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WAYNE

A DOC FORD NOVEL

WHITE

A lighthouse on a hill at night with a lightning bolt striking the sky. The lighthouse is illuminated from within, and the sky is dark with a bright lightning bolt striking down. The background is a dramatic sky with clouds and a sunset or sunrise glow.

ONE DEADLY EYE

"WHITE IS A POET, A WORDSMITH ON A LEVEL FEW EVER OBTAIN." —TAMPA TRIBUNE



I returned an arcane Station Six pistol to the US Consulate in Cape Town, South Africa, unaware a storm that would forever change Florida had gathered to the north, fueled by a mirror that is the Sahara Desert.

In a world of electronic intrusions, I'm too often deafened to the silence of atmospheric tides, saltwater and sunlight—dynamics that can ignite a cataclysm six thousand miles away.

“Has this weapon been fired?” the consulate armorer asked.

The strange bolt action pistol lay on a table. Its bulbous barrel (an integrated sound suppressor) had the utilitarian aspect of a ball-peen hammer.

“At the range a few days ago. Five rounds,” I said.

“But not in the field.”

“Nope.”

“A few practice rounds. That's all?” He sounded disappointed.

“With a bolt action single-shot, five rounds was four too many.”

A Cold War assassin's tool was an ironic weapon to issue me, a marine biologist in Africa under the guise of tagging great white sharks.

He noticed the bandage on my knuckles. Blood had wicked through the gauze.

“Tough on your shooting hand. Too bad, Dr. Ford.”

“Tougher to explain if I’d been stopped at the border,” I said. “Shouldn’t I get some sort of receipt?”

When I was at the door, the armorer spoke again. “Afrikaners call the stretch of water off Dyers Island ‘Shark Alley.’ I heard a Russian diplomat went missing there yesterday.” There was a pause. “Or defected. Depends, I guess, on who you ask.”

It was a question without a question mark.

Dyers Island, one hundred twenty kilometers southeast. It brought back the stench of thousands of fur seals and penguins fighting, breeding, dying, birthing pups on a rock the size of a parking lot. Blood, the ammonia stink of urine, verified that monster great whites cruised the island’s rim.

I replied, “Can’t say I’ve been there before. Maybe next visit.”

“After your wedding, perhaps. An interesting honeymoon that would make. A few weeks away, isn’t it?”

In state department/intel circles, there are no personal secrets, only classified obligations.

“Maybe,” I said again. I tapped my wrist. “The COS wants a word before I take off.”

He buzzed me out.

The US Consulate in Cape Town is a geometry of white concrete on acres of landscaped grounds. Tiers of bulletproof windows, three stories high, are dwarfed by the enormity of Table Mountain, a slower geologic cataclysm eight kilometers north.

Across the commons, Marines in BDUs were getting in a morning run. Kids with tattoos, jarhead buzz cuts, rocking to a navy cadence call.

*Let 'em blow, let 'em blow,
Let those trade winds blow,
From the east, from the west...
Let those nukes, the new kids glow...*

A foreboding message cheerfully voiced this spring morning in September, half a globe away from my lab and home at Dinkin's Bay Marina, west coast Florida.

Building A, through security, up three flights of granite steps. The Chief of Station slid an envelope across her desk, an encrypted IronKey memory drive inside.

After some distancing pleasantries, she said, "Don't download the files until you're over international waters. Are you familiar with Black Dolphin Prison on the Kazakhstan border?"

I might have smiled if I didn't know the place was real. Russia sends its twisted worst to Black Dolphin—terrorists, pedophiles, serial killers, the criminally insane. Cannibals.

"Named for a stone dolphin carved by inmates," I said. "No prisoner has ever left there alive from what I've heard."

Chief of Station indicated the envelope. "Until two years ago. There was an earthquake, the facility flooded. Guards evacuated and left seven hundred prisoners behind. We don't know how many drowned, but at least six escaped according to the few villagers they didn't murder." Again, a glance at the envelope. "It's all in there."

I started to explain, respectfully, that I was a poor choice to send to Russia.

Chief of Station surprised me by agreeing. "Of course. Not at your age, Dr. Ford." She was bemused. "And your skill set isn't up to...well. Let me ask you something. This morning, were you aware of the van shadowing you?"

I answered, "Until it missed the curve at Killig Bay. Was anyone hurt?"

