The Last Night of the World by Ray Bradbury

Originally published in the February 1951 issue of Esquire

"What would you do if you knew this was the last night of the world?"

"What would I do; you mean, seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"I don't know — I hadn't thought. She turned the handle of the silver coffeepot toward him and placed the two cups in their saucers.

He poured some coffee. In the background, the two small girls were playing blocks on the parlor rug in the light of the green hurricane lamps. There was an easy, clean aroma of brewed coffee in the evening air.

"Well, better start thinking about it," he said.

"You don't mean it?" said his wife.

He nodded.

"A war?"

He shook his head.

"Not the hydrogen or atom bomb?"

"No."

"Or germ warfare?"

"None of those at all," he said, stirring his coffee slowly and staring into its black depths. "But just the closing of a book, let's say."

"I don't think I understand."

"No, nor do I really. It's jut a feeling; sometimes it frightens me, sometimes I'm not frightened at all — but peaceful." He glanced in at the girls and their yellow hair shining in the bright lamplight, and lowered his voice. "I didn't say anything to you. It first happened about four nights ago."

"What?"

"A dream I had. I dreamt that it was all going to be over and a voice said it was; not any kind of voice I can remember, but a voice anyway, and it said things would stop here on Earth. I didn't think too much about it when I awoke the next morning, but then I went to work and the feeling as with me all day. I caught Stan Willis looking out the window in the middle of the afternoon and I said, 'Penny for your thoughts, Stan,' and he said, 'I had a dream last night,' and before he even told me the dream, I knew what it was. I could have told him, but he told me and I listened to him."

"It was the same dream?"

"Yes. I told Stan I had dreamed it, too. He didn't seem surprised. He relaxed, in fact. Then we started walking through offices, for the hell of it. It wasn't planned. We didn't say, let's walk around. We just walked on our own, and everywhere we saw people looking at their desks or their hands or out the windows and not seeing what was in front of their eyes. I talked to a few of them; so did Stan."

"And all of them had dreamed?"

"All of them. The same dream, with no difference."

"Do you believe in the dream?"

"Yes. I've never been more certain."

"And when will it stop? The world, I mean."

"Sometime during the night for us, and then, as the night goes on around the world, those advancing portions will go, too. It'll take twenty-four hours for it all to go."

They sat awhile not touching their coffee. Then they lifted it slowly and drank, looking at each other.

"Do we deserve this?" she said.

"It's not a matter of deserving, it's just that things didn't work out. I notice you didn't even argue about this. Why not?"

"I guess I have a reason," she said.

"The same reason everyone at the office had?"

She nodded. "I didn't want to say anything. It happened last night. And the women on the block are talking about it, just among themselves." She picked up the evening paper and held it toward him. "There's nothing in the news about it."

"No, everyone knows, so what's the need?" He took the paper and sat back in his chair, looking at the girls and then at her. "Are you afraid?"

"No. Not even for the children. I always thought I would be frightened to death, but I'm not."

"Where's that spirit of self-preservation the scientists talk about so much?"

"I don't know. You don't get too excited when you feel things are logical. This is logical. Nothing else but this could have happened from the way we've lived."

"We haven't been too bad, have we?"

"No, nor enormously good. I suppose that's the trouble. We haven't been very much of anything except us, while a big part of the world was busy being lots of quite awful things."

The girls were laughing in the parlor as they waved their hands and tumbled down their house of blocks.

"I always imagined people would be screaming in the streets at a time like this."

"I guess not. You don't scream about the real thing."

"Do you know, I won't miss anything but you and the girls. I never liked cities or autos or factories or my work or anything except you three. I won't miss a thing except my family and perhaps the change in the weather and a glass of cool water when the weather's hot, or the luxury of sleeping. Just little things, really. How can we sit here and talk this way?"

"Because there's nothing else to do."

"That's it, of course, for if there were, we'd be doing it. I suppose this is the first time in the history of the world that everyone has really known just what they were going to be doing during the last night."

"I wonder what everyone else will do now, this evening, for the next few hours."

"Go to a show, listen to the radio, watch the TV, play cards, put the children to bed, get to bed themselves, like always."

"In a way that's something to be proud of — like always."

"We're not all bad."

They sat a moment and then he poured more coffee. "Why do you suppose it's tonight?"

"Because."

"Why not some night in the past ten years of in the last century, or five centuries ago or ten?"

"Maybe it's because it was never February 30, 1951, ever before in history, and now it is and that's it, because this date means more than any other date ever meant and because it's the year when things are as they are all over the world and that's why it's the end."

"There are bombers on their course both ways across the ocean tonight that'll never see land again."

"That's part of the reason why."

"Well," he said. "What shall it be? Wash the dishes?"

They washed the dishes carefully and stacked them away with especial neatness. At eight-thirty the girls were put to bed and kissed good night and the little lights by their beds turned on and the door left a trifle open.

"I wonder," said the husband, coming out and looking back, standing there with his pipe for a moment."

"What?"

"If the door should be shut all the way or if it should be left just a little ajar so we can hear them if they call."

"I wonder if the children know — if anyone mentioned anything to them?"

"No, of course not. They'd have asked us about it."

They sat and read the papers and talked and listened to some radio music and then sat together by the fireplace looking at the charcoal embers as the clock struck ten-thirty and eleven and eleven-thirty. They thought of all the other people in the world who had spent their evening, each in their own special way.

"Well," he said at last. He kissed his wife for a long time.

"We've been good for each other, anyway."

"Do you want to cry?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

They went through the house and turned out the lights and locked the doors, and went into the bedroom and stood in the night cool darkness undressing. She took the spread from the bed and folded it carefully over a chair, as always, and pushed back the covers. "The sheets are so cool and clean and nice," she said.

"I'm tired."

"We're both tired."

They got into bed and lay back.

"Wait a moment," she said.

He heard her get up and go out into the back of the house, and then he heard the soft shuffling of a swinging door. A moment later she was back. "I left the water running in the kitchen," she said. "I turned the faucet off."

Something about this was so funny that he had to laugh.

She laughed with him, knowing what it was that she had done that was so funny. They stopped laughing at last and lay in their cool night bed, their hands clasped, their heads together.

"Good night," he said, after a moment.

"Good night," she said, adding softly, "dear..."