

WRITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

A mammoth task.

BY KARLO YEAGER RODRÍGUEZ

What apocalypse am I creating today?

I feed two blank sheets of onionskin, carbon paper sandwiched between, through my typewriter's platen. I stop a moment, remembering this joke. *This guy gets on a bus*, it starts, but I don't write that.

Instead, I begin my 302nd story about the end of the world. I stretch my fingers over the keys, looking out the window. When I first got this cabin, I chose it for its view of the pond, cradled by the mountains. Today, I'm choosing it for its isolation from the world.

Off the grid. Solar panels on the roof; overflow to shielded battery back-ups underground. Enough to run my fridge. Wood-burning stove, in case I'm up here during the winter. Battery-powered well pump, with a UV sanitation system for if the pond gets contaminated. Hell, I even have an e-reader with a downloaded version of Wikipedia to make sure I can still do research.

I ache to turn on my radios — Internet app and ham, if the other goes offline — and see what's happening out in the world, but no.

I have a deadline.

So, this guy, he gets on a bus. Across from where he sits, is another guy gripping a battered briefcase on his lap, a thin sheen of sweat on his face. Every time the bus stops, nervous briefcase man cracks open his briefcase and throws fistfuls of crumpled paper out the window.

The first time I ended the world was at a workshop down near DC. They wanted to contract me as a — get this — futurist. I'd only ever written some stories with rockets and ray-guns, but the pay was good.

Q: What's the difference between 'writer' and 'futurist'?

A: The amount of dollars in front of the decimal.

If I accepted, I was to get myself to Union Station, where they would transport me the rest of the way to an undisclosed location. When I approached the young man holding a card with my name on it, he directed me towards an olive-drab bus. Another author flumped down into the seat across from mine. Instead of putting his briefcase under his seat, he kept it in his lap. He caught my

glance, and patted its leather.

"Gift from my daughter," he said. "To celebrate my first sale." I nodded and smiled — it was the polite thing to do — but didn't think it important at the time.

We pulled into a corporate office park somewhere in Alexandria, and filed off into the building. Bad coffee, good doughnuts. I balanced one atop the other before being



led into a large classroom with long tables.

Apart from a huge mirror where a chalkboard would be, the room was as bland and forgettable as our instructor. As he explained different scenarios, I stared at the mirror. I was sure the spooks and top brass were watching us from behind it.

"Be creative when writing about apocalypses," he said.

Apocalypses.

Plural.

I always assumed there would be only one.

"Imagine the danger is *imminent*." He paused to look at all of us. "Because it is. Think it all through.

"Worst-case, best-case and all scenarios in between. Everyone is affected, whether it's the leader of a country or of the local PTA. We want you to think of all types of stories."

"Are *we*," briefcase author said, "actually in danger? I can't help but notice *we* were the ones who dropped the bomb on another country."

Others shrank away from him, and silence filled the space.

Was it lunchtime? Dinner?

We had all been under the flicker of fluorescents so long, nobody knew any more. In a workshop run by spooks, were they studying whom among us could do what they needed?

Back to the joke.

So, our guy notices nervous briefcase man throwing wads of paper from his briefcase out the window at the first stop. Then the

second, and on the third, he decides to find out why he's doing it.

"Excuse me, sir," he says. "I can't help but notice every time we stop, you open your briefcase, and throw papers out the window."

"That's right," nervous briefcase man says after a minute.

"Why?"

At the question, nervous briefcase man's face lights up with a sly smile, and he beckons our guy a bit closer.

"It's to keep the elephants away," he confides.

They taught us how the disruption of human systems can cause the end of the world. As I worked, the other writers, clicking their pens, or drumming their fingers, imagined their loved ones stricken down in the first wave, or left to lingering deaths. Each wrestling with their emotions.

Long enough to pin them down, observe and describe them.

The writer with the briefcase, sat alone at his desk, dabbing at his upper lip while taking notes. Back on the bus, he muttered in the dark, hugging his briefcase to his chest.

He never made it off the bus.

Our instructor intervened, and prevented the police from taking our statements. Whatever he told them made the Capitol Police retreat to their patrol cars. They debriefed us on the incident.

He'd had a bad ticker, if you can believe it.

"But, sir," our guy on the bus says, "there aren't any elephants for thousands of miles!"

The bus is coming up to the next stop, and nervous briefcase guy cracks the case open, crumpling papers into a fist.

"See how well it works?"

I start typing, eyes on the distant mountains.

Hope is important in these stories. No matter how grim things can get, I always try to leave room for it. People like stories like that.

When I'm done, I peel the carbon copy off, stuff it in an envelope to be mailed out to a magazine. The original, I put in my safe, hidden in the crawlspace.

Will this story stop the apocalypse this time?

I doubt it, but I've got to try something. ■

Karlo Yeager Rodríguez is from the enchanted island of Puerto Rico, but moved to Baltimore some years back. He lives happily with his partner and one very odd dog.