

# Nimbus<sup>1</sup>

Peter Watts

She's been out there for hours now, listening to the clouds. I can see the Radio Shack receiver balanced on her knees, I can see the headphone wires snaking up and cutting her off from the world. Or connecting her, I suppose. Jess is hooked into the sky now, in a way I'll never be. She can hear it talking. The clouds advance, threatening grey anvils and mountains boiling in ominous slow motion, and the 'phones fill her head with alien grumbles and moans.

God she looks like her mother. I catch her profile and for a moment it *is* Anne there, gently chiding, *of course not, Jess, there aren't any spirits. They're just clouds.* But now I see her face and eight years have passed in a flash, and I know this can't be Anne. Anne knew how to smile.

I should go out and join her. It's still safe enough, we've got a good half hour before the storm hits. Not that it's really going to hit *us*; it's just passing through, they say, on its way to some other target. Still, I wonder if it knows we're in the way. I wonder if it cares.

I *will* join her. For once, I will not be a coward. My daughter sits five meters away in our own back yard, and I am damn well going to be there for her. It's the least I can do before I go.

I wonder if that will mean anything to her.

\* \* \*

An aftermath, before the enlightenment.

It was as though somebody had turned the city upside down and shaken it. We waded through a shallow sea of detritus; broken walls, slabs of torn roofing, toilets and sofas and shattered glass. I walked behind Anne, Jess bouncing on my shoulders making happy gurgling noises; just over a year old, not quite talking yet but plenty old enough for continual astonishment. You could see it in

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her eyes. Every blown newspaper, every bird, every step was a new experience in wonder.

Also every loaded shotgun. Every trigger-happy national guardsman. This was a time when people still thought they owned things. They saw their homes strewn across two city blocks and the enemy they feared was not the weather, but each other. Hurricanes were accidents, freaks of nature. The experts were still blaming volcanoes and the greenhouse effect for everything. Looters, on the other hand, were real. They were tangible. They were a problem with an obvious solution.

The volunteers' shelter squatted in the distance like a circus tent at Armageddon. A tired-looking woman inside had given us shovels and pitchforks, and directed us to the nearest pile of unmanned debris. We began to pitch pieces of someone's life into an enormous blue dumpster. Anne and I worked side by side, stopping occasionally to pass Jessica back and forth.

I wondered what new treasures I was about to unearth. Some priceless family heirloom, miraculously spared? A complete collection of Jethro Tull CDs? Just a game, of course; the whole area had been combed, the owners had come and despaired of salvage, there was only wreckage beneath the wreckage. Still, every now and then I thought I saw something shining in the dirt, a bottle cap or a gum wrapper or a Rolex--

My pitchfork punched through a chunk of plaster and slid into something soft. It dropped suddenly under my weight, as if lubricated. It stopped.

I heard the muted hiss of escaping gas. Something smelled, very faintly, of rotten meat.

*This isn't what I think it is. The crews have already been here. They used trained dogs and infrared scopes and they've already found all the bodies, they couldn't have missed anything there's nothing here but wood and plaster and cement--*

I tightened my grip on the pitchfork, pulled up on the shaft. The tines rose up from the plaster, slick, dark, wet.

Anne was laughing. I couldn't believe it. I looked up, but she wasn't looking at me or the pitchfork or the coagulating stain. She was looking across the wreckage to a Ford pickup, loaded with

locals and their rifles, inching its way down a pathway cleared in the road.

"Get a load of the bumper," she said, oblivious to my discovery.

There was a bumper sticker on the driver's side. I saw the caricature of a storm cloud, inside the classic red circle with diagonal slash. And a slogan.

A warning, to whom it may concern: *Clouds, we're gonna kick your ass.*

\* \* \*

Jess takes off the headphones as I join her. She touches a button on the receiver. Cryptic wails, oddly familiar, rise from a speaker on the front of the device. We sit for a moment without speaking, letting the sounds wash over us.

Everything about her is so pale. I can barely see her eyebrows.

"Do they know where it's headed?" Jess asks at last.

