

Winner: Rejection, Richard Hooton (Mossley, England)

THE world stopped spinning. Ground to a halt. Obviously, the effects were catastrophic.

The disaster didn't happen in a sudden, spectacular blow up; it was almost imperceptible — the slow, silent creep of a black panther in the night until what's now known as "*The Jolt*". Only then did it pounce.

But there *were* warnings. There are *always* warnings. No one heeded them. We just carried on as normal, rushing through banal, busy lives as if impending doom wasn't looming over us like some vast Hollywood spaceship. Oblivious, I thought my life was going well.

The first warnings were almost as unnoticeable as "*The Slowing*." A handful of scientists claimed to have detected a very gradual decline in Earth's rotation. They were mostly ignored, earning just a few inches in the broadsheets. Journalists pecked around it like pigeons sifting crumbs from grit until there was a body of substance, fleshed by figures, calculations, data, indicating a deceleration of the world's spin.

We didn't pay attention.

Some scientists said it was caused by melting polar ice caps changing the way the Earth moves on its axis; a side effect of global warming, nothing too serious. Others said tidal forces were already slowing the rotation but these appeared to be getting unfathomably stronger; the magnetic moon increasing its gravitational attraction, winning the tug-of-war over our planet. There was no consensus, only separation. What would the effects be? No one knew. But *something* was wrong. Very wrong. Anxious politicians were weak, paralysed by indecision. By the time the public realised it was too late. No one knew how to reverse it anyway.

The effects weren't immediately noticeable. At first, people found it amusing. Social media was ablaze with wags. "It's the End of the World as we know it (and I feel fine)" by REM went straight to the top of the download charts. U2's "Until the End of the World" was second. I liked hearing those old songs again. "World's Not In Motion", screamed The Sun. "Armageddon Out Of Here", jested The Mirror. "We're Doomed" wailed The Mail.

I grabbed a beer from the fridge and turned on the TV. Whatever was happening was out of my control. That nice Professor Brian Cox, the simpering Northerner that housewives love, was on every channel explaining the physics. He said we were all whizzing along with the Earth at a rotational velocity of 1,674.4 kilometres an hour. If the world suddenly stopped spinning, we would all be thrown sideways in a ballistic trajectory, smashing into oblivion. It wasn't very comforting.

I flicked through the channels. They reeked of panic. Religious leaders heralded Revelations. Christians and Muslims united in their proclamations that Judgement was upon us. Jehovah's Witnesses danced in the streets, awaiting their salvation. Environmentalists howled that we'd all caused it: human activity had overloaded the planet, our sheer mass and development literally causing the Earth to stop. The po-faced politicians urged calm, soothing that they had experts advising them on what to do. Pecking journalists had only questions.

Then the people reacted; they lost control. Like the end of all revolutions it started peacefully with protesting crowds holding up “End of the World” placards that were so old-fashioned familiar they were almost reassuring. Waves and waves of unrest followed in a never-receding tide that broke into an orgy of rioting and looting. There were madcap ideas on how to get the world moving again. Blasting nuclear weapons into the Antarctic to cause an explosion massive enough to get it shifting was suggested. Then sensibly dismissed. There were rumours of accelerated NASA programmes to shuttle the best to space stations to salvage mankind.

No one really knew what to do.

It wasn’t happening, blinkered deniers said. Our Mother Earth would not just stop. She had given us life, sustained us for millennia, borne us on her back through the worst of times. No matter what we did to her, how much we neglected, ill-treated or abused her, she would always be there for us.

They were wrong.

One day she gave up. Stopped turning for us. Abandoned us.

When “*The Jolt*” arrived, I was one of the “*Lucky Ones*”. Scientists believed it couldn’t happen. Gravity’s caused by mass. Unless the planet went on a massive weight loss plan it couldn’t *lose* it. Ha! As if the end of the world would follow rational explanation.

So why did it stop? Had she somehow purposefully let go?

I was home. The phone rang. Heartbreaking news. I sat quietly in the lounge. It was like being in a rollercoaster carriage when it stops: jerked forward in my seat, shoved backwards, swiftly still. Motionless. The strangest of feelings. Almost indiscernible. A kind of disconnection. Estrangement. A sickening realisation that you didn’t know why it had happened, but you knew that *everything* had suddenly changed.

I got to my feet slowly, arms stretched out in trepidation. I crept to the window. The street was empty but the surroundings still there: houses attached, trees firm in their roots, cars in driveways. My feet began to leave the ground, levitating as if I’d subconsciously learnt a magic trick I couldn’t control. I gripped the windowsill, knuckles white, as my legs reached the level of my head and I stretched out horizontally. I peered out of the window and saw my neighbour. He was ten feet in the air. He’d been mowing the front lawn but now the lawnmower was above him. A look of disbelief on his face morphed into confusion. His fingers grasped at air like useless worms pulled from soil. He stared at me, mouthing the word ‘help’. What could I do? What could anyone do? He sailed away, as pathetic as a helium balloon let go by a distraught child. Within minutes he was floating in the clouds with no way of coming back down, upwards and upwards, getting smaller and smaller, until he was just a black dot in a blue sky, a full stop on a pure white page. I held up one hand. And waved goodbye.

“*Floaters*” they were called. The ones lost to the sky. Everyone outside was hoovered into the atmosphere. I smiled grimly. It was an efficient, environmental way for the planet to get rid of us, discarding us into the exosphere where we’d be vaporised. No dead bodies stinking the streets. No burial grounds. Just gone. We are of Mother Earth but we’ll never return to her.