Her flat gaze told me the subject was not to be discussed. "Our concern is, they know who you are. Don't worry, we'll look into the matter. Besides, you're getting married in a few weeks, aren't you?"

Not if a certain agency didn't stop leveraging me with extradition threats.

I responded, "That's the plan."

As I went out the door, she said something about the weather—“Keep an eye on it,” possibly, which I took as a reference to my flight. Or marriage. Or both.

At Wingfield Airbase, a chill breeze was siphoning toward the Sahara—another silent dynamic. At 36,000 feet, I opened the IronKey while our pilots rode the North Equatorial Jetstream across the Atlantic.

I read. I summarized. Six of Russia’s most violent criminals had left a blood trail crossing to the Caspian Sea and might have entered the US via Venezuela or Mexico.

Might. But it made sense. Bratva, a Russian criminal brotherhood, and Wagner mercenaries had established crime syndicates in major US cities, including Miami.

Thus the courtesy of briefing me, a biologist whose skill set was doubted, but who could at least pick up a phone and dial for help.

So why bother with the second, unopened folder on my laptop screen?

Why, indeed.

Sixteen hours in the air. I dozed, awoke when the pilot warned of turbulence. Somewhere off Brazil, the plane pitched, banged down hard into thermal clouds that mimicked tentacles. We landed and took off again at sunset. Below revolved a familiar green mosaic of seaward borders. South America. The coastline tracked my past and the passage of time.

To port, a monoxide haze flagged Caracas. The largest tarpon in the Americas had been landed there long before Lake Maracaibo became a swill of petroleum, plastics and industrial offal.

After that, there were only small pockets of light: jungle villages, fires burning, night islands of humanity linked by darkness, aglow like pearls, bright and solitary from four miles high.

We crossed the flight corridor of Western Cuba, Pinar Del Rio. More solitary lights. Somewhere down there was a farm

town, Vinales, a baseball diamond, wooden bleachers, fields where oxen grazed.

I winced away fun memories of villagers and playing ball with barnstorming friends.

Nostalgia is a waste of time. The present is our only tenuous reality. It's all a rational person has. But there was something grating about the Chief of Station's smirk regarding my skills and age. And her reference to the impending wedding had the ring of sterile dismissal.

My betrothed—Hannah Summerlin Smith. Captain Hannah to fly-fishing aficionados from Ketchum to Key West. And the mother of our toddler son, Izaak.

In the Everglades, in the middle of nowhere, is a jet port that never got off the ground for environmental reasons. But its ten-thousand-foot runway is still used clandestinely and for commercial touch-and-goes.

Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport is the official name.

They dropped me off in the wee hours of the morning, the air heat-laden, wet, ripe with sulfur. By 4:00 a.m. I was in my new truck, a gray Ford, crossing the Causeway bridges a few miles from the marina and home.

I reminded myself, *If you don't stop lying to Hannah, there won't be a wedding.*

Most of us have a nagging, destructive voice that second-guesses even the best of decisions.

Is that such a bad thing? mine argued.



An hour before sunrise is night's end, nautically speaking, on a barrier island that, from the air, resembles a gravid seahorse that is twelve miles long and just as fragile.

Dinkin's Bay forms the island's rotund belly. Our marina is among the last of the old Florida fish camps, which is to say it sits on a patch of mangrove waterfront, the docks are wobbly and buildings are not automated, galvanized barns.

A small marina is a village. Tribal in an easygoing way.

When I arrived, the chain-link gate should have been locked. It wasn't.

The handful of folks who call the place home should have been asleep.

Instead, I got out of my truck to see shadow people moving in a quiet, industrious way. A-Dock is where the deep water live-aboard vessels are moored. Cabin lights were on inside a couple, engines grumbling. The fishing guides, Jeth, Alex and Neville, are the rare early risers in our party-loving group, but they captain small boats. And 5:30 a.m. was too early even for them.

Why the activity?

I shouldered my Maxpedition bag and crossed the shell parking lot. The marina office door was propped open to catch the breeze.

Mack, who owns the place, was inside, screened by racks of T-shirts and tacky souvenirs, but I could smell fresh coffee.

On the glass counter at his elbow lay the marina's black cat, Crunch & Des.

The cat looked up.

Mack did not.

"I knew you'd come crawling back sooner or later, Doc. Suppose Hannah booted you out of the house for disappearing again? Don't blame her. A woman like that—strong, knows her own mind. Men would stand in line just to have a chance. We got a pool going about how long before you screwed this up."