I shake my head. "There's Hanford, but they've never gone after a reactor before. They say it might be trying to get up enough steam to go over the mountains. Maybe it's going after Vancouver or Sea-Tac again." I tap the box on her knees. "Hey, it might be laying plans even as we speak. You've been listening to that thing long enough, you should know what it's saying by now."

A distant flicker of sheet lightning strobes on the horizon. From Jessica's receiver, a dozen voices wail a discordant crescendo.

"Or you could even talk to it," I continue. "I saw the other day, they've got two-ways now. Like yours, only you can send as well as receive."

Jess fingers the volume control. "It's just a gimmick, Dad. These things couldn't put out enough power to get heard over all the other stuff in the air. TV, and radio, and..." She cocks her head at the sounds coming from the speaker. "Besides, nobody understands what they're saying anyway."

"Ah, but *they* could understand *us*," I say, trying for a touch of mock drama.

"Think so?" Her voice is expressionless, indifferent.

I push on anyway. Talking at least helps paper over my fear a bit. "Sure. The big ones could understand, anyway. A storm this size must have an IQ in the six digits, easy."

"I suppose," Jess says.

Inside, something tears a little. "Doesn't it *matter* to you?"

She just looks at me.

"Don't you want to know?" I say. "We're sitting here underneath this huge thing that nobody understands, we don't know what it's doing or why, and you sit there listening while it shouts at itself and you don't seem to care that it changed everything overnight--"

But of course, she doesn't remember that. Her memory doesn't go back to when we thought that clouds were just...clouds. She never knew what it was like to rule the world, and she never expects to.

My daughter is indifferent to defeat.

Suddenly, unbearably, I just want to hold her. *God Jess, I'm sorry we messed up so badly.* With effort, I control myself. "I just wish you could remember the way it was."

"Why?" she asks. "What was so different?"

I look at her, astonished. "Everything!"

"It doesn't sound like it. They say we *never* understood the weather. There were hurricanes and tornadoes even before, and sometimes they'd smash whole cities, and nobody could stop them then either. So what if it happens because the sky's alive, or just because it's, you know, random?"

Because your mother is dead, Jess, and after all these years I still don't know what killed her. Was it just blind chance? Was it the reflex of some slow, stupid animal that was only scratching an itch?

Can the sky commit murder?

"It matters," is all I tell her. Even if it doesn't make a difference.

The front is almost directly overhead now, like the mouth of a great black cave crawling across the heavens. West, all is clear. Above, the squall line tears the sky into jagged halves.

East, the world is a dark, murky green.

I feel so vulnerable out here. I glance back over my shoulder. The armoured house crouches at our backs, only the biggest trees left to keep it company. It's been eight years and the storms still haven't managed to dig us out. They got Mexico City, and Berlin, and the whole damn golden horseshoe, but our little house hangs in there like a festering cyst embedded in the landscape.

Then again, they probably just haven't noticed us yet.

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Relieved. The thing in the sky had gone to sleep, at least in our corner of the world. The source of its awareness--sources, rather, for they were legion--had convected into the stratosphere and frozen, a billion crystalline motes of suspended intellect. By the time they came back down they'd be on the other side of the world, and it would take days for the rest of the collective conscious to fill the gap.

We used the time to ready our defenses. I was inspecting the exoskeleton the contractors had just grafted onto the house. Anne was around front, checking the storm shutters. Our home had become monstrous, an angular fortress studded with steel beams and lightning rods. A few years earlier we would have sued anyone who did this to us. Today, we had gone into hock to pay for the retrofit.

I looked up at a faint roar from overhead. The sun reflected off a cluster of tiny cruciform shapes drawing contrails across the sky.

Cloud seeders. A common enough sight. In those days we still thought we could fight back.

"They won't work," Jess said seriously at my elbow.

I look down, startled. "Hey, Jess. Didn't see you sneaking up on me."

"They're just getting the clouds mad," she said, with all the certainty a four-year-old can muster. She squinted up into the blue expanse. "They're just trying to kill the, um, the messenger."

I squatted down, regarded her eye to eye. "And who told you that?" Not her mother, anyway.