I clung to the windowsill for hours. Everything in my lounge was now on the ceiling. The sky boiled livid and bloody. Why had she done this? I clenched my jaw, veins bulging. She was a bucking bronco, flinging us off her back. She didn't want our burden anymore; the same as my aching arms that eventually forced me to let go. I soared until I slapped against the ceiling where I sprawled out, breathing heavily, tears stinging my eyes. I'd never noticed how dirty it had become up here. From pure white to grubby grey after years of neglect, particles of dust and decay stuck to it. And me.

Eventually I tried to move. It's not easy, weightlessness, especially for a clumsy, big guy like me, used to being anchored to the settee. It's like swimming without water: harder than it looks and tiring. For my first few attempts, I'd push away, only to be shoved back up. Using different styles, I adapted, settling on a deformed breast stroke, dizzy and disorientated, nausea rising in my throat. I float back up to rest and sleep there, pressed against the ceiling, where it smells of junk food and sweat.

I admit there is some fun, it's not all wallowing. Childhood dreams of being a spaceman flying around the house have become reality. It's a novelty. Solo, with no chance of prying eyeballs, you can do anything you want. In moments of blissful ignorance I close my eyes and pretend nothing's wrong; that you're supposed to drift alone through life.

I still have water to sustain me. I turn on the tap and a liquid loop streams upwards into my gasping mouth. The lack of gravity does present issues though. I can't cook. I eat whatever's still fresh. I urinate into plastic bottles and throw them out the window. I figure they'll just burn up in the stratosphere so it isn't polluting or littering. For more solid waste, I defecate into a plastic bag, tie it up and fling it to the heavens. Take that, God. My pitiful insurrection.

The concept of time died; another constant gone. Without the Earth spinning a day will last a year, the scientists say, so that's six months of daytime with no changing temperatures or colours of the seasons and the sun perpetual, its heat a 24-hour swelter. I can't sleep. The light constantly seeps through my eyelids. I yearn for blackouts but the only darkness is in my thoughts. How can you get your world spinning again? It's much easier to drift towards the end. My stomach rumbles. Supplies are low.

With hands shaking I haul myself to the window to gaze upon the radicalised world. It's always the same scene, as if my view has been replaced by a painting of a deserted suburbia. Those of us left daren't venture outside; we're molluscs clinging to the rock, frightened to let go. There's no way out. It's too late.

Somehow, the sky changes. Now it's the colour of the lush grass I'll never caress, with stars sparkling in the ether, a promise of something beautiful out of reach. I sigh and float back up. When you're pinned to the ceiling you have a lot of time to think. About everything you'd have done differently. Everything you never got round to doing. What you'll never see. Never hear. Never taste. I miss her motion; the subtle feel of perpetual movement, a tenderness propelling us forward. I miss the curve of the horizon. I miss the kiss of fresh air softly invigorating my lungs. I miss the intoxicating fragrance of life and love. I miss you.

A noise breaks up my thoughts. A rattling shattering the silence. My disturbed imagination. No, it's there again, a lusty banging on the front door; as stark and startling as if caught naked.

I propel myself to the hall, cautiously opening the door, careful not to get sucked out. Staring back is my old friend, Steve. He's used a system of ropes and hooks to tether himself to the ground. I remember he liked mountaineering.

'You alright?' His eyebrows raise. It's a ludicrous question in the circumstances. Dumbfounded, I just nod. We join the street's eerie hush.

'Steve, what you doing here?'

'I'm delivering supplies.' He pulls a rucksack from his back. 'So I thought I'd check on you.' He keeps a firm grip on the rope. 'Y'know. After everything.' He looks past me.

'I'm surviving.' Despite the loneliness, I resent the contact.

'Anything you need?'

I shrug. 'Don't know.' I resist the pull of the outdoors.

'Here.' He gives me a pack of biscuits that hang limp in my hand. 'These'll keep you going.'

I grab them, keeping one hand fixed on the doorframe. 'Thanks.' I give a smile as broken as my heart then stare at the ground like an awkward teenager.

'I'll be off then,' he says cheerily, hoisting the bag around his shoulders. 'Maybe see you later.'

He crawls away. Hunched low to the ground, with his backpack protruding, he looks like a snail slithering along. I had no more contact. With anyone. I did try to call people; phone lines were dead. Before I shut the door I looked up. The sky was an empty, desolate black.

Electricity remains, flickeringly. I turn on the TV. Some programmes persist, made by people who became trapped in studios after "*The Jolt*." They've nothing better to do. After years of special effects, they're quite boring; just people floating around empty sets chatting, like some permanent Big Brother. But it's where I get all my information. They're interspersed with horror captured by CCTV cameras that remain attached. Images of beautiful Mother Earth – provider, carer, nurturer – tearing herself apart, cracks splitting into two, her tranquillity revolting into volcanoes spewing red hot lava across cities, earthquakes collapsing buildings as if they're towers of playing cards. The scientists trapped in TV stations predict she will stop orbiting and be lured into the sun's fiery death furnace. I shudder. If the 20th century saw the death of God, then the 21st Century was seeing the suicide of Mother Earth.

She has withdrawn her love and protection. Given up on us. The future no longer exists. I'm sorry for us. For what we've become.

It's time for me to go. You know when you're not wanted. With no purpose or human interaction, hours of tedium stretched to the elastic band breaking point, life has become pointless. A man with nothing to do soon becomes nothing.

I crawl along the ceiling to the window like a stoned fly and force it open. Before I let myself free, I'll throw back this piece of paper on which I've scrawled all this down. You were my centre. Maybe you'll come back to read this and realise. You never know.

Whatever. I'm out of here. Away from this sad and stale room. Like the bag of excrement, I'll fling myself out and up, up, up into the blue beyond.