

There is a sweet little horror story that is only two sentences long:

- 5 “The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door...”

Two sentences and an ellipsis of three dots. The horror, of course, isn't in the two sentences at all; it's in the ellipsis, the implication: what knocked at the door? Faced with the unknown, the human mind supplies something vaguely horrible.

But it wasn't horrible, really.

- 10 The last man on Earth – or in the universe, for that matter – sat alone in a room. It was a rather peculiar room. He'd just noticed how peculiar it was and he'd been studying out the reason for its peculiarity. His conclusions didn't horrify him, but it annoyed him.

- 15 Walter Phelan, who had been associate professor of anthropology at Nathan University up until the time two days ago when Nathan University had ceased to exist, was not a man who horrified easily. Not that Walter Phelan was a heroic figure, by any wild stretch of the imagination. He was slight of stature and mild of disposition. He wasn't much to look at, and he knew it.

- 20 Not that his appearance worried him now. Right now, in fact, there wasn't much feeling in him. Abstractedly, he knew that two days ago, within the space of an hour, the human race had been destroyed, except for him and, somewhere, a woman – one woman. And that was a fact which didn't concern Walter Phelan in the slightest degree. He'd probably never see her and didn't care too much if he didn't.

- 25 Women just hadn't been a factor in Walter's life since Martha had died a year and a half ago. Not that Martha hadn't been a good wife – albeit a bit on the bossy side. Yes, he'd loved Martha, in a deep, quiet way. He was only forty now, and he'd been only thirty-eight when Martha had died, but – well – he just hadn't thought about women since then. His life had been his books, the ones he read and the ones he wrote. Now there wasn't any point in writing books, but he had the rest of his life to spend in
30 reading them.

True, company would be nice, but he'd get along without it. Maybe after a while, he'd get so he'd enjoy the occasional company of one of the Zan, although that was a bit

difficult to imagine. Their thinking was so alien to his that there seemed no common ground for discussion, intelligent though they were, in a way.

5 An ant is intelligent, in a way, but no man ever established communication with an ant. He thought of the Zan, somehow, as super-ants, although they didn't look like ants, and he had a hunch that the Zan regarded the human race as the human race had regarded ordinary ants. Certainly what they'd done to Earth had been what men did to ant hills – and it had been done much more efficiently.

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10 But they had given him plenty of books. They'd been nice about that, as soon as he had told them what he wanted, and he had told them that the moment he had learned that he was destined to spend the rest of his life alone in this room. The rest of his life, or as the Zan had quaintly expressed it, forev-er. Even a brilliant mind – and the Zan obviously had brilliant minds – has its idiosyncracies. The Zan had learned to speak Terrestrial English in a manner of hours but they persisted in separating syllables.
15 But we disgress.

There was a knock on the door.

You've got it all now, except the three dots, the ellipsis, and I'm going to fill that in and show you that it wasn't horrible at all.

20 Walter Phelan called out, "Come in," and the door opened. It was of course, only a Zan. It looked exactly like the other Zan; if there was any way of telling one of them from another, Walter hadn't found it. It was about four feet tall and it looked like nothing on earth – nothing, that is, that had been on Earth until the Zan came there.

Walter said, "Hello, George." When he'd learned that none of them had names he decided to call them all George, and the Zan didn't seem to mind.

25 This one said, "Hel-lo, Wal-ter." That was ritual; the knock on the door and the greetings. Walter waited.

"Point one," said the Zan "You will please hence-forth sit with your chair turned the other way."

30 Walter said, "I thought so, George. That plain wall is transparent from the other side, isn't it?"

"It is trans-par-ent."

“Just what I thought. I’m in a zoo Right?”

“That is right.”

Walter sighed. “I knew it. That plain, blank wall, without a single piece of furniture against it. And made of something different from the other walls. If I persist in sitting
5 with my back to it, what then? You will kill me? – I ask hopefully.”

“We will take a-way your books.”

“You’ve got me there George. All right I’ll face the other way when I sit and read. How many other animals besides me are in this zoo of yours?”

“Two hun-dred and six-teen.”

10 Walter shook his head. “Not complete, George. Even a bush league zoo can beat that – could beat that, I mean, if there were any bush league zoos left. Did you just pick at random?”

“Ran-dom sam-ples yes. All spe-cies would have been too man-y. Male and female each of one hun-dred and eight kinds,”

15 “What do you feed them? The carnivorous ones, I mean.”

“We make food Syn-thet-ic.”

