

After Newport, Oregon (2041), Sucre, Bolivia (2044), New York City (2045), and the whole of Liechtenstein (2047), in 2048 it was our turn to live on the *Edge*™. Not exactly cause to jump and jive, you can imagine. When the guy from *Edgeworks*™ left again, faces were long. Skinny dude they had sent, name of Olaf Something-or-other. Face like a weasel. Painfully obvious he couldn't wait to get out of here again - with good reason, of course. Forty-eight hours, he said, of personal grief time. The same deal as everyone else. Forty-eight hours to get our affairs in order.

Forty-eight hours to compose ourselves until the rest of the world would be told. Should we roast him? we asked ourselves, with the dust from Olaf's hasty departure still in the air. Why not? What had we to lose? Just roast the clown and pretend he never showed up. Then, when they sent Olaf #2 to investigate the wherewithal of Olaf #1, we would shrug and say, "Olaf who?" Then we would roast Olaf #2. And we would keep roasting Olafs until *Edgeworks*™ finally acquiesced, directing their goons somewhere else, some rotten luck town where everyone was so brainwashed they had no qualms about dying in the name of some science that no one knew the first thing about. I kid you not, these people exist. They butter their toast with *Edgeworks*™ margarine.

But no, we would refuse to play ball. Leading, hopefully, to an emergency meeting in Iceland, where they would wonder, addle-brained, what is the name of this raggedy-assed town that is roasting our employees faster than we can rehire? Best not anger them further lest we find ourselves with no employees at all, or worse, in a situation where any future employee would automatically ask for a risk of roasting bonus and thus bring down the whole company. Voilà. A last-minute save. Just like that.

In the end, of course, we allowed Olaf #1 to escape scalp, fingernails and all, which – between you and me - was just as

well. While we bawled our eyes out over the crappy hand fate had dealt us, the rest of the world was going bananas over the fact that the axe had come down on someone else's head again, i.e. ours, and ours didn't count, since a population of less than twenty thousand put us squarely in the camp of hick towns no one gave two hoots about. Everybody still remembered 2045, after all, the announcement alone a world-class shock, and the repercussions reverberating for years, if not still: New York City, *Edged*TM for the first time in living memory, i.e. never the same again, and world along with it. What a load of baloney, if you ask me, but then again, experts are experts for a reason, and concerning this matter they were all in agreement: next time better hillbilly town than another NYC, and what can I say: they got their wish. The markets, in free-fall for months, rallied; more than that – they rose to record highs, never mind how insulting that was for everyone here. I guess, in a weird way you finally know your worth when the *Edge*TM comes round to your neck of the woods.

Apart from us, only the TV stations were unhappy, having crossed their fingers for L.A. or Moscow or Rio, and now sulking big-time as all their well-hatched plans went up in flames and they saw themselves reporting on the weather again, which was never quite as satisfying as the imminent demise of a couple of million souls. But then some genius network official somewhere had a glorious idea. He said hold on a second, if we can't have big, let's make it something else. Why not make it up close and personal? We'll get to know that yokel town in advance of *Edge-Day*TM, get to be on a first name basis with everyone over there, hear their miserable life stories, i.e. how come they ended up where they ended up and not in a more important place, important in the sense of massive things going on all the time. Had they never dreamed of being one of the movers and shakers in the world? And if they had, when did the dream die? And anyhow, what about this *Edge*TM coming up and everything dissolving? Your name, your body, everything you ever did null and voided. Was that not just a big fat stinker?

Within hours the place was swarming with journalists. You could hardly fetch the mail without being accosted and asked how was our sleep since we had been told? Had there been a spike in blood pressure? Were people friendlier to one another, generally speaking? Did food taste better now that we knew we only had a month or so left, realistically speaking? What about beer?

The journalists, of course, benefited from the invisible barrier only working one-way. We could no longer get out, but they could certainly get in. Aren't you afraid we're going to hold you here? We asked them. What's to stop us from tying you to that lamppost?

That took care of a number of them, though a brazen few continued to hang around.

There were other folks, too, descending on the town like a plague of locusts. About a third of the country, it seemed - anxious to revel in the pre-*Edge*TM gloom, have a cup of coffee in a coffeehouse they knew would be toast next month, carry off some touristy piece of crap or chunk of asphalt they would then attempt to sell on Ebay, or merely sit around morbidly trying to feel as if they themselves were affected, in danger of blinking out of existence in a matter of days. At times they just sat there, crying their eyes out till someone came and whooped them upside the head, to general cheering.

