

*This book is for everyone  
who went to high school . . .  
. . . and survived.*

**If you have enough money and a good name,  
you can do anything.**

CORNELIA GUEST  
*THE DEBUTANTE'S GUIDE TO LIFE*

**Why do we remember the past but not the future?**

STEPHEN HAWKING  
*A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME*



CENTRAL PARK, NEW YORK CITY

## **PROLOGUE**

### **BECKY'S LAST RUN**

#### **NEW YORK CITY**

**2:35 A.M. DATE: UNKNOWN**

The girl in the torn bridal gown ran for her life through Central Park.

Thorny branches slashed her cheeks as she charged headlong through the undergrowth. It was late, well after midnight. The park and the city around it were dark and silent.

Becky Taylor's normally pretty seventeen-year-old face was smeared with blood and dirt. Across her forehead written in red lipstick were the words:

#### **HEAD GIRL**

The crimson letters were streaked with desperate sweat.

Becky ducked her head as she rushed frantically through the brush, leading with her forearm. Amid all the bloody scratches on that arm were some marks near the wrist.

Four vertical lines: **IIII**

Rising above the trees behind Becky, black shadows against the night-time sky, were the iconic buildings of Central Park West: the colossal Museum of Natural History

and some of the most famous and expensive apartment buildings in the world, the San Remo, the Majestic and the Dakota. Not a single light glowed within them.

Her heart pounding, her lungs burning, Becky kept running as fast as she could.

She could hear them behind her—running, grunting, hunting.

And then she pushed through a final thicket and suddenly the ground dropped away in front of her and Becky pulled up with a lurch, narrowly avoiding falling down a seven-foot drop.

In her ripped bridal gown, Becky Taylor risked a smile.

She'd reached the 79th Street Transverse.

She was almost there.

She quickly lowered herself down the seven-foot wall that flanked the sunken roadway and dashed across it.

Of course the road that had once allowed vehicular traffic to cross Central Park was now empty. Like the darkened city around it, it was eerily deserted.

Weeds, grass and ivy had grown up through the bitumen, cracking it, warping it. Abandoned cars lay at all angles: the weeds had simply engulfed them.

Not a soul could be seen.

It was just Becky in this dead, empty city . . . and her pursuers.

Around her left wrist was a ring of torn, bloody skin. Becky had awoken here bound to a streetlight, her hands tied behind her back with rope. After some very painful struggling, she had managed to wrench her left hand free of her bonds and begun this frantic run home.

Becky sprinted across the roadway and clambered up the stone wall on its opposite side.

A minute later, she rounded a corner and saw it: the Swedish Cottage.

The Swedish Cottage is a strange brown wood-walled gingerbread-style house that was actually built in Sweden in the 1870s and shipped to the US soon after as a gift from the government of Sweden. It sits in Central Park beside the Shakespeare Garden, out of time, out of fashion and out of place.

It wasn't the cottage that Becky was after, but what lay behind it.

She dashed around the brown building and came to a dirt clearing on the other side.

There she saw the low stone well.

Becky hurried over to the well and leapt straight into it, pressing her hands and feet against its close walls and lowering herself down the tight vertical shaft.

Twenty feet later, she emerged inside the mysterious tunnel at the bottom of the well. She dropped the last few feet and hurried down the tunnel until she saw the ancient stone doorway . . .

. . . and stopped dead.

The exit wasn't open.

She couldn't get out.

'Misty, Chastity, you bitches,' Becky said to no-one.

A bloodcurdling male scream from outside made her spin.

And there in that cold underground tunnel in that wretched version of New York City, Becky Taylor realised that she was going to die.

This day wasn't supposed to end like this.

Only hours earlier, she had literally been the belle of the ball, stunning in her Vera Wang gown, outstanding at school, with a handsome date and the world at her feet.

And now she was here.

In this horrible place.

Trapped and alone.

Soon its cruel inhabitants would find her, and when they did, they would kill her in the slowest and ugliest of ways.

And with those grim thoughts, Becky Taylor—in her torn bridal gown and lipstick-branded face—dropped to the floor, closed her eyes and quietly began to sob.

At that exact same moment, in Becky's room in her family's apartment in the Majestic building—a regular seventeen-year-old girl's room in the regular New York City of today—her parents found her phone and, on it, a final text message written but unsent.