The accent was Kiwi via Tasmania. His assessment was uncomfortably accurate.

"I was away at a conference."

"Always. What kind this time?"

"The boring kind. I learned a lot about pollution and vibrio pathogens. Food sucked."

"A shame. Bet it wasn't hard getting tickets to a piss-up like that." Mack was enjoying himself. "Vibrio as in vibrators? A lot of them are plastic. Or so I've heard."

I said, "Vibrio as in bacteria. They hitch rides on hydrocarbons, trash, stuff like that. Makes the little devils more deadly because they're mobile. Bad for people, bad for everything, including fish and sharks. You seen my dog around? I don't think that tracking chip on his collar is as waterproof as they claim."

"Marion Ford, the shark doctor," Mack mused. "Are you talking about germs that cause the, what-do-you-call-it, 'flesh-eating disease'? A couple times a year, someone cuts their foot at the beach and ends up buggered-all."

"They're a type of germ, I suppose."

"You suppose, huh? Pathogens and gobbledygook. No wonder people don't believe half of what scientists say." He placed a

steaming Styrofoam cup on the counter. “You want sugar, help yourself. What happened to your hand?”

There are times when the best way to cloak the truth is to tell the truth.

“A great white banged into my cage—a shark-tagging deal. Like an idiot, I tried to push the thing away.”

“Oh, sure you did. Just whacked a white pointer on the nose. It was the same with me when I hit fifty. Skin gets thin as an onion. Bump into a wall, bang my hand, I bleed like hell, so I’d make up some wild story. Well, wherever you were, you would’ve been better off staying.”

Behind the counter, black windows framed waves freckled with arrhythmic stars and boat lights. He nodded toward A-Dock, where one of the gaudier floating homes, *Tiger Lily*, an old Chris-Craft cruiser, was pulling out. Aboard were two familiar shadows, JoAnn Smallwood and Rhonda Lister.

He waved a silent goodbye. “There they go, the two sweetest ballbusters in the slowest damn stinkpot around. The girls wanted to get a big head start just in case.”

I put it together. “A hurricane warning, huh? How far out?”

He stared over heavy black glasses frames. “They didn’t have TVs at the hotel where you stayed?” He smiled, grunted. “Sorry, forgot. You wouldn’t watch the damn thing if they did. Good on you for it. Today’s Friday and they’re guessing Tuesday. Thursday, maybe, if it doesn’t peter out. Which it probably will. Remember the last time this happened?”

Several years back, the deadliest of the big, a Cat-Five, was supposed to hit somewhere between Tampa and Naples. Two days before landfall, the governor caused panic by announcing, “If you don’t leave now, it’ll be too late.”

“I remember,” I said. “We all do.”

The storm was memorable for unexpected reasons.

Mack is a big man, not tall but wide. Straw hat, Hawaiian shirts and Cuban cigars that are habitually chomped, seldom

smoked. He came to Florida years ago with a knack for free enterprise and a need to escape criminal charges in Australia.

Something to do with running an illegal carnival show. If true, there were no better credentials for dealing with the quirky souls who believe that living aboard a boat, elbow-to-elbow with other boaters, represents a freedom suburbia can't offer.

"Never again," Mack responded, referring to the storm.

On the counter sat a bronze cash register, the old-fashioned kind. He punched the *No Sale* key. The tray clanged out. Arranging bills in orderly stacks was, to him, a morning ritual.

"I won't do it again, Doc. Leave this marina unattended with all the million-dollar houses around here? Not to mention the billionaires. That's like a welcome sign to every thieving bastard for miles." He finished a pile of tens and scooped up some twenties. "Last couple of nights, they've been casing the place."

My interest zeroed in. "By car?"

"One of those RHIB-hulled jobs the cops sometimes use," he said, meaning a rigid-hulled inflatable boat. "Big four-stroke engine. They took off when I zapped 'em with a Q-Beam."

"Did you get a look?"

"Too far away," he said.

"Maybe it was the cops. Coast Guard or FWC. The state sends outside help before a storm."

Mack didn't buy it. "Both times, it was after midnight, and they were running without lights. Those redneck bastards will never steal from me again."

I didn't associate rednecks with fast tactical boats. I made a mental note to do some night spooking of my own.

"What about Pete?" I asked. Pete, a cinnamon-haired retriever, was once owned by a geneticist-slash-dog-breeder. I'd found him lost, half-wild in the Everglades.