“Smart,” said Walter. “And the flora? You got a collection of that, too?”

“Flo-ra was not hurt by vi-bra-tions. It is all still growing.”

20 “Nice for the flora,” said Walter. “You weren’t as hard on it, then, as you were on the fauna, Well, George, you started out with ‘point one.’ I deduced there is a point two kicking around somewhere. What is it?”

“Some-thing we do not un-der-stand. Two of the oth-er a-nimals sleep and do not wake? They are cold.”

25 “It happens in the best regulated zoos, George,” Walter Phelan said. “Probably not a thing wrong with them except that they’re dead.”

“Dead? That means stopped. But nothing stopped them. Each was a-lone.”

Walter stared at the Zan. “Do you mean, George, you don’t know what natural death is?”

“Death is when a be-ing is killed, stopped from liv-ing.”

Walter Phelan blinked. “How old are you, George?” he asked.

5 “Six-teen-you would not know the word. Your pla-net went a-round your sun a-bout sev-en thou-sand times, I am still young.”

Walter whistled softly. “A babe in arms,” he said. He thought hard a moment. “Look, George,” he said, “you’ve got something to learn about this planet you’re on. There’s a guy here who doesn’t hang around where you come from. An old man with a beard
10 and a scythe and an hour-glass. Your vibrations didn’t kill him.”

“What is he?”

“Call him the Grim Reaper, George. Old Man Death. Our people and animals live until somebody – Old Man Death – stops them ticking.”

“He stopped the two crea-tures? He will stop more?”

15 * * * * *

Walter opened his mouth to answer, and then closed it again. Something in the Zan’s voice indicated that there would be a worried frown on his face, if he had had a face recognizable as such.

20 “How about taking me to these animals who won’t wake up?” Walter asked. “Is that against the rules?”

“Come,” said the Zan.

That had been the afternoon of the second day. It was the next morning that the Zan came back, several of them. They began to move Walter Phelan’s books and furniture. When they’d finished that, they moved him. He found himself in a much
25 larger room a hundred yards away.

He sat and waited and this time, too, when there was a knock on the door, he knew what was coming and politely stood up. A Zan opened the door and stood aside. A woman entered.

Walter bowed slightly, "Walter Phelan," he said, "in case George didn't tell you my name. George tries to be polite, but he doesn't know all of our ways."

The woman seemed calm; he was glad to notice that. She said, "My name is Grace Evans, Mr. Phelan. What's this all about? Why did they bring me here?"

5 Walter was studying her as she talked. She was tall, fully as tall as he, and well-proportioned. She looked to be somewhere in her early thirties, about the age Martha had been. She had the same calm confidence about her that he'd always liked about Martha, even though it had contrasted with his own easy-going informality. In fact, he thought she looked quite a bit like Martha.

10 "I think I know why they brought you here but let's go back a bit," he said. "Do you know just what has happened otherwise?"

"You mean that they've – killed everyone?"

"Yes. Please sit down. You know how they accomplished it?" She sank into a comfortable chair nearby. "No," she said, "I don't know just how. Not that it matters
15 does it?"

"Not a lot. But here's the story – what I know of it from getting one of them to talk, and from piecing things together. There isn't a great number of them – here, anyway. I don't know how numerous a race they are where they came from and I don't know where that is, but I'd guess it's outside the Solar System. You've seen the
20 space ship they came in?"

"Yes. It's as big as a mountain."

"Almost. Well it has equipment for emitting some sort of a vibration – they call it that, in our language, but I imagine it's more like a radio wave than a sound vibration – that destroys all animal life. It – the ship itself – is insulated against the vibration. I
25 don't know whether its range is big enough to kill off the whole planet at once, or whether they flew in circles around the earth, sending out the vibratory waves. But it killed everybody and everything instantly and, I hope, painlessly. The only reason we, and the other two-hundred odd animals in this zoo, weren't killed was because we were inside the ship. We'd been picked up as specimens. You do know this is a
30 zoo, don't you?"

"I – I suspected it."

"The front walls are transparent from the outside. The Zan were pretty clever at fixing up the inside of each cubicle to match the natural habitat of the creature it

contains. These cubicles, such as the one we're in, are of plastic, and they've got a machine that makes one in about ten minutes, If Earth had had a machine and a process like that, there wouldn't have been any housing shortage. Well, there isn't any housing shortage now, anyway. And I imagine that the human race – specifically
5 you and I – can stop worrying about the A-bomb and the next war. The Zan certainly solved a lot of problems for us.”

