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Things We Didn't See Coming

Steven Amsterdam

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Coming

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Harvill Secker

London

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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781407092379

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Harvill Secker 2010

First published in Australia in 2009 by Sleepers Publishing,
Melbourne

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Harvill Secker
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V
2SA

www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group
Limited can be found at:

www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 9781846553660

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment



Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives
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What We Know Now

For the first time, Dad is letting me help pack the car, but only because it's getting to be kind of an emergency. He says we've each got to pull more than our own weight. Even though we're only going to Grandma and Grandpa's farm, he's packing up the kitchen with pasta, cans of soup, and peanut butter—plus the toolbox and first-aid kit. Carrying a carton past the living room, I see Cate there, trying not to pay attention. "Almost done, Cate," I tell her.

"I'm your mother. Call me by that name," she says.

I say, "Mother."

My job is to bring everything out to the car. We'll load it all up when I'm done. He parked in front of our building and put orange cones down on the road on either side of the car two days ago. None of the neighbors said a word and he asked me not to make a big deal. The closeness makes it easy to keep a lookout on our stuff while I'm running up and down the two flights of steps. No one's on the street when I step outside so I go up for another load.

The Benders on the third floor went away the day before Christmas, but Dad said he wanted to wait until the day of New Year's Eve to maximize preparation. He says this is a special new year and we're taking special measures. He says this year I *have* to stay up until after midnight.

Because he's still inside organizing boxes and Cate is just turning pages and not looking up on purpose when he drags them past her, I decide to stay out of their way. To help out, though, I packed up all the batteries from all my

games and my portable radio because Dad says they would be useful.

While it's OK for me to hold the key, I'm not allowed to start the car. I think about turning it in the ignition and then saying that I was just checking the fuel gauge, which is all right. But I might get in trouble because I already know he's been to the gas station to fill up, not to mention we've got two big red jugs of gas in the back of our station wagon. Cate knows I know about it because I asked her. She said to just be patient.

I'm sitting on the car, guarding our stuff and scratching at a chip in the maroon paint between my legs, when Milo from downstairs comes out. He acts like he's running out to get to the store before it closes. Then he sees me and slows down and starts asking questions. This is what he always does and it makes my back go up like a cat. Where are we going? How come we're leaving? What am I going to be doing with my lame grandmother at midnight? (He's twelve and is going to a party with friends.) I answer as quickly as possible, keeping an eye on our stuff, not because I think Milo's going to take it, but because I'm trying to figure out why Dad packed all the kitchen knives. Cate sure doesn't know about that or she wouldn't be keeping so quiet right now.

Milo finally says what he's wanted to say since he saw me in the window and came downstairs and it's this: His father, who works in computers, is going to make 125 grand tonight, because he's going to stop blackouts and everything from happening. Once he tells me this, he hangs around a minute, looking at our suitcases and our car. It makes the stuff look bad somehow. He raises his eyebrows at me and goes back inside. He wasn't going to the store.

I know what a grand is because Milo's always telling me how much his father makes (a lot). My grandmother said

not to use the word, because it makes me sound like a little gangster.

Finally, Dad comes out dragging the last thing, the cooler, and he's got a bag of vegetables balanced on top of it.

"We're bringing vegetables to a farm?" I ask.

"Just give me a hand."

He doesn't say much about my arrangement of our stuff on the street, but begins right away loading it. He's got that look that means I shouldn't bother him, but I tell him what Milo told me about the 125 grand. He doesn't look at me but he laughs and asks me where Milo's father is going to be working tonight. I say that I think it's the same place he usually does, in an office downtown. Dad shakes his head and says, "He's a dead man."

Cate steps out into the cool air with her bright blue wheelie bag, which looks funny and small considering what Dad is busy cramming into the trunk. She looks up and down the block to see who's watching. The rest of the street looks normal. I hold up my saggy backpack to show her how little I'm bringing, and then she tells me to get my jacket on. She wheels her bag over to Dad, who's sticking cans of tuna fish around all of our stuff. Cate stares at him like she's watching a dog digging a hole that's way too deep.