It read:

DEAR MOM AND DAD,

I JUST CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE: THE PRESSURE,  
THE EXPECTATIONS, THE BURDEN OF THOSE  
EXPECTATIONS.

PLEASE DON'T COME LOOKING FOR ME, BECAUSE  
YOU WON'T FIND ME. I WILL BE AT THE BOTTOM OF  
THE RIVER, AT PEACE.

I LOVE YOU.

BECKY

# PART I

## THE SCHOOL WHERE NEW GIRLS GO MISSING

**They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—  
they smashed up things and creatures and  
then retreated back to their money . . .**

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD  
*THE GREAT GATSBY*

## NEW SCHOOL, NEW LIFE

It was my first day at school in a new city but I don't think you'd find many people feeling sorry for me.

On paper, my life was the ultimate fantasy of the average American sixteen-year-old girl.

I was living in New York City on the Upper West Side, in the historic San Remo building, in an enormous apartment that overlooked Central Park. The San Remo is one of those imperious twin-towered art deco co-ops that were built in the 1930s which are now occupied by movie stars, Wall Street Masters of the Universe, Saudi princes, and anybody else who can afford to pay \$20 million in cash for an apartment.

But as far as I saw it, my life sucked.

Wrenched from my childhood home in Memphis, I had been transplanted at the age of sixteen into the most fearsome milieu of teenage bitchiness imaginable: that of ultra-wealthy New York.

Enrolled at a new school in a new city, away from the father I loved, living with a mother I despised and a stepfather who tolerated me, I hated it. The only plus was that my twin brother, Red—ever calm and easygoing—was in it with me.

The first day of school didn't start well.

I dressed in my uniform: an utterly sexless white

button-down blouse under a navy-and-green tartan dress. The white shirt was long-sleeved with stiff buttoned cuffs. A racing-green ribbon was the only hair accessory allowed. In a school as well-to-do as Monmouth, jewellery can be a serious issue—girls can get competitive about this sort of thing and it was entirely possible for a female student to wear earrings worth a few hundred thousand dollars. So all jewellery was forbidden. The only other accessory permitted was a watch.

I didn't mind the plainness of it all, or the sexlessness for that matter. At my old school in Memphis—an all-girls school—there had been no dress code, so the student body had worn whatever they liked, and as the girls got older, every day became a fashion contest. And as hips became curvier and breasts became larger, the waistlines of jeans got lower and the necklines of tops plunged further. In the stifling heat of the Tennessee summer, the amount of skin on display was outrageous.

One hot summer's day, as I saw two male gym teachers ogling the asses of three seventeen-year-old girls in short shorts, I overheard a female teacher say, 'Are you kidding me?'

But this was not the case at The Monmouth School (never forget to include the 'The'; they will correct you). It was a learning institution and uniforms—for both boys and girls—were one of the ways it kept its students' eyes on their books and not on the opposite sex.

As I said, I didn't mind this. For my own reasons, I especially liked the long-sleeved shirt. And I always wore a watch on my left wrist: a chunky yet very practical white Casio G-Shock.

My mother, on the other hand, had all sorts of issues with the school's uniform policy.

She positioned me in front of the mirror in our entry hall and began redoing my hair from behind me. She twirled a couple of mousy brown strands down around my temples.

'Don't yank your hair back off your face like that, Skye, darling,' she said. 'You could be pretty, you know, if you tried a little.'

I bristled inwardly, but I didn't let it show. I'd heard a thousand comments like this before.

*Why don't you wear something a little more flattering?*

*Stop slouching, pull your shoulders back, push your little titties forward.*

*Eyes up, child. Honestly, how will you ever get a boy to notice you if you never look up?*

And most cutting of all: *You know, Skye, I really think you could stand to lose a little bit of weight.*

Of course, my mom was fully made-up even though it was 7:30 in the morning.

She had already been up for two hours by then, and in that time she had run six miles on her treadmill, done a hundred sit-ups and a twenty-minute mindfulness meditation. My mother was forty-five with the body of a twenty-five-year-old and today her sleek form had been poured into a perfectly fitted Prada dress. Her long auburn hair, as always, had been professionally done, every curl and wave carefully arranged. (Our live-in maid, Rosa, in addition to being my mother's personal servant, confidante and informer, had once been a TV make-up artist, which no doubt had secured her the job.)