Grace Evans smiled faintly. “Another case where the operation was successful, but the patient died. Things were in an awful mess. Do you remember being captured? I don't. I went to sleep one night and woke up in a cage on the space ship.”

10 “I don't remember either,” Walter said. “My hunch is that they used the vibratory waves at low intensity first, just enough to knock us all out. Then they cruised around, picking up samples more or less at random for their zoo. After they had as many as they wanted, or as many as they had space in the ship to hold, they turned on the juice all the way. And that was that. It wasn't until yesterday they knew
15 they'd made a mistake and had underestimated us. They thought we were immortal, as they are.”

“That we were – what?”

“They can be killed but they don't know what natural death is. They didn't anyway, until yesterday. Two of us died yesterday.”

20 “Two of – Oh!”

“Yes, two of us animals in their zoo. One was a snake and one was a duck. Two species gone irrevocably. And by the Zan's way of figuring time, the remaining member of each species is going to live only a few minutes, anyway. They figured they had permanent specimens.

25 “You mean they didn't realize what short-lived creatures we are?”

“That's right,” Walter said. “One of them is young at seven thousand years, he told me. They're bi-sexual themselves, incidentally, but they probably breed once every ten thousand years or thereabouts. When they learned yesterday how ridiculously short a life expectancy we terrestrial animals have, they were probably shocked to
30 the core – if they have cores.

At any rate they decided to reorganize their zoo – two by two instead of one by one. They figure we'll last longer collectively if not individually.”

“Oh!” Grace Evans stood up and there was a taint flush on her face. “If you think – If they think -” She turned toward the door.

5 “It’ll be locked,” Walter Phelan said calmly “But don’t worry. Maybe they think, but I don’t think. You needn’t even tell me you wouldn’t have me if I was the last man on Earth; it would be corny under the circumstances.”

“But are they going to keep us locked up together in this one little room?”

10 “It isn’t so little; we’ll get by. I can sleep quite comfortably in one of these overstuffed chairs. And don’t think I don’t agree with you perfectly, my dear. All personal considerations aside, the least favor we can do the human race is to let it end with us and not be perpetuated for exhibition in a zoo.”

She said “Thank you,” almost inaudibly, and the flush receded from her checks. There was anger in her eyes, but Walter knew that is wasn’t anger at him. With her eyes sparkling like that, she looked a lot like Martha, he thought.

He smiled at her and said, “Otherwise -‘

15 She started out of her chair, and for an instant he thought she was going to come over and slap him. Then she sank back wearily. “If you were a man, you’d be thinking of some way to – They can be killed, you said?” Her voice was bitter.

20 “The Zan? Oh, certainly. I’ve been studying them. They look horribly different from us, but I think they have about the same metabolism we have, the same type of circulatory system, and probably the same type of digestive system. I think that anything that would kill one of us would kill one of them.”

“But you said -”

25 “Oh, there are differences, of course. Whatever factor it is in man that ages him, they don’t have. Or else they have some gland that man doesn’t have, something that renews cells.”

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She had forgotten her anger now. She leaned forward eagerly. She said, “I think that’s right. And I don’t think they feel pain.”

“I was hoping that. But what makes you think so, my dear?”

“I stretched a piece of wire that I found in the desk of my cubicle across the door so my Zan would fall over it. He did, and the wire cut his leg.”

“Did he bleed red?”

5 “Yes but it didn’t seem to annoy him. He didn’t get mad about it; didn’t even mention it. When he came back the next time, a few hours later, the cut was gone. Well, almost gone. I could see just enough of a trace of it to be sure it was the same Zan.”

Walter Phelan nodded slowly.

10 “He wouldn’t get angry, of course,” he said. “They’re emotionless. Maybe, if we killed one, they wouldn’t even punish us. But it wouldn’t do any good. They’d just give us our food through a trap door and treat us as men would have treated a zoo animal that had killed a keeper. They’d just see that he didn’t have a crack at any more keepers.

“How many of them are there?” she asked.

15 “About two hundred, I think, in this particular space ship. But undoubtedly there are many more where they came from. I have a hunch this is just an advance guard, sent to clear off this planet and make it safe for Zan occupancy,”

“They did a good -”

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There was a knock at the door, and Walter Phelan called out, “Come in.”

20 A Zan stood in the doorway.

“Hello George,” said Walter.

“Hel-lo Wal-ter,” said the Zan.