She gets really close to him and asks, "You sure you don't want to just stick around and knock over a bank when things get crazy?"

He laughs like he doesn't think it's funny.

"How can you knock over a bank?" I ask.

She smiles and tells me she's counting on me to be the only sane person tonight and possibly into the next century. I ask her again how you can knock over a bank, but she

starts helping Dad. I stretch out on the backseat so I can listen to them.

Cate says, "There's no reason to be stressed right now. We're all together. We're doing everything to protect ourselves. We're taking all the precautions you wanted."

He keeps packing.

After they finish and Dad decides I can be trusted with the mini-fridge next to me ("That food is not for tonight, it's for the long haul"), we get on the road just as the sun is starting to go down.

Dad dodges cars quicker than usual as we make our way through streets of dressed-up people, some already drunk. In a few minutes, we swing up onto the expressway. Cate says, "Not much traffic for doomsday."

"Can you please let up on the sarcasm?"

Cate shuts down and nobody says anything for a while.

When we're out of the city, she puts on the radio. Pretty soon, we're on country roads, more than halfway there. On the radio, people in London are getting ready for a wild party. I say that it's great that one night can make people have fun all over the world. She agrees and says to Dad, "London Bridge still seems to be standing. That's a good sign, isn't it?"

This makes Dad quiet and angry. She looks at his face for half a minute, then looks out the window. We zip past farms that are dark and farms with lights on and cars parked all over their driveways.

Dad, talking like she's not there, tells me that the world is large and complicated, with too many parts relying on other parts and they all octopus out. Then he starts talking like he's writing one of his letters to the editor, going into stuff I don't understand but have heard a lot of times before. "Our interdependence is unprecedented in history. It's foolish."

I wish I was on a plane over everything. We'd be flying west, going through all the New Year's Eves, looking down just as they happen. I'd have to stay awake for twenty-four hours of nighttime, but I'd be looking out the little window and watching ripples of fireworks below, each wave going off under us as we fly over it. I start to talk about this, but then decide to save it for Grandma. Dad doesn't think planes are safe tonight either.

Cate puts her hand behind Dad's head to squeeze his neck, which means she wants to help him. "What else can we do for you, babe? We're set if anything goes wrong. If it doesn't, we'll have a quiet night of it with my parents. It's all right now. All right?" She looks at me so I can also tell him that we'll be safe. I nod to mean yes, but don't say anything out loud because I'm not sure if it's what he wants me to say or if it's even true.

"What do you think?" He looks at me through the rearview mirror. We both have green eyes. Sometimes, he says, it's like looking in a mirror.

Just then, we bump into the car ahead of us. Not a big bump, a touch, enough to scare everybody. I'm not wearing a seat belt so I get knocked into the back of Dad's seat and a can of tuna fish shoots over onto my seat. It's nothing serious. Cate reaches her hand back to me and grabs my knee to make sure I'm all right. Once it happens I realize that while I was looking at Dad I also saw the car slowing down in front of us, but it all happened so fast I couldn't even call out for us to stop.

The car we hit pulls onto the gravel and we follow close behind like a kid trailing a teacher to the principal's office. Dad says, "Shit!" and punches the button to turn off the radio.

Cate suddenly lets him have it. "Don't blame the radio. It's because you've been so paranoid and scattered that

this happened.” Here she’s talking about something else. “We’ll get through the other side and promise me that you’ll be better? Promise me.” He doesn’t say anything. She sinks back and says to herself, “It would just be so nice if things would work again.”

I ask, “What doesn’t work, Cate?”

Even madder now, she asks Dad why I’m not calling him by his first name.

So I say his name, “Otis,” and that makes him laugh.

Dad says to her, “Can’t you just be on my side tonight?”

We wouldn’t have hit that car if he hadn’t been looking at me, but I keep my mouth shut.

