

The confusion started when he saw half of a girl, the lower half, strutting down the paper towel aisle as if it owned the place. Hallucinations weren't uncommon for the man, let's call him M, but this was even stranger than the usual bout of tracers, or the occasional shadow in the corner or his eye. Shortly thereafter other people started noticing the half-woman too, then someone screamed. He was relieved that it wasn't just him this time.

The news crew interviewed him since he was the first to see the apparition. The anchorwoman asked him if he thought it was a ghost. It didn't look like a ghost, he said, it was just a pair of legs with a skirt wrapped around them.

The next day at the office, he found the guys in the kitchen, drinking coffee and telling jokes about the top-less lady being the perfect woman. As he poured coffee into a styrofoam cup, one of the guys cleared his throat and asked him if he'd seen any other interesting things lately. M knew the guys, who seemed to do nothing but sit around and drink coffee, didn't take him seriously. They all knew about his past—whenever they noticed the half-dozen Narcotics Anonymous chips on his keychain they'd ask him how his recovery was going, and would offer patronizing affirmations like, “just keep truckin” or “glad you're still on the wagon, bro!”

All day long, M did as little as possible at the office and thought about the legs he'd seen. When he arrived back at home that evening, he flipped on the TV, hoping to hear more about the legs. But instead, the news was reporting a state of emergency. Evidently, astronomers had been noticing very strange business in the heavens. The stars had all shifted far away from their usual positions, as if someone had gathered them up and scattered them again like jacks across the sky. It was scientifically impossible that they could move so quickly to another region of the universe. But somehow they'd done just that.

Nobody seem to have any theories on the matter.

It seemed clear enough to the man as he sat on his couch, eating a cold slice of pizza. And he declared aloud to himself, “The universe is leaking out through the cracks.”

The next few days were notably more chaotic. During a board meeting, an explosion occurred in the back of the room and after the smoke cleared a man was standing in a pair of overalls, looking altogether bewildered. After some investigation they learned that the man was from Montana, and the last thing he remembered was being on top of his tractor, tilling his corn field. He also asked if it was still 1937.

“See?” said M, as if proving his theory to a skeptic, “The universe is leaking out through the cracks.”

The coffee-drinking guys rolled their eyes toward each other. One of them yawned. The man in overalls was escorted out of the building and left on the street.

M stood up, addressed the coffee-drinkers in the room, and quit his job. If the universe was ending, as he suspected, then he preferred to die in the comfort of home.

He called his ex-wife. She'd left him years ago, at a low point in his life as an addict. She couldn't live with someone like him, and she didn't blame him. But now the universe was leaking and there was nobody in the world he'd rather spend his final days with. He left a message on her answering machine and thought the leaky universe problem through once again.

It seemed that matter was no longer able to hold a firm grasp in space or time, evidenced by the stars and time-traveling farmers being shuffled inexplicably around the universe. Evidently parts of people could vanish and re-materialize as well. Now M began to fear for himself. What if he were teleported to open space? Or the bottom of the ocean? Or to the late Cretaceous period? Well, if it was going to happen there wasn't a thing he could do about it. All the more reason to live it up now.

M procured a few small baggies of powder and various colored pills from the usual place. He hadn't bought junk in years, but his hook-up was a loyal guy and still roamed the same haunts. M cooked the heroine and shot it into his blood. After a few hours of lying under his living room coffee table without a thought in his head, he started awake and remembered his ex-wife. He envisioned her

in his arms, their passion rekindled among the tumults of the dying universe.

Before heading out, he popped a few amphetamines for good measure. As he strode down the center of the road, an earthquake occurred. Car alarms sounded, plumes of smoke erupted as houses collapsed in on themselves. M laughed because he couldn't help it, not that any of it was all that funny.

He knocked on his ex-wife's door and she answered with a gasp. After producing a bouquet of flowers he'd grabbed on the way there, M sidled into her living room and lied down on the carpet.

"The universe is leaking out through the cracks," he said.

"You're high," she responded coldly.

"Haven't you been watching the news? Why is your calendar still on March?"

"Because it is March, dear."

M sat up and examined the Norman Rockwell calendar hanging over the telephone on the wall. He protested that it was April, not March. Her skirt twirled as she fetched her her laptop computer from a nearby table, and she unfolded it to show him the date and time.

"I've been sent back," he said. "I've leaked through a crack, and I'm still okay! Our love has conquered the universe."

At that moment M's wife exploded. Once the smoke cleared, he heard her say, "What's the big idea?"

Although she was still alive and could talk, all that was left of M's ex-wife was the top half of her body. She watched him expectantly, her hands on her hips, or just above where the hips used to be.

"How long has this been going on? Ten years of sobriety, down the toilet. And now you show up at my house high as a kite. You've got some serious nerve." She choked on these last words and wiped her eyes with a sleeve.

M didn't have the heart to tell her half of her had gone missing.

"Fine," he said. "Maybe I'll just go." By the time he'd finished talking he was floating in black space in some remote corner of the universe.