"Haven't seen that fish-eating dingo in days, I'm happy to report. Hannah called, said he swam across the bay to be with her and young Luke. Notice how much better the place smells when that dog of yours is gone?"

It was two miles on a rhumb line across the bay to the larger, more protected island of Gumbo Limbo.

“Not the first time he’s made that swim,” I replied. “I’ll run the boat over later today.”

Jeth, fishing guide and handyman, appeared in the doorway. He gave me a wave before saying, “Mack, I got that plywood stacked. Want me to start boarding windows? Or focus on getting rental boats out of the water?”

Mack gave up on the fifties. The question had ruined his profit-loving ritual. “Geezus, here we go again. The Hurricane Circus Drill. Three days it’ll take to get ready, and three more days to open up. Not that it matters ’cause internet news will scare tourists away for a month.”

The cash register door clanged shut. “Bloody pointless...but yeah, rental boats and canoes first. Leave the plywood until—you know. Turns the damn place into a dungeon, so hold off on that. Oh, and move the golf carts, anything with batteries, as far as you can get from the gift shop and my house. Bastards been catching on fire, they say.”

I scratched the cat’s ears and wandered out into the last blue hue of darkness. A nervous wind rattled the mangroves. About every twenty seconds, the wind gusted.

I timed the gusts and looked south. Chief of Station’s directive—“Keep an eye on the weather”—was no longer a farewell pleasantry.

Something was out there.

To the north, beyond the docks, a hundred yards away, was a charcoal sketch of a sailboat, lights on in the cabin.

My pal, Tomlinson, the Zen Buddhist hipster with the big brain, was awake.

I told Mack and Jeth, “I heard it’s only lithium batteries you need to worry about. But the news, you never know if it’s political crap or legit.”

I got in my boat.



Tomlinson said to me, “Marion, I’m not afraid of dying. It’s the possibility I’ll stay dead that really scares the piss out of me.”

I had tied my boat, a twenty-five-foot Dorado, off the stern of his blue water sloop, *No Más*.

He said, “Leave this planet with all the screwheads in charge? Those ego starved politicians would whack off in a hanky if it got them a mention on Google news. Mother dogs and fart-huffers, the lot of them. On both sides of the latrine.”

My pal sat in a half lotus position outside on the bow, staring at the last of the stars. A skinny, long-haired Buddha who’s also a six-foot-something left-handed pitcher—with all the quirkiness this implies.

“Are you drunk or stoned?” I asked.

“Neither. But the day is young, amigo, so I’m optimistic. My galley is larded with enough food, beer and more beer for a month at sea.” A bony finger pointed west. “See that?”

In the darkness, a pair of ice-white spheroids drifted above the mangrove rim.

“Jupiter and Saturn,” I said. “What do they have to do with storm warnings? Or you dying? If you want to haul your boat, I’ll help—after I see Hannah. How pissed off is she?”

He continued pointing. “Not Jupiter. To the right a few degrees, the brightest star. Vega. In the constellation Lyra. Shaped like a harp on star maps, but the ancients—Arabs, Egyptians, who the hell knows—saw a bird with folded wings. The Falling Vulture, they called it.”

“Like a death symbol, you mean?” I said. “That’s a long stretch even for you. If you’re right, then everyone north of the twenty-sixth parallel is in for a bad week. Hey... Mack said he saw a tactical boat in here the last couple of nights. A big inflatable, hard bottomed. You know the type. Some bad guys casing the place, he thinks. You see anything?”

Tomlinson replied, “If you define a ‘long stretch’ as fifty-light years away, for sure. Doc—they found a planet out there. A perfect little earth, man, with its own sun. That’s where I’m headed. Yep, and I’m leaving today.”

He got up. Bent at the waist and touched his toes. Shook his arms, staying loosey-goosey.

I said, “Gad—put some clothes on. Pants at least.”

“No siree, Bob. I’m sailing west just like I came into this beautiful, screwed-up world. Bare-ass naked and screaming. Entropy—are you familiar with the dynamic?”

I replied, “Antitropy? I think it has to do with vertebrates.”

“No, *entropy*. Entropic. An invisible force, man, that governs chaos and the death of our universe. Mark my words, big fella, the kimchi is about to hit the F-ing fan.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “How can I change your mind about leaving?”

“You can’t. We’ll stay in touch on forty-meters. I rigged an antenna from the mast stay. As you know, salt water is the best radio ground around.” He