Oh, and my mother wore heels, even in our apartment at that hour.

‘Skye,’ she said, ‘this is a hard truth that nobody wants to admit, but you have to learn how the world judges women: it’s not what is in our heads that matters. It’s the package. How else do you think I won your stepfather?’

*A quick little disappearing act under the table at the restaurant on your first date?* I thought uncharitably. I’d overheard Mom revealing that to her best friend, Estelle, one night on the phone after she’d had one too many cosmopolitans.

My mother, Deidre Allen (née Rogers, née Billingsley)—one-time Belle of the Memphis Ladies Auxiliary’s Debutante Ball and second runner-up in the Miss Tennessee beauty pageant—had only a high-school education to her name, but that hadn’t stopped her rising to the peak of New York society and adopting a daily ritual of shopping, lunching, yoga and cocktails.

Thankfully, at that moment, Red came down the stairs, dressed in his Monmouth blazer, tie and trousers, and said, ‘You ready, Blue?’

I loved my twin brother. His real name was Alfred, but since time immemorial everyone had called him Red. With his carelessly tousled copperish hair and his elfin face—which matched mine—he somehow managed to make his private school uniform look cool.

I don’t know how he did it.

Hell, sometimes I didn’t know how he and I had shared the same womb.

A bare two minutes older than me, Red was everything

I was not: chill and all but unflappable. Nothing could rattle him. ‘It’s that extra level of maturity I possess,’ he’d tease me. ‘Since I *am* a little bit older than you.’

He made friends easily, effortlessly. You could throw Red into a room full of strangers and within twenty minutes, he’d be chatting and laughing with a bunch of them.

I wished I could do that.

I liked to think that I was pretty good at small talk and felt that I could get along with most people.

The problem was the intro.

I was painfully shy when I met people for the first time. I just had to *get to* the conversation. Once there, I was actually okay, but it was getting there that was my problem.

Blue had been my dad’s nickname for me—my real dad’s—as in sky blue. (I actually couldn’t remember him ever using my real name.) Get it? Red and Blue. And since my dad’s name was Dwight, he had loved to say, ‘Look at us three: Red, Dwight and Blue!’

Dad jokes. You hate them when you hear them every day, but trust me, you sure do miss ’em when he’s gone.

I said, ‘Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.’

I yanked myself from my mother’s grip and got out of there as fast as I could.

Our new school was directly on the other side of Central Park, maybe half a mile away, so Red and I walked there.

I have to admit, despite all the other things I hated about my life, I liked that walk.

Our building was on Central Park West, not far from the Museum of Natural History, and Monmouth was over on the East Side, on Fifth Avenue near the Met, so we walked along the lovely tree-lined paths that swooped over and beside the ever-busy 79th Street Transverse.

At that time of the morning, it was quite delightful.

Delightful, that is, except for the crazies and the religious weirdos who had become regular sights on the sidewalks near landmarks like the Met and most of the major entrances to Central Park, holding up their signs and bibles.

The happier nutjobs wore tinfoil hats and danced around like idiots. They carried signs like:

**THIS ST PATRICK'S DAY  
IS GONNA BE THE BEST ONE EVER!**

**YOU SHOULD HAVE ASKED HER OUT.**

**FORNICATE! SPEND! LOOT!  
AFTER MARCH 17  
IT AIN'T GONNA  
MATTER ANYMORE!**

The religious ones were older and more serious. They held their placards silently and stoically. Their signs were less colourful:

**LUKE 21: 25-26  
1 JOHN 5:19**

**THE WHOLE WORLD LIETH IN WICKEDNESS!  
AND HE SHALL DESTROY THE SINNERS! ISAIAH 13:9**

**THIS IS GOD'S VENGEANCE  
FOR ALLOWING GAYS TO MARRY.**

**GOD HATES FAGS AND JEWS.  
WELCOME TO THE RECKONING.**

I didn't care much for the St Patrick's day stuff. It had been all over the news when that old scientist had first made his announcement a year or so ago, but March 17 was still seven months away and after the initial media fervour, people had got bored with it, and soon the whole thing had acquired the standing of just another Y2K, Comet Hale-Bopp, or 2012 apocalypse. It blew over.