"That woman. Talking to mom."

Not just a woman, I saw as I rounded the corner into the front yard. A couple: early twenties, mildly scruffy, both bearing slogans on their t-shirts. *Love Your Mother* the woman's chest told me, over a decal of the earth from lunar orbit. The man's shirt was more verbose: *Unlimited growth, the creed of carcinoma*. No room for a picture on that one.

Gaianists. Retreating across the lawn, facing Anne, as if afraid to turn their backs. Anne was smiling and waving, the very picture of inoffence, but I really felt for the poor bastards. They probably never knew what hit them.

Sometimes, when Seventh-Day Adventists came calling, Anne would actually invite them in for a little target practise. It was usually the Adventists who asked to leave.

"Did they have anything worthwhile to say?" I asked her now.

"Not really." Anne stopped waving and turned to face me. Her smile morphed into a triumphant smirk. "We're angering the sky gods, you know that? Thou shalt not inhabit a single-family dwelling. Thou shalt honour thy environmental impact, to keep it low."

"They could be right," I remarked. At least, there weren't many people around to argue the point. Most of our former neighbours had already retreated into hives. Not that *their* environmental impact had had much to do with it.

"Well, I'll grant it's not as flakey as some of the things they come up with," Anne admitted. "But if they're going to blame me for the revenge of the cloud demons, they damn well better have a rational argument or two waiting in the wings."

"I take it they didn't."

She snorted. "The same hokey metaphors. Gaia's leaping into action to fight the human disease. I guess hurricanes are supposed to be some sort of penicillin."

"No crazier than some of the things the experts say."

"Yeah, well, I don't necessarily believe them either."

"Maybe you should," I said. "I mean, *we* sure as hell don't know what's going on."

"And you think *they* do? Just a couple of years ago they were denying everything, remember? Life can't exist without stable organized structure, they said."

"I sort of thought they'd learned a few things since then."

"No kidding." Anne's eyes grew round with enlightenment. "And all this time I thought they were just making up trendy buzzwords."

Jess wandered between us. Anne scooped her up; Jess scrambled onto her mother's shoulders and surveyed the world from dizzying adult height.

I glanced back at the retreating evangelists. "So how did you handle those two?"

"I agreed with them," Anne said.

"Agreed?"

"Sure. We're a disease. Fine. Only some of us have mutated." She jerked a thumb at our castle. "Now, we're resistant to antibiotics."

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We are resistant to antibiotics. We've encysted ourselves like hermit crabs. We've been pruned, cut back, decimated but not destroyed. We are only in remission.

But now, outside the battlements, we're naked. Even at this range the storm could reach out and swat us both in an instant. How can Jess just sit there?

"I can't even enjoy sunny days any more," I admit to her.

She looks at me, and I know her perplexity is not because I can't enjoy clear skies, but because I would even think it worthy of comment. I keep talking, refusing the chronic realization that we're aliens to each other. "The sky can be pure blue and sunshine, but if there's even one fluffy little cumulus bumping along I can't help feeling...watched. It doesn't matter if it's too small to think on its own, or that it'll dissipate before it gets a chance to upload. I keep thinking it's some sort of spy, it's going to report back somewhere."

"I don't think they can see," Jess says absently. "They just sense big things like cities and smokestacks, hot spots or things that...itch. That's all."

The wind breathes, deceptively gentle, in her hair. Above us a finger of grey vapour crawls between two towering masses of cumulo-nimbus. What's happening up there? A random conjunction of water droplets? A 25000-baud data dump between processing nodes? Even after all this time it sounds absurd.

So many eloquent theories, so many explanations for our downfall. Everyone's talking about order from chaos: fluid geometry, bioelectric microbes that live in the clouds, complex behaviours emerging from some insane alliance of mist and electrochemistry. It looks scientific enough on paper, but spoken aloud it always sounds like an incantation...

And none of it helps. The near distance is lit with intermittent flashes of light. The storm is walking toward us on jagged fractal legs. I feel like an insect under the heel of a descending boot. Maybe that's a positive sign. Would I be afraid if I had really given up?