Dad turns off the engine. Finally, a woman gets out of the other car. She’s not small, and she’s bundled up in a lot of clothes. Our car doesn’t look any better than hers, but at least we’ve got heat.

Cate says, again, to herself, “A woman driving alone on New Year’s Eve.”

I say, “Maybe she’s going to a party.”

“No, look at her. She’s not going to a party.”

The woman rubs her hands along the dent on her bumper, then she looks right at Dad. He looks down at his lap and catches his breath. “I can’t believe I did this.”

“Don’t make it a bigger deal. Just talk to the woman,” Cate says. Then she reaches her hand back to hold mine and tells me, “Once we’re at Grandma and Grandpa’s, it’ll be quiet. We can see stars and just watch the fireplace till we fall asleep.”

“Till midnight,” I correct her. I don’t think I mind missing New Year’s Eve in the city. We’ll get up early because Grandma will wake everyone up by clattering in the kitchen, till we all show up to keep her company. Then she’ll whip up pancakes and let me stick the blueberries

into the batter once she's poured it onto the pan. Dad will be friendly but kind of quiet until it's time to leave because they're not his parents. Unless, of course, the world does end tonight, in which case he'll be in charge of all of us.

Dad hasn't made a move yet. The woman starts rubbing her head with her hands even though it's not itching, the way Dad does when he's keeping something in or about to explode. She's not going to be patient with him, whatever his excuse. I see him in the front seat, seeing what I see as he watches her. It's like we're looking at the same person with the same eyes. He turns his head right and left, checking out the empty road around us.

"Let's go." Dad starts the car.

"What are you doing?" Cate is yelling.

"There isn't time."

As he pulls off past her, the woman watches us, stunned. She slaps her sides and just stares at the back of our car as we bump up back onto the road.

"Dad, I think she's memorizing our plate."

"I can't believe that you would be such a"—Cate wants to say something worse, but I'm in the car—"jerk to a total stranger. You've done a hit and run."

"What? We did stop. She's OK. She can walk."

Cate is rocking in her seat she's so angry. "I can't believe this. And now you've made us your accomplices."

Cate is done, she's facing forward. "I can't defend this at all."

"Have I asked you to?" Dad just drives on into the dark—still fast, with this weird I'm-not-even-sorry look.

Cate turns her head and says to me, "I don't want you to learn one thing from tonight. Not about how to conduct yourself during times of stress, not about how to respect other people, not about how to manage your own insane

worries. I want you to look out the window and watch the trees go by, because that's what I intend to do."

Dad taps the wheel a few times with his fingertips to keep from saying anything.

Grandma is waiting on the patch of grass in front of their house, brushing her hair, which always looks so long when she's holding it straight out. On top of her green dress, which she says has been her favorite for sixty years, she's wearing her gray wool coat. When she sees it's us coming around the curve, she puts the brush in her coat pocket and walks out to the road, waving us in as if Dad wouldn't know how to find the driveway without her.

As the car stops, Grandma rubs her hands together for warmth and because she's getting ready for a hug. Cate busts out of the car like she's running out of oxygen.

Grandma throws her arms around her, squeezes tight and gives me a wink.

I climb out and Grandma grabs me by my ears for a kiss on the forehead and both cheeks. "My bean. It's after eight o'clock. You're lucky it's New Year's or I'd already be snoring. Do you know how long I've been waiting here, brushing and brushing? Since lunchtime, maybe breakfast. It's a wonder I've still got hair on my head, much less feeling in my fingers." She holds me tight. Then she sees the back of our car. "What in the world did you pack? Did you think I wouldn't have put in food?"

Cate bounces the question to Dad with a wave of her hand and walks toward the front steps, where Grandpa's just come out of the house.

Dad's standing by the side of the car, quiet and not looking for a hug. "It's more than food. Papers and things. Just in case."

"Just in case?" she asks.

“We’re prepared,” I tell her, proudly.

“For what, exactly?”

“For everything to fall apart from interdependence,” I tell her.

“Ooh, that sounds unpleasant. Is that what’s in store?”