Many people, like my mother, compared it all to that crazy Christian dude who had convinced his followers to sell all their possessions because the world would end on May 21, 2011. When it didn't, many found themselves broke and still very much here.

And so Red and I just walked right past the ragtag group of sign-wavers and entered our new school, where my own personal hell would take place.

## ASSEMBLY

The Monmouth School is located inside a 19th century Astor family mansion on Fifth Avenue. Above its aged stone entry arch is a coat-of-arms and the Latin motto: PRIMUM, SEMPER.

First, always.

That about sums it up.

Monmouth is not your standard high school.

Its students are rich. Really rich. Their parents are the kinds of people you see at White House dinners. Situated on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, overlooking Central Park, the school is one of the most exclusive high schools in America. Everyone who is anyone wants their progeny to go there and they do whatever it takes to make that happen.

But with one of the biggest endowment funds in the country behind her, the famous headmistress of Monmouth, Mrs Constance Blackman—she has been headmistress for twenty years—cannot be bought. As she puts it, there are *other elements* that make a child ‘Monmouth material’.

Those other elements can be anything, really, but they usually pertain not to the student but to the student’s family. They might include a sustained contribution over many years to the cultural life of New York City

or being the winner of an old and highly-regarded prize (read: Nobel or Pulitzer), but in the end, one asset trumps all others.

Breeding.

When I arrived there, the school boasted four students who were direct descendants of *Mayflower* families and three who had ancestors who had signed the Declaration of Independence.

Monmouth disdained the children of modern celebrities and the nouveaux riches. Ms Blackman, a lifelong spinster of modest tastes who lived in a cosy apartment on the premises, delighted in turning down bribes. She had once famously declined an invitation to attend the Met Gala with a prospective parent, saying, ‘Why on Earth would I want to attend a function put on by a magazine?’

Her job, she maintained, was simple. It was to retain Monmouth’s number one standing in the dual worlds of education and society.

First, always.

That said, there was one thing about The Monmouth School that Ms Blackman did her very best *not* to talk about.

The missing girls.

Over the last two years, three students connected to the school—all girls, all new, one sophomore, one junior, one senior—had gone missing.

Just *poof*, gone. Without a trace.

Never to be seen again.

There was the smart girl, Trina Miller: a sophomore with a 4.3 Grade Point Average and an exceedingly

bright future. She'd disappeared in January of last year, only five months after starting at Monmouth.

Then there was Delores Barnes, the special-needs student. A moon-faced angel with Down Syndrome, Delores had been part of the 'My Little Sister Program', a program that paired students at Monmouth with kids from nearby special schools.

Even though it was designed to show them how fortunate they were, the students from Monmouth mocked the program relentlessly. But they did it anyway, for that all-important 'community service' line on their college applications. Delores had been a junior and had disappeared in December last year.

And finally, the most recent disappearance, that of Rebecca 'Becky' Taylor.

Becky's disappearance had been the most shocking of all.

A vivacious and outgoing girl, within a year of arriving at Monmouth, Becky had become one of its most popular students. Everyone had thought she would be named Head Girl this school year. But then, back in March, on the very night she had been crowned 'Belle of the Ball' at the East Side Cotillion—the most exclusive debutante ball in New York—she had disappeared.

Just vanished into the night in her snow-white debutante gown, never to return.

Alone among the missing girls, Becky had left a note—a text—saying that, overwhelmed by the pressures facing her, she had thrown herself into the river, presumably weighted down so that she would never be found.

It shocked many that a student as bubbly and popular as Becky could have been harbouring suicidal

thoughts. You just never know, they said. She became a lesson taught in self-esteem classes.

Of course, in all three cases the NYPD had been called and detectives assigned.

Ms Blackman had even hired a former FBI investigator to look into the matter. The police, she said publicly, ‘fine public servants that they are, might not give this task the time and effort it deserves.’ In private, she put it another way: ‘Regular people use the police. We pay for, and get, a better service.’

But neither the police nor the ex-FBI guy found anything that could lead them to the missing girls—no phones, no fragments of clothing, no bodies.

Not a single thing.

The FBI man investigated the possibility of kidnap in all three cases, but those efforts also came to nothing.

It was puzzling, he said, that in this age of CCTV cameras, credit card records, and Find My iPhone, these three students could vanish from the face of the Earth.