It was hard to tell in which category the woman belonged who sat down opposite me at Joe's Pizza, two weeks into *Edgewart*TM.

"Hello," she said, beaming.

Hello," I said back, cautiously, since whatever the exact type of her affliction, she clearly could not be trusted.

"Ada," she said, still smiling – inanely, I thought.

“Gilbert,” I said.

“You have a friendly look about you, Gilbert.”

A minute or so of silence. Her smile never wavered, never changed, and I began to feel like the butt of a joke.

“I’m sorry –?” I tried.

“Oh, you,” she said, pointing to a yellow ribbon on her right breast in the shape of a bird.

I nodded in what I hoped was an appreciative manner.

“Very nice,” I said.

She shook her head, laughing.

“No, silly,” again pointing to the bird and giving me a nudge.

“So, do you?” she asked, a trifle uncertain. “Do you want to?”

I was out of my depth, and professed as much.

“Do I want to what?” I asked, feeling like the village idiot.

“So you really don’t know!” she said.

I shook my head no.

“I really, really don’t,” I said.

And then it came pouring out of her. That she was an *Edgegal*[™]. That the bird was their sign. Hadn’t I heard of *Edgegals*[™] before? Never seen the bird sign before? Didn’t I watch MTV? I said no, what do they do? Well, honey, said Ada, we believe that babies conceived during *Edgewait*[™] and then smuggled out by an *Edgegal*[™] will one day be the saviors of mankind. Did I not think

that a worthy endeavor?

I said I didn't know if it was, since I had heard about it for the first time just now, and it sounded absolutely ludicrous. Okay, I didn't actually say any of that, but my look must have conveyed the gist of it.

“Well, but wouldn't you like to have a child?” she asked. “You have so little time left.”

She looked at me intently.

“A child I'll never see growing up?” I asked.

“A part of you that lives on,” she said.

I said nothing.

A week before the apocalypse saw the return of Olaf, of *Edgeworks*TM fame. We told him he had some nerve coming back, and to better run and hide. Someone tackled him, but it ended up more like a playful nudge in the ribs. Poor guy was only doing his job, after all, and no matter what they paid him, it wasn't nearly enough.

“It's my duty to inform you of the possibility of redemption,” he read slowly from a laminated card, while we were rolling our eyes. “This time tomorrow morning, you may present the *Edgeworks*TM official with a written argument, detailing why you should be spared.”

“Oh, for Chrissake,” someone said.

“The argument,” Olaf went on, “may run to no more than a thousand words, and must be signed by ten representatives. The *Edgeworks*TM official will then feed the argument to the *Edge*TM who will make a decision within twenty-four hours.”

Olaf wished us good luck, and left us to our deliberations.

Historically, most cities, in our position, had taken the road of a sappy appeal, sometimes accompanied by Polaroids, imploring the *Edge*TM to spare their children.

*The Edge*TM, however, was never swayed by tears.

Other cities, most notably NYC, had based all their hopes on their cultural importance for the whole of humanity, only to have them crushed when the *Edge*TM spat out a slip of paper with the word “No” on it in cruel 12 pt. Comic Sans.

We chose, instead, to make threats, just letting the expletives fly and using up every one of the thousand words at our disposal.

*The Edge's*TM answer was what we knew it would be, and what it was always going to be.

Town life drew inward in those last few days. I always used to wonder how things would pan out in an *Edge*TM event, never having followed the footage myself, all those countless round-the-clock programs from Lyon, Dortmund, Mariupol, Brindisi, Pondicherry. What were those people jabbering on about? What were they saying? I found the whole thing odious, to say the least, and couldn't muster the patience. Now I could only speculate. Would people choose to lose their heads completely in a drunken swirl that would propel them into the *Edge*TM zonked and swooning?

Speaking only of our town, this did not happen. Instead, social life all but collapsed. There were drunks, yes, but of the reserved variety, the kind looking for quiet extinction rather than a mad hullabaloo.

Of tourists, there were still a few. Journalists, too, lingered. But even they seemed to have been infected by the melancholy airs and the realization, rapidly spreading, that this was no child's play, and that things were finally coming to a head. There would be – and there could be – no midnight pardon.

I lived alone. Others had it worse. Or better, whichever way you looked at it. There was a voice in my head saying, “At least they have family to share these last moments with.” It had to be a whole lot easier that way. And then a different voice piped up, saying what kind of a life was that, knowing your five-year-old kid would be following you into the *Edge*TM? How could anybody live with that knowledge?

