

Lunatic Pandora

By Nick Hayden

Then, one day, the sky began to fall.

No one noticed at first except the scientists. Soil samples indicated trace amounts of sky, which was first regarded as a lab error, then as a scientific prank. Victor Von Frank, a man with three doctorates and no sense of reality, was the first to announce that he had isolated the “sky particles.”

A year later, after many duplicated tests, *Time* and *Newsweek* announced the results to the public. The tabloids had done so six months earlier.

It was not considered an immediate problem. There is plenty of sky, the respected senator from Montana argued. A few flakes drifting away here and there can't hurt.

Dermatologists released a report that the apparent increase in *seborrheic dermatitis* was, in all probability, related to this disintegration of the sky. They had charts of land distribution and charts of population distribution. People wearing hats were immune, the report concluded.

No one much cared, except for other dermatologists.

Then hairdressers, as if willed as one by their cosmetological god, complained of the increase in dandruff. Fear and panic spread like an old joke among new third graders. Committees and advisory boards were formed. They were dissolved after realizing they had no power to accomplish anything. A grass roots petition signed by 11.5 million Americans demanded that NASA simply “stop it.” The UN considered the question and found it to be outside its authority.

Life returned to its normal state of unpredictability, and, for awhile, people forgot about the falling sky.

Then cracks appeared in the sun, and people began to worry.

The cracks were like crow's feet on the eye of exhaustion. The sun was old and tired. As one TV commentator pointed out, "Hey, it's been around for billions of years. It's about time it showed signs of wear." The network cancelled the commentator's show after receiving several dumpsters of complaints and two letter bombs. The commentator gained an instant cult following on cable.

There was a sudden increased interest in the sun. People went to libraries and looked it up on the Internet. Networks ran biographies on the sun. It became a popular category on *Jeopardy!* Still, despite its increased popularity, creases and cracks spread along the sun's circle.

Telescopes found these same tears in the sky, hairline fractures of the atmosphere. Children asked their parents about the sun and the sky. The parents shook their heads and said, You wouldn't understand. You're too young.

So was everyone else.

In August, the news reported that a famous Hollywood actor had been found dead, a shard of sky the size of a broken plate lodged in his skull. The world wept. A week later it was reported that 937 others had died in a similar manner the month before. None of these had been actors.

For a week, stock in hard helmets rose in step with paranoia. It was soon verified that the shards were aerodynamic, that the wind could direct their course. They could disembowel as well as split skulls. There was a renewed interest in medieval armor.

Weather became a daily terror. Rain brought the clink of glass and roofing bills. Snowballs ended in hospital stays. Sunny days were not dangerous, except for the usual debris and neighbors screaming at the

shattered sun. Rainbows added color to the fields of blue and white glass. Tornadoes reminded people to attend church. Somewhere in Europe, a weatherman was stoned.

Collectors picked among the scrapes of sky that littered the highways and fields for pieces that resembled the faces of presidents and cartoon characters. Artists arranged them into abstract designs meant to represent the soul or the mind or the rising price of gas. In time, the shards melted into globes like mercury and dissipated into the ground and were lost forever.

The United Nations' Committee of Atmospheric Deterioration released a detailed study of the darkness revealed behind the missing sky. The pictures, magnified and dramatized, were featureless and blank. Some thought the negatives had gone bad. The report concluded by saying that the Committee did not understand the phenomena. A comedian said that the sky report wasn't all it was cracked up to be. The sign lit up and the audience laughed.

When the first cloud fell and crushed Paris, no one was surprised. A nimbus conquered Naples a few days later. Others fell, tearing thousands of acres of blue from the sky. A thunderhead landed in the ocean. The subsequent tidal wave killed millions of people. No one bothered to count how many.

A new slang term developed for the darkness that used to be the sky. They called it Heaven. No one actually believed it was Heaven, but some had forgotten what heaven was and other didn't want to name the darkness truly. It had swallowed all the stars. Shreds of sky bulged as Heaven pushed down against them. The clouds scraped the ground like the bellies of giant white pigs. Eventually, they collapsed from their own weight and died.

The sun, a bloodshot eye in the sky, finally exploded into a billion burning fragments. It rained fire for a day and a half. Cities burned, but most had been abandoned already. People didn't mind the light of flames all that much. It was better than the blindness of Heaven.

In those last days, when there were still slivers of blue above, communities gathered in the fallen clouds. They hollowed out tunnels and rooms and tapped water from the cloud's interior. It might have worked—they might have survived—except that after the sky fell, Heaven began to fall.

Heaven bulged. "A pregnant womb pressing hard against the scraps of our battered reality," an objective newspaper read. People with nothing better to do considered the image and invented horrors Heaven could birth. "Letters to the Editor" overtook the sports section of local newspapers. A prize was given for the most creative prediction of future destruction. The prize was one million dollars—it would buy beef jerky for the backyard bunker.

Heaven gained names. Some called it Destiny, others Death, others Madness, others God. It ate skyscrapers first, then office building, then cathedrals. Children threw balls into it. The balls never came down.

The cloud-cities could not handle Heaven. The clouds shriveled like rotten fruit at its touch. The halls burned with the smell of ozone. Someone declared that the end of the world was at hand. Another replied, Oh yeah? Sarcasm became the official language of fifty-seven countries.

Heaven continued downward. It hung in suspended tears above the earth. Tall men stooped. Short men laughed, and then they too stooped as Heaven continued downward. The ones who had not called it God or Destiny began chipping away at Heaven with the abandoned tools of their

abandoned trades. Hammers, spatulas, keys, flashlights, keyboards, knitting needles, X-ray machines—whatever each person knew how to use—these pounded and scraped and clanged and clawed and drilled at Heaven. It was said that certain poets could tear a foot-long gash into Heaven with the edge of their wit.

And now I lie here on my back, alone in the darkness of Heaven and the light of my own personal star. I have only a pencil and a box of granola bars I stole from the kitchen when it still existed. A pinpoint of light blazes above me, the work of my pencil. Heaven, though it seems the thickness of reality, is the thinness of a dream not yet woken from. I continue puncturing Heaven to reach the light beyond. The darkness pushed the sky away, but the light—the heaven behind Heaven—is pushing the darkness away.

I need to be on the other side. Heaven is not thick, but it is tough and unyielding. I may die soon. All that's left is to dig my hole. The world is swallowed. There are other people in other pockets, perhaps, but I am alone. I hope to slip through my hole before I die. I hope the hole is large enough.

If not, my soul should fit at least.