Maybe. Maybe the situation is irrelevant. Maybe cowards are *always* afraid.

Jess's receiver is crying incessantly. "Whale songs," I hear myself say, and the tremor in my voice is barely discernible. "Humpback whales. That's what they sound like."

Jess fixes her eyes back on the sky. "They don't *sound* like anything, Dad. It's just electricity. Only the receiver sort of...makes it sound like something we know."

Another gimmick. We've fallen from God's chosen to endangered species in only a decade, and the hustlers still won't look up from their market profiles. I can sympathize. Looming above us, right now, are the ones who threw us into the street. The forward overhang is almost upon us. Ten kilometers overhead, winds are screaming past each other at sixty meters a second.

So far the storm isn't even breathing hard.

There was a banshee raging through the foothills. It writhed with tornados; Anne and I had watched the whirling black tentacles tearing at the horizon before we'd fled underground. Tornados were impossible during the winter, we'd been assured just a year before. Yet here we were, huddling together as the world shook, and all our reinforcements might as well have been made of paper if one of those figments came calling.

Sex is instinctive at times like those. Jeopardy reduces us to automata; there is no room for love when the genes reassert themselves. Even pleasure is irrelevant. We were just another pair of mammals, trying to maximize our fitness before the other shoe dropped.

Afterwards, at least, we were still allowed to feel. We clung together, blind and invisible in the darkness, almost crushing each other with the weight of our own desperation. We couldn't stop crying. I gave silent thanks that Jess had been trapped at daycare when the front came through. I wouldn't have stood the strain of a brave facade that night.

After a while, Anne stopped shaking. She lay in my arms, sniffing quietly. Dim floaters of virtual light swarmed maddeningly at the edge of my vision.

"The gods have come back," she said at last.

"Gods?" Anne was usually so bloody empirical.

"The old ones," she said. "The Old Testament gods. The Greek pantheon. Thunderbolts and fire and brimstone. We thought we'd outgrown them, you know? We thought..."

I felt a deep, trembling breath.

"I thought," she continued. "I thought we didn't need them any more. But we did. We fucked up so horribly on our own. There was nobody to keep us in line, and we trampled everything..."

I stroked her back. "Old news, Annie. You know we've cleaned things up. Hardly any cities allow gasoline any more, extinctions have levelled off. I even heard the other day that rainforest biomass increased last year."

"That's not *us*." A sigh whispered across my cheek. "We're no better than we ever were. We're just afraid of a spanking. Like spoiled kids caught drawing naughty pictures on the walls."

"Anne, we still don't know for sure if the clouds are really alive. Even if they are, that doesn't make them intelligent. Some people still say this is all just a weird side-effect of chemicals in the atmosphere."

"We're begging for mercy, Jon. That's all we're doing."

We breathed against dark, distant roaring for a few moments.

"At least we're doing something." I said at last. "Maybe we're not doing it for all the enlightened reasons we should be, but at least we're cleaning up. That's something."

"Not enough," she said. "We threw shit at something for centuries. How can a few prayers and sacrifices make it just go away and leave us alone? If it even exists. And if it *does* have any more brains than a flatworm. I guess you get the gods you deserve."

I tried to think of something to say, some twig of false reassurance. But, as usual, I wasn't fast enough. Anne picked herself up first:

"At least we've learned a little humility. And who knows? Maybe the gods will answer our prayers before Jess grows up..."

\* \* \*

They didn't. The experts tell us now that our supplications are on indefinite hold. We're praying to something that shrouds the whole planet, after all. It takes time for such a huge system to assimilate new information, more time to react. The clouds don't live by human clocks. We swarm like bacteria to them, doubling our numbers in an instant. How fast the response, from our microbial perspective? How long before the knee jerks? The experts mumble jargon among themselves and guess: decades. Maybe fifty years. This monster advancing on us now is answering a summons from the last century.