Nasty girls from nearby schools never missed an opportunity to goad Monmouth students about it, and I had only found out about the missing-girls issue when I had casually told someone about my new school.

And as I walked under that old stone archway on my first day, I did it acutely aware that at the school where new girls go missing, I was the new girl.

The 280 students of The Monmouth School gathered in the school’s theatre-like auditorium, a sea of blue-and-green tartan uniforms, murmuring quietly.

I must say that, seeing it en masse, I liked the uniform thing even more, chiefly because it allowed me to remain anonymous. I didn't want to stand out and in a uniform I could hide in plain sight.

The girls, I saw, sat in tight cliques that had no doubt been formed long ago. The sophomore boys slouched up the back, watching the girls. Teachers stood in the aisles by the walls, chatting casually with each other.

And then silence—sudden and powerful—as Ms Blackman took the stage.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' she said, 'welcome to a wonderful new school year at The Monmouth School.'

The usual platitudes followed: about how privileged we were to be attending such a fine institution; how Monmouth would make us the leaders of tomorrow; an exhortation to the new senior class to provide the leadership that was expected of them; yada yada yada.

And then Ms Blackman said a few things that actually interested me.

'Do not let these times of hysteria distract you. Over the course of my life, I have seen many foolish people claim the end of the world is coming and I am still here.'

'Not even a nuclear warhead could kill that old battleaxe,' a handsome boy with wavy blond hair in the row behind me snickered. 'When it's all over, it'll just be her and all the cockroaches.'

A nearby teacher hissed: 'Mr Summerhays. *Shh!*'

Ms Blackman then said, 'I will now call upon your Head Boy and Head Girl, Mr Bo Bradford and Ms Chastity Collins, to address you.'

Two seniors sitting in the front row of the auditorium stepped up onto the stage.

I didn't mean to do it, but at the sight of them I did a double take.

To call them 'good-looking' would be to oversimplify the matter. They weren't just blessed with good genes. No, they had something more than that. These two high school seniors had been professionally *styled*.

The boy filled out his racing-green blazer perfectly. He even made his garish tartan tie look sharp. With his exquisitely shaved square jaw, symmetrical cheekbones and laser-parted sandy hair, Bo Bradford looked like a guy who rowed crew for Harvard and modelled for Ralph Lauren in his spare time.

Some girls beside me whispered breathlessly:

'Oh my God, he is so hot, I can't . . .'

'He is a dime. I'd literally let him do anything to me . . .'

'Good luck, he was practically betrothed to Misty Collins in pre-K . . .'

The Head Girl looked about seventeen and she was similarly attractive and well-presented: tall and statuesque, with blonde hair, light freckling, blue eyes and a thousand-watt smile that seemed to me a little too practised. Her school uniform fit her like a glove, as if it had been tailored to her exact measurements, which I actually think it had.

She spoke first, her voice perky and bright.

'Hi everyone. If you don't know me, I'm Chastity.'

A light-skinned African-American girl with a gorgeous mop of curly bronze hair sitting to my left snorted. 'Well, there's the first piece of false advertising I've heard this year.'

'Shut up, Jenny, you bitch,' another girl whispered.

The black girl named Jenny shrugged. ‘I mean, *Chastity*. Really? We all know Chastity loves to get all up-close-and-personal with the boys.’

‘I’m going to punch you in the uterus, Jenny,’ one of the other girls hissed.

‘Like you ever could, Hattie.’

‘How’s your *job*, Jenny? Still waiting tables?’

‘Ladies . . .’ a female teacher whispered from the aisle. ‘Miss Brewster. Miss Johnson. That’s enough.’

I was so enthralled by the little battle going on in the cheap seats, I had tuned out of Chastity Collins’s speech.

She was saying, ‘. . . and let us not forget our departed friend, Becky Taylor. God rest her soul.’

The girl named Jenny snorted again. ‘Chastity *should* be thanking God. She wouldn’t be Head Girl if Becky Taylor hadn’t hopped off the planet.’

‘Miss Johnson! You will report to my office when assembly is over!’ the teacher in the aisle whispered.

Chastity Collins continued, ‘. . . so sad to lose someone so talented and so promising so young.’ But then she transitioned brilliantly, her ‘sad face’ suddenly brightening.

