

GRACE PERIOD

You notice first a difference in the quality of space. The sunlight is still golden through the dust hanging in the driveway, where your wife pulled out a few minutes ago in the Celica on a run to the mailbox, and the sky is still a regular blue, but it feels as if for an instant everything stretched just slightly, a few millimeters, then contracted again.

You shut off the electric hedge trimmers, thinking maybe vibration is affecting your inner ear. Then you are aware that the dog is whining from under the porch. On the other hand you

don't hear a single bird song. A semi shifts down with a long backrap of exhaust on the state highway a quarter mile away. A few inches above one horizon an invisible jet is drawing a thin white line across the sky.

You are about to turn the trimmers on again when you have the startling sense that the earth under your feet has taken on a charge. It is not quite a trembling, but something like the deep throb of a very large dynamo at a great distance. Simultaneously there is a fluctuation of light, a tiny pulse, coming from behind the hills. In a moment another, and then another. Again and more strongly you have the absurd sense that everything inflates for a moment, then shrinks.

Your heart strikes you in the chest then, and you think instantly *aneurysm!* You are 135 over 80, and should have had a checkup two months ago. But no, the dog is howling now, and he's not alone. The neighbors' black lab is also in full cry, and in the distance a dozen others have begun yammering.

You stride into the house, not hurrying but not dawdling either, and punch in the number of a friend who lives in the city on the other side of the hills, the county seat. After the tone dance a long pause, then a busy signal. You consider for a moment, then dial the local volunteer fire chief, whom you know. Also busy.

Stretching the twenty-foot cord, you peer out the window. This time the pulse is unmistakable, a definite brightening of the sky to the west, and along with it a timber somewhere in the house creaks. You punch the Sheriff. Busy. Highway Patrol. Busy. 911. Busy. A recorded voice erupts, strident and edged with static, telling you all circuits are busy.

You look outside again and now there is a faint shimmering in the air. On the windowsill outside, against the glass, a few flakes of ash have settled. KVTX. Busy. The *Courier*. Busy. On some inexplicable frantic whim you dial out of state, to your father-in-

law (Where is your wife, she should have the mail by now?), who happens to be a professor of geology on a distinguished faculty. The ringing signal this time. Once. Twice. Three times. A click.

"Physical plant."

Doctor Abendsachs, you babble, you wanted Doctor Abendsachs.

"This is physical plant, buddy. We can't connect you here."

What's going on, you shout, what is happening with the atmosphere—

He doesn't know. They are in a windowless basement. Everything fine there. It's lunchtime and they are making up the weekly football pool.

It is snowing lightly now outside, on the driveway and lawn and garage. You can see your clippers propped pathetically against the hedge. Once more, at top speed, you punch your father-in-law's number. Again a ringing. A click.

This time a recording tells you that all operators are busy and your call will be answered by the first available. The voice track ends and a burst of music begins. It is a large studio orchestra, heavy on violins, playing a version of "Hard Day's Night." At the point where the lyrics would be "sleeping like a log" the sound skips, wobbles, and skips again as if an old-fashioned needle has been bumped from a record groove.

You look out the window once more, as the house begins to shudder, and see that it is growing brighter and brighter and brighter.