

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

by Robert Goolrick

EDITOR'S NOTE: "What happened to you?" When Robert Goolrick asked this question of a homeless man, it unexpectedly opened a world of investigation into his own life, a search to understand what indeed had happened to him. The



Robert Goolrick,

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The End of the World as We Know It

Several summers ago, in the heat of July, a homeless man claimed a spot on the sidewalk on Manhattan's Sixth Avenue, right across from Balducci's. He was young, no more than his late twenties, and he appeared to be healthy. He was handsome and deeply tanned, and he was dressed simply but not shabbily in jeans and a T-shirt and an army jacket. His only equipment was an old duffel bag and a paper cup, and as the days went by I got into the habit of dropping small change into his cup as I passed.

One day I couldn't resist. I leaned down, put a dollar in his cup, and looked at him.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

He was silent for a long time. Then he looked up, his eyes clear and young and blue. "Everything just fell apart all at once," he said, and then looked away again. I thought of asking him home to my apartment, offering him a shower and a steak, but, somehow, you just don't do that.

End of the World as We Know It is the result, a wrenching yet life-affirming story of a man coming to terms with the truth of the past, in search of an answer that might hold a key to the future.

Instead, I said that I hoped things would go better for him, and then I moved on; after several weeks, the boy wasn't there anymore.

What happened to you? It's the essential question. It's the question we always want to ask and rarely do. It's what we want to know about strangers, and even about the people we've known for decades.

One afternoon, in late summer, I sat down and decided to write about what happened to me. Why I wanted to do it was unclear, but I realized that I'd always known I'd write about it someday, and suddenly that day had arrived.

That morning I had been to see my shrink. While there, I asked, for no particular reason, "Did I ever tell you about my father's funeral?" And it turned out I hadn't, so I proceeded to tell him.

My father's funeral was peculiar in a lot of ways. In the first place, he was to be buried in the backyard of my family's house in Virginia, right next to where

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my mother was buried. In the second place, I woke up at six in the morning the day of the funeral and realized that nobody had dug a hole in which to put his ashes, so I got out of bed in the sweltering August dawn and dug the hole the box would go in.

I had told the story over and over during the years, always with a comic spin, all about how weird and Gothic Southerners are, and people always laughed, and I laughed with them.

Suddenly, in my shrink's office, I started telling the story in the usual jocular fashion, only to find myself crying. I didn't know where the tears came from. After all, I had told the story many times, so there would seem to be nothing cathartic left in what had become simply a bizarre anecdote.

But it suddenly seemed so lonely. It suddenly seemed as though something unexplained had happened on that day fifteen years ago, something I had never really examined. So that afternoon I wrote it all down, a simple effort to understand.

When I was done, I wasn't sure I understood it any better, but at least now there was a record of the event, and I didn't need to tell the anecdote anymore. And I didn't need to cry about it, ever again.

After that, I wrote about my mother's funeral, and next my aunt's, and then I proceeded through my life, as though looking at old snapshots, only this time seeing all the details I had missed before, even in stories I had told repeatedly in my effort to explain to friends and strangers what had happened to me.

Things have happened to me in my life. Things that shouldn't happen. Things you don't talk about.

I've always felt that ordinary lives hold a special fascination. Perhaps it's because I come from a small town, where daily events—from trips to the grocery store to broken bones to adultery and divorce—were all anyone ever talked about. There may not have been much glamour in them, but these stories have the pith of life about them, and they are fragile and touching and infinitely moving.

In writing my book, I decided I finally wanted to be known. I wanted to be honest and open about the secrets I have held close since childhood, about the pain of that childhood, about how damaged I had been, and how I had lived my life in silence. I wanted to reveal the complex and often terrifying interior of an outwardly ordinary life.

My life had been an effort to appear to be right at all times, and the effort had exhausted me. My clothes were immaculate, my house charming, and my dinner parties a success, yet inside I felt completely dead. I found that writing about my life was a way of saving what's left, and fortunately it came easily to me.

The homeless boy said that in his life everything fell apart all at once. For me, everything fell apart very slowly and quietly. It fell apart in the dark, away from the bright light of day, and it fell apart largely in secret.

What happened to you? Sooner or later, we all ask that question of ourselves. My book gave me a way to finally provide an answer. ■

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—ROBERT GOOLRICK