‘On a lighter note, this year promises a *very* exciting social season. Monmouth has no fewer than three girls debuting at some of the most prestigious debutante balls in the city, including—and forgive me for being a little biased here—my sister, Misty, who will be attending both the International Debutante Ball and the East Side Cotillion *as a junior*, which is a very rare honour indeed.’

The two girls who had exchanged barbs with the girl named Jenny patted a third girl on the shoulder.

This girl was a younger, more compact version

of Chastity Collins, with the same blonde hair, light freckling and blue eyes. But she had a harder face, a more serious aspect.

I'd seen this kind of kid before. The younger sibling of the golden child, who, known only to herself, was destined for even bigger things.

The girl named Jenny couldn't resist a gibe. 'Smile, Misty. Gotta work on that RBF.'

The blonde girl named Misty turned to Jenny and unleashed what could only be described as a winning smile.

'Thanks, Jenny, I appreciate the advice,' she said.

I saw Jenny frown for a microsecond, thrown by the fact that her taunt had not got a rise out of Misty.

In the space of a few minutes I'd seen a taunt about sluttiness, a threatened punch to the uterus, some humble-bragging by the Head Girl about the school's social status and a dose of good old-fashioned mean-girl passive-aggressiveness from Misty. School, I reflected sadly, was school no matter how high the tuition fees were.

Shortly after, Chastity ended her speech and the handsome Head Boy said some bullshit. Then Ms Blackman retook the microphone and went through a few administrative issues and I kind of switched off until she said something that made my blood run cold.

'... thrilled to welcome two new juniors who are joining us from Memphis, Tennessee ...'

*Oh, God, no.*

'... Mr Alfred and Miss Skye Rogers ...'

At the sound of my name echoing through that auditorium, I shrank into my seat. I wanted to shrivel up and die.

*Please don't make us stand up. Please don't. Please don't.*

Ms Blackman smiled kindly at Red and me. 'Why don't you come up on stage so we can all get a look at you.'

Of course, Red sprang out of his chair at the invitation and bounded up onto the stage, waving cheerfully at the student body.

I edged out of my row and stalked up the steps, head bowed, shoulders hunched, trying to create the tiniest silhouette possible.

At which point I tripped on the top step and went sprawling onto the stage like the biggest klutz in America.

Red—God love him—caught me inches off the ground but the damage had been done.

Giggles rippled through the audience.

Blushing with mortification, I regathered myself and gave the audience a weak half-nod.

Ms Blackman gestured for us to vacate the stage and I was off it in a flash.

As I resumed my seat, I heard them:

'Did you see her trip? How *embarrassing* . . .'

'Oh my God, I would just want to die . . .'

Then there came a voice directed at me. 'Nice faceplant, Memphis.'

More giggles.

*Damn, I hate girls.*

The assembly ended.

And as I watched my fellow students filing out, talking and yammering, high-fiving and pointing, I thought, *Even in a tartan uniform, school is a jungle.*

## THE COMING END

I should probably explain the whole St Patrick's Day end-of-the-world thing that was going on.

Long story short, no-one knew what to think.

It had all started in August the previous year when an ageing scientist from Caltech named Dr Harold Finkelstein had written an article in an academic publication called *Astrophysical Journal* about a phenomenon he had spotted in space.

He called it a cloud of high-density ultra-short-wave ionised gamma radiation which the world soon shortened to 'the gamma cloud'.

It was basically a cloud of electromagnetically charged energy that had wafted into our solar system. When Dr Finkelstein spotted it, it was passing Jupiter and, according to his calculations, the Earth—as it swept around the sun—was going to pass through it on March 17 next year.

It was what would happen to the Earth and everyone on it when this event occurred that became the subject of intense debate in the scientific community, on morning TV shows and among the general population.

It was Finkelstein's position that it would be an extinction-level event.

And it would not be pretty. It would be twenty-four hours of terror and misery.

For gamma radiation would not be kind to the fragile human body. It would hurt it in several different ways.

First, electrically. That would be the real killer, Finkelstein said.

Almost every cell in our bodies relies on electrical impulses to survive. The human brain uses electricity to send signals to the rest of the body. When struck by the gamma cloud, the average person's brain would fry and that person would literally drop dead where they stood.

That would knock out 99.5% of the global population.

But the gamma cloud was not, Finkelstein said, of a single uniform level of strength: it would be denser in some places and more diluted in others.