The sky screams down to fight with ghosts. It doesn't see me. If it sees anything at all, it is only the afterimage of some insulting sore, decades old, that needs to be disinfected. I lean against the wind. Murky chaos sweeps across something I used to call property. The house recedes behind me. I don't dare look but I

know it must be kilometers away, and somehow I'm paralysed. This blind seething medusa claws its way towards me and its face covers the whole sky; how can I *not* look?

"Jessica..."

I can see her from the corner of my eye. With enormous effort, I move my head a little and she comes into focus. She is looking at the heavens, but her expression is not terrified or awed or even curious.

Slowly, smooth as an oiled machine, she lowers her eyes to earth and switches off the receiver. It hardly matters any more. The thunder is continuous, the wind is an incessant roar, the first hailstones are pelting down on us. If we stay out here we'll be dead in two hours. Doesn't she know it? Is this some sort of test, am I supposed to prove my love for her by facing down God like this?

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe now's the time. Maybe--

Jessica puts her hand on my knee. "Come on," she says, like a parent. "Let's go inside."

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I am remembering the last time I saw Anne. I have no choice; the moment traps me when I'm not looking, embeds me in a cross-section of time stopped dead when the lightning hit ten meters behind her:

The world is a flat mosaic in blinding black-and white, strobelit, motionless. Sheets of grey water are suspended in the act of slamming the earth. Anne is just out of reach, head down, her determination as clear as a kodalith snapshot in perfect focus: she is damn well going to make it to safety and she doesn't care what gets in her way. And then the lightning implodes into darkness, the world jerks back into motion with a sound like Hiroshima and the stench of burning electricity, but my eyes are shut tight, still fixed on that receding instant. There is sudden pain, small fingernails gouging the flesh of my palm, and I know that Jessica has not closed her eyes, that she knows more of this moment than I can bear to. I pray, for the only time in my life I pray to the sky *please*

*let me be mistaken take someone else take me take the whole fucking city only please give her back I'm sorry I didn't believe...*

Forty or fifty years from now, according to some, it might hear that. Too late for Anne. Too late even for me.

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It's still out there. Just passing through, it drums its fingers on the ground and all our reinforced talismans can barely keep it out. Even here, in this underground sanctum, the walls are shaking.

It doesn't scare me any more.

There was another time, long ago, when I wasn't afraid. Back then the shapes in the sky were friendly; snow-covered mountains, magical kingdoms, once I even saw Anne up there. But now I only see something malign and hideous, ancient, something slow to anger and impossible to appease. In the thousands of years we spent watching the clouds, after all the visions and portents we read there, never once did we see the thing that was really looking back.

We see it now.

I wonder which epitaphs they'll be reading tomorrow. What city is about to be shattered by impossible tornados, how many will die in this fresh onslaught of hailstones and broken glass? I don't know. I don't even care. That surprises me. Just a few days ago, I think it would have mattered. Now, even the realization that we are spared barely moves me to indifference.

Jess, how can you sleep through this? The wind tries to uproot us, bits of God's brain bash themselves against our shelter, and somehow you can just curl up in the corner and block it out. You're so much older than I am, Jess; you learned not to care years ago. Barely any of you shines out any more. Even the glimpses I catch only seem like old photographs, vague reminders of what you used to be. Do I really love you as much as I tell myself?

Maybe all I love is my own nostalgia.

I gave you a start, at least. I gave you a few soft years before things fell apart. But then the world split in two, and the part I can live in keeps shrinking. You slip so easily between both worlds;

your whole generation is amphibious. Not mine. There's nothing left I can offer you, you don't need me at all. Before long I'd have dragged you down with me.

I won't let that happen. You're half Anne, after all.

The maelstrom covers the sound of my final ascent. I wonder what Anne would think of me now. She'd disapprove, I guess. She was too much of a fighter to *ever* give up. I don't think she had a suicidal thought in her whole life.

And suddenly, climbing the stairs, I realize that I can ask her right now if I want to. Anne is watching me from a far dark corner of the room, through weathered adolescent eyes opened to mere slits. Is she going to call me back? Is she going to berate me for giving in, say that she loves me? I hesitate. I open my mouth.

But she closes her eyes without a word.