

Second Place
Grades Nine/Ten

When the Sky Falls

by Leon Pescador

A meteor. A solar flare. An earthquake. This is how the world ends, doesn't it? A big explosion. Maybe a white light or a loud trumpet. No. No, it doesn't. The world doesn't end like that. At least my world. My world ends today. There's no loud, grandiose bang. I get the quiet, dragged out end. The sky is about to fall on my head.

As I enter through my high school, I realize I forgot to finish the reading in *Grapes Of Wrath* last night. With that, my impending doom has started to descend on me in the form of my English class. I walk through the maze of hallways to American Literature with Mr. Ackerman. I walk slowly, taking my time. My stroll there is stroll of shame, the same way a convicted killer probably walks to his death. And as his walk ends when he sees the spot where he will be lethally injected, mine does too as I see Mr. Ackerman as I walk through the door.

I sit down right at the middle of the classroom. There are twenty-five seats and a person for each. Here, in this spot, I believe I won't get called on. The middle is the most inconspicuous space. As the class begins to fill up, my heart pounds a bit faster. Time starts to slow down. Each movement of the minute hand on the clock feels like it's taking a year. My brain starts to panic, thinking of excuses and scenarios that I can use to explain the lack of reading I did. If I get called on. I think I will be called on. I know it. I'll be the first person to be victimized today for not knowing a chapter of one of John Steinbeck's great American classics. Kind of like when Jim Casy gets killed. But in this chapter of my life, there will be no Tom Joad to avenge my death. It's seven fifty.

Class has started.

"Okay, enough chitchat everyone. Alright . . ." The teacher said as a few more came in. "Good morning class. We have a long our ahead of us. I want you all to take out your books. We're going to go through some questions." Mr. Ackerman ordered. He rose from his desk and carefully selected a piece of chalk. I closed my eyes. The chalk scraped on the board and after a few seconds it stopped. I knew it was going to be me. I would walk up to the board blind, hoping to catch a whisper of from the front row about the answer. And right there, the sky would get a little closer, inching its way to me as Mr. Ackerman would question me in front of twenty-four people on why I did not know the answer.

“Mr. Cheng,” He said. My opened wide as he called my name. “This is class, not nap time.” I almost rose from of my seat, but then he called on Melissa Johnson from the front row to answer the question. One down, who knows how many more to go. The next name to be called was Ahmed Mehdi, the boy sitting to my right.

“Okay, now for the last question,” If this was going to be the last question, my odds of surviving the class were good. “Sam Cheng, how about you answer this question.” I looked at him, then the board. The question asks what happened to Tom Joad. He repeated my name again and I slowly got up from my chair. I walked to the front and picked up the chalk. My hand slowly moves toward the board. I hope for some sort of a deus ex machina to save me. But nothing saves me. As I tell Mr. Ackerman that I don’t know what happened to Mr. Joad, I feel like I’m falling. Falling into an endless black hole. No one can wants to catch me and even if they did, they couldn’t.

The void owns me now.

As I return to my seat, the teacher continues his instructions. I close off the world of because a memory that happened a year back. It was conversation between my father and I. Something we usually don’t do. It was back at home. Ten PM. Friday night. His accustomed stare, looking at me as if he was at his pediatric clinic trying to diagnose a patient.

“Stop being a clown in school.” He said sternly, “They have the circus for clowns. Do you want to join the circus?” My dad doesn’t let a single question fly by someone, especially me. He demands answers.

“No. I don’t want to join the circus.” I responded, my monotone past his mind. These conversations were routine. I would fail his expectations. He would talk to me. I would emerge punished for whatever I had done and when I failed his expectations again, it would repeat. It’s a vicious cycle.

“What do you go to school for? To play around? To get distracted with the other kids. What do you go to school for?” He asked, temper rising.

“To get the grades I need so I can go to a good college.” I told him. He didn’t want any other answer. He didn’t want my opinion. All he wanted was for me to meet his hopes, nothing less. As I replayed this moment over and over again, I thought about our prior talks. I was Prometheus. He was the eagle. Every time we had this same conversation, the same eagle would descend on Prometheus. My dad’s cold words eroded my confidence and self-respect, just as the eagle devoured the poor man’s liver. And today, the same eagle would plunge from the sky to eat mine when I reached home and my grades reached my dad.

He got up from his seat, waving a white piece of paper in front of me. My semester grades. “Do these scores get you into a good school? Do they!?” He inquired. His disgust morphed into anger. “Do you go to school for this!? Do you!?” That was it. There was nothing after that. The memory disappeared as the sliding of chairs grabbed my attention. I was in the classroom again. Everyone was leaving, so instinctually I grabbed my backpack and left. I was the last student to exit the room.

The door closed behind me.

The next class was math. Analysis. Ms. Hammond teaches it. I didn’t hesitate to meet with friends or awkwardly enter the conversations of acquaintances. I just walked to my next class. My head was down. My shoulders were down. I was in the doldrums. All I hope is that math will go better than writing.

That’s all I hope.

The lesson is up on the board already as I sit down in my usual seat. The bell rings, but my peers still pour through the door like water through a dam. The last student finally enters and door closes. Ms. Hammond gets up from her desk and launches the day by writing two problems. I watch and slowly write them down in my notebook.

I stare down at the paper with a frown. The paper stares back. The equations are cryptic little puzzles that I don’t know how to solve. The jumble of integers, exponents and whatever else is on the paper would be laughing at me right now, if they could laugh. But they aren’t frowning like me.

Lucky them.

With the numbers on the board piling up, one integer after the last, I can feel even more compressed. It’s someone’s forgotten junk slowly gets crushed by a trash compactor. And at the bottom there’s me. But trash is not crushing me. The integers on the board are crushing me. And the stress of having to get past those integers is crushing me. And even after all that, my grade performance under the weight of all that crushes me down even further.

At least the garbage survives the trash compactor. But when it’s all over, there’s still something left, isn’t there? I don’t know. Maybe not this time. Because truth is, there’s a day like this every year. A day where everything goes wrong. One where I feel like the sky is falling on my head. But this day is different. I don’t know if I can go back to my home and deal with this day. No. No, I can’t. The pressure is suffocating. I feel like I’m about to implode like a dying star.

The bell rings. Class is over.