It may or may not have been the same Zan, but it was always the same ritual.

“What’s on your mind?” Walter asked.

25 “An-oth-er crea-ture sleeps and will not wake. A small fur-ry one called a wea-sel.”

Walter shrugged.

“It happens, George. Old Man Death. I told you about him.”

“And worse. A Zan has died. This morning.”

“Is that worse?” Walter looked at him blandly. “Well, George, you’ll have to get used to it, if you’re going to stay around here.”

5 The Zan said nothing. It stood there.

Finally Walter said, “Well?”

“A-bout wea-sel. You ad-vise same?”

Walter shrugged again. “Probably won’t do any good. But sure, why not?”

The Zan left.

10 Walter could hear his footsteps dying away outside. He grinned. “It might work, Martha,” he said.

“Mar – My name is Grace, Mr Phelan. What might work?”

“My name is Walter, Grace. You might as well get used to it. You know, Grace, you do remind me a lot of Martha. She was my wife. She died a couple of years ago.”

15 “I’m sorry,” said Grace “But what might work? What were you talking about to the Zan?”

“We’ll know tomorrow,” Walter said. And she couldn’t get another word out of him.

That was the fourth day of the stay of the Zan.

The next was the last.

20 It was nearly noon when one of the Zan came. After the ritual, he stood in the doorway, looking more alien than ever. It would be interesting to describe him for you, but there aren’t words.

He said, “We go. Our coun-cil met and de-cid-ed,”

“Another of you died?”

25 “Last night This is pla-net of death.”

Walter nodded. "You did your share. You're leaving two hundred and thirteen creatures alive, out of quite a few billion. Don't hurry back."

"Is there an-y-thing we can do?"

5 "Yes. You can hurry. And you can leave our door unlocked, but not the others. We'll take care of the others."

Something clicked on the door; the Zan left.

Grace Evans was standing, her eyes shining.

She asked, "What -? How -?"

10 "Wait," cautioned Walter. "Let's hear them blast off. It's a sound I want to remember."

The sound came within minutes, and Walter Phelan, realizing how rigidly he'd been holding himself, relaxed in his chair.

15 "There was a snake in the Garden of Eden, too, Grace, and it got us in trouble," he said musingly. "But this one made up for it. I mean the mate of the snake that died day before yesterday. It was a rattlesnake."

"You mean it killed the two Zan who died? But -"

20 Walter nodded, "They were babes in the woods here. When they took me to look at the first creatures who 'were asleep and wouldn't wake up,' and I saw that one of them was a rattler, I had an idea, Grace. Just maybe, I thought, poison creatures were a development peculiar to Earth and the Zan wouldn't know about them. And, too, maybe their metabolism was enough like ours so that the poison would kill them. Anyway, I had nothing to lose trying. And both maybes turned out to be right."

"How did you get the snake to -"

25 Walter Phelan grinned. He said, "I told them what affection was. They didn't know. They were interested, I found, in preserving the remaining one of each species as long as possible, to study the picture and record it before it died. I told them it would die immediately because of the loss of its mate, unless it had affection and petting – constantly. I showed them how with the duck. Luckily it was a tame one, and I held it against my chest and petted it a while to show them. Then I let them take over with it
30 – and the rattlesnake."

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He stood up and stretched, and then sat down again more comfortably.

5 “Well, we’ve got a world to plan,” he said. “We’ll have to let the animals out of the ark, and that will take some thinking and deciding. The herbivorous wild ones we can let go right away. The domestic ones, we’ll do better to keep and take charge of; we’ll need them. But the carnivora – Well, we’ll have to decide. But I’m afraid it’s got to be thumbs down.”

He looked at her. “And the human race. We’ve got to make a decision about that. A pretty important one.”

10 Her face was getting a little pink again, as it had yesterday; she sat rigidly in her chair.

“No!” she said.

15 He didn’t seem to have heard her. “It’s been a nice race, even if nobody won it,” he said. “It’ll be starting over again now, and it may go backward for a while until it gets its breath, but we can gather books for it and keep most of its knowledge intact, the important things anyway. We can -”

He broke off as she got up and started for the door. Just the way his Martha would have acted, he thought, back in the days when he was courting her, before they were married.

20 He said, “Think it over, my dear, and take your time. But come back.”

The door slammed. He sat waiting, thinking out all the things there were to do, once he started, but was no hurry to start them; and after a while he heard her hesitant footsteps coming back.

He smiled a little. See? It wasn’t horrible, really.

25 The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door...