This meant that different locations on the Earth would be hit with different levels of exposure, which meant some people—perhaps because they were hit by a lower level of gamma radiation or perhaps because they possessed a natural resistance to it—might survive the wave of death scouring the planet.

That said, those survivors wouldn't have a great world to keep living in.

Because the same electromagnetic forces that would scramble the brains of most of the people on Earth would also have a devastating impact on every electrical circuit on the planet.

In short, the gamma cloud would cause all electrical devices—TVs, computers, lights, power plants—to snuff out. Power would be lost. Mankind would be plunged back to the Stone Age.

It was all pretty dire stuff.

Twenty-four hours of death and suffering plus catastrophic power loss, which was why all the crazies—religious and otherwise—had got so lathered up about it.

Of course, the media latched onto it.

The late-night comedians had a field day, especially with the date Finkelstein had pinpointed for the coming apocalypse: St Patrick's Day. It was an Irish conspiracy, Stephen Colbert joked, designed to allow Irishmen to drink more beer.

Every network morning show brought on an expert, astrophysicists from around the world who had aimed their telescopes at the sky. Many agreed with Finkelstein, but almost as many didn't.

Even those who concurred with him argued that the cloud might simply miss us. It happened with comets all the time.

But Dr Finkelstein stubbornly maintained that his calculations were correct.

And, of course, the seventy-two-year-old scientist came under intense personal scrutiny himself.

Every scholarly paper and article he had ever written was dissected. A plagiarism accusation from his undergraduate days fifty years earlier was dug up. A sexual harassment complaint—he'd been exonerated—was also found.

Rival astrophysicists accused him of being a sad old man looking for attention in the sunset of his career.

And then, maybe because of the intense media attention and speculation, Dr Harold Finkelstein did the most unexpected thing.

He died.

He'd just finished an interview with George Stephanopoulos on *Good Morning America* and was taking off his lapel-mike when he suddenly clutched at his chest, his face twisting in a rictus of pain, and collapsed to the studio floor. Dead of a heart attack.

The cameras didn't catch his fall but images of him lying on the floor went around the world within minutes.

And with the chief proponent of the end-of-the-world theory gone, and with enough naysayers stepping forward to take his place, the theory itself drifted out of the news cycle and became just another crackpot thing and—tin-foil-hat crazies and religious doomsday proponents aside—the world moved on.

At least until March 17 came within sight, and then people began talking about it again, just in case Finkelstein had been right.

My own feelings about the end of the world were mixed.

Was it true? Was it a crock? By the time the media was through with it, the average shmuck couldn't tell. When *The New York Times* suggests you weigh up all the possibilities and *The National Enquirer* tells you to buy an underground bunker and line the walls with twelve inches of lead, who are you going to believe?

Like many people, I had been leaning toward the it'll-all-be-okay side of the argument until I spoke to my dad about it—my real dad, that is.

Dr Dwight R. Rogers had formerly been the Dean of the School of Medicine at the University of

Tennessee—his area of expertise: nuclear medicine—and on my last visit to Memphis, he had told me he'd looked at Finkelstein's work and concluded that the man wasn't nuts. He was correct.

Dad told me that you could survive the plunge through the gamma cloud if you were inside a vacuum-walled chamber or if you had a naturally or artificially boosted immune system that protected the body's electrical conductivity, especially in the brain.

'Load up on calcium and phosphorus,' he said to me in his ultra-precise, earnest way. 'They are vital to nerve-impulse transmission in the body and the brain, which is what gamma radiation affects. But mainly calcium, not too much phosphorus. Whole milk, yoghurt, sardines—yes, yes, lots of sardines—and any kind of calcium supplements you can find at a pharmacy. Ease up on sodas, because they'll retard your calcium uptake. And maybe get your hands on some antipsychotic medication, something like Risperdal or Zyprexa, which also affect neurotransmitters. ADHD meds or antidepressants would work, too.'

He was starting to babble, his brain moving faster than his mouth, as it often did. I just nodded encouragingly.

Beside me, Red rolled his eyes.

He was a lovely man, my dad, a brilliant one, too, until the nervous breakdown.

I understood Red's point of view: it's hard to take advice about surviving the end of the world from a resident of a mental asylum in Memphis, Tennessee.