From what I witnessed, there were several ways people coped. There were those who were up front about what was happening. They cried and embraced effusively. There were those who ignored the *Edge*TM altogether, refusing to make space for it in their lives. And there were those, too, who decided to choose the moment in time themselves, who could not bear the thought of waiting for the *Edge*TM to tell them when their time was up, and who walked into the abyss believing they were doing the right thing.

An amusing vignette that will have you in stitches, I promise: the other day, my buddy Rollins cornered me by the plaza. This was a week or so before Olaf #1 started spreading the Christmas spirit. Rollins had a brand-new rucksack slung over his shoulder that looked about fit to burst.

“Hey, Gil,” he called. “You wanna come with?”

“With where?” I asked warily.

“The big apple,” he said. “Where else?”

It turned out Rollins had recently subscribed to the idea that the

*Edge*TM never chose the same place twice in a row, and so he and a handful of other lunatics had decided to become temporary citizens of New York, where, so the theory went, you were as safe as kittens.

To be fair, there were more than a handful currently with a membership to that elite globetrotting club. At last count, New York had swelled to thrice its normal size.

“That’s not a rule,” I told him. “You stand exactly the same chance in New York that you do here.”

“Aha! That’s what they want you to believe,” he said triumphantly, having, of course, an ace up his sleeve: the *Edge*TM really had never hit the same spot twice in a row, at least in recorded history. That was a fact not to be trifled with.

“Well, of course,” I lectured him. “With all the thousands and thousands of cities, chances are it’ll hit some other shit-luck place. But it’ll happen, one day, because it has to. Law of statistics.” My heart, but I felt superior.

“Yadda yadda yadda,” said Rollins, but I wasn’t finished. Not yet. I had one more card to play, and I played it suavely.

“You’re a million times more likely to die at the hands of a mugger in New York than out here because of the *Edge*TM,” I said. “I for one wouldn’t be caught dead in New York.”

And now Rollins was in some posh four-star off Times Square, I’m sure, pushing pretzels and Macadamia nuts into his face, muttering sweet I-told-you-so’s at the latest Plasma monstrosity from Samsung, while I was already as good as dead.

Life is droll like that sometimes.

Ada insisted we wait until the last possible moment, ensuring the *Edge's*TM influence on the child would be at its most powerful. Then, when waiting any further would have seriously jeopardized her chances of making it back to safety, she led me to a secluded spot very near the edge – the *Edge's*TM edge, so to speak (“Because proximity matters, too, you know,” Ada’s words) – and we made an *Edgebaby*TM with the black mass always in sight like a lake of molasses.

“What do you think’ll happen?” asked Ada after, when we sat on the ground for a last powwow, hugging our knees tightly against the cold emanating from the *Edge*TM.

I shrugged.

“You know what happens,” I said. “Sometime in the next hour or so, the *Edge*TM will begin to ripple. Like Jell-O, I suppose. Then it will slowly spread itself over everything, like a blanket. After that, nothing for a month, two months, and when the *Edge*TM disappears again, there will be a new town, right here, with the same name, roughly the same number of people, but all new.”

She knew all this, of course.

“And do you think you’ll be one of these people?” she asked. I mulled it over, as if thinking about it for the first time.

“I don’t know,” I finally said.

“Oh, but I do!” she said brightly. “I have a good feeling about you, Gilbert. I think you’ll bounce right back.”

I said nothing, trying to zone out her chipper voice. Didn’t look at her, either, only out at the void a couple of hundred yards away, and at the dozen or so men and women peering down into it like storks looking for food. I mean, this close to the *Edge*TM it was real hard to stay upbeat about the whole thing.

As we watched, a tall lanky fellow came running out of nowhere and, without pausing, jumped. As if encouraged by this, one of the longtimers, after looking back towards us in a forlorn, pleading sort of way, let himself drop.

“When he grows up,” I said, breaking off as a chilly wave emanated from the *Edge*TM, sending goosebumps down my arms.

“When he grows up,” I went on, heedless, “tell him to expect an opening in his chest. A rip, almost. Tell him his father said to tell him that, and that he had learned it from his father, too, a long time back when he was a young boy himself. Tell him to wish for it with all his heart, to pine after it day after day, and that once he succeeds, to strive to make the gash permanent and to look in the gash for a strand the size of a flea’s hair. It is this strand he has to picture when he stands before the *Edge*TM. Will you tell him that?”

I turned to look at Ada, but she was already gone, and I had no way of knowing what she had heard, if anything. The *Edge*TM had begun to ripple at the margins, and I readied myself.