintest of light, cast deep shadows across the room. The ceiling hung limp from its mountings, and sagged in spots where tiles had come loose. These falling to join the debris that covered the floor.

Eons had passed since anything living had left a footprint in this small room.

The wall opposite the dim light held a bank of computers. A thick black cable, plugged into a central access panel, made its way across the floor and up the side of a tub that sat beside a steel desk that the vidscreen rested upon.

A husk of a body floated in the tub. It may once have been human—possibly even male—but time had pulled from it as much as it could. A few wisps of stringy hair still clung to the scalp surrounding the spot on the forehead in which the black cable had been implanted into. At the base of the cable, several smaller wires snaked away and pierced other areas of the skull. Dark cavities sat where eyes once rested, the skin surrounding the sockets pulled into their depths. Bone jutted out from where, at one time, a nose may have been. The mouth gaped open, stretched into a perpetual scream by the dried ligaments that stood out taut on the being's neck just below its paper-thin skin. One emaciated arm, flesh the color of dried leather, dangled over the side of the tub. The ring finger was missing; the digit rested on the floor below. The severed finger had a corroded golden substance edging the spot where it had detached from the hand, giving the only clue as to what may have severed it.

Save for the vidscreen, the desk sat bare except for a raised glass bubble. The bubble, filled with a thin, gray mist, rhythmically pulsed with a red light that played off the shadows of the empty eye sockets of the body in the tub. Suspended in the mist was a message—Warning, Power Failure Eminent.

A loud clack ricocheted off the walls sending a drizzle of fresh dust falling from the ceiling. The loud whine of a turbine buzzed; the noise of its motor winding down to dissipate into silence as it spun to a stop.

The monitor flashed once and flicked off the moment power was denied to its circuits. In the faint, green afterglow that still resonated from within its CRT, the body shuddered once in the tub, sending a small ripple streaming across the surface of the solution that held it. The ripple lapped against the outer rim, rebounded back toward where it had originated, but lost its momentum in the thick substance, and fell still. Countless centuries had passed since the body in the tub had been connected to the Global Network. Now darkness, and the utter silence of a tomb, enveloped the chamber as Ryan Tillman's body expired.