I think something will happen, but I tell her, “Maybe.”

She stretches her arms out to a sky full of stars and breathes deeply, until her breath turns into a loud, unladylike yawn. “There. I guess that’s what I think about *maybe*. Are you hungry?”

I nod.

“Good,” she says and shoves me in Grandpa’s direction, but I stay to watch.

She looks at Dad, who’s still standing on the other side of the car. “Are you well?”

“I’m well.”

“Will we all be eating dinner together tonight?”

“It’s been a bit of a day for us. I’m afraid I’m not on board. But thanks.”

This stinks. Dad’s not going to apologize. He’ll hide out in their room all night and the three of us won’t be all together at midnight.

Grandma puts her hands on my shoulders and tells Dad, “Unpack whatever’s necessary and come inside before the new year starts and everything breaks into tiny pieces.”

Grandpa’s telling Grandma, Cate and me how one New Year’s Eve they invited people to a party and the night was so cold that not one person showed up. Grandma called all their friends the next day and *forced* them to come by for lunch to eat the enormous ham she’d made. Grandma was so persuasive and so many people came that they ran out of food before two in the afternoon. We’ve all heard this

before—and Grandma lived it—but sitting with them in the living room tonight, eating popcorn and watching the fire, hearing the story again feels good.

The clock on the low bookshelf next to the kitchen doorway is humming loudly and saying there's more than two hours until midnight. It's the same faded blue plastic clock that Grandpa carries with him everywhere. When he takes a nap, he puts it down next to him. When he's working outside, he props it up on the porch. It runs on batteries and he brings it to our house when he comes to visit as if it's the only clock he can trust.

Grandma finishes by saying, "That story, by the way, is a lesson for us all that shows you never know what way New Year's Eve is going to turn out. Come midnight, all we might have is the light from this fire. Then how will we look?"

Grandpa says, "We'll be one hundred percent fine. I bought a box of candles the other day. And heaven knows you won't let us go hungry. Nothing's going to be different in the morning."

"But you don't know everything about computers," I say to him.

This gets a look from everyone. I talked back because I had to, because it's true.

Grandpa sits back in his chair, sticks his thumbs under his arms and smiles. "In fact, I do. More to the point, it doesn't matter."

Serious now, Grandma puts her hands in front of her lips like she's going to pray and says to me, "Why don't you get your father? There's no reason for him not to be with us."

Cate throws her hands up, which means I can do what I want.

I go to their room and it's dark. "Dad?" No.

I go down the hall, looking in all the rooms, but he isn't anywhere. Then, in just my socks, I head out the back door into the yard and along the front of the house. Through the window, I see Cate, Grandma and Grandpa inside, all sitting still, nobody saying anything. It's hard to tell if they're bored or if they're what Grandma calls "quietly content." Dad's not in front of the porch either, which I can't get close to or else the light will go on.

I walk out to the car. The grass has gotten damp and chilled and almost icy from the night air, so it crunches under my feet. The car's half unpacked. I go a little way onto the road in front of the house and look for anything moving in the dark. "Dad?" It's quiet and the cold is starting to reach my toes.

When I come back inside alone, I stand in the hall for a minute to warm up. I look in my parents' room again and turn on the light. It's just their overnight bags on the bed that Grandma's made up perfectly, with a little bouquet of holly on the pillow, as if this is some fancy hotel.

I grab my sweatshirt and put it on, even pull the hood up. I head back to the living room and tell everyone, "He wants to be by himself tonight."

"Fine," Cate says. "He'll be better off. He'd worry us for the rest of the evening. Let him rest."

Grandma doesn't approve. "Nobody's better off by themselves when they're like he is."

Grandpa ends it, with "What is he so worried about? It's always been the end of the world. What did we have this century? World War I, the influenza, the Depression, World War II, concentration camps, the atomic bomb. Now he's scared about a computer glitch? A blackout? Let's go about our business. We'll enjoy our hot chocolate with Baileys. He knows what he's missing and can come in here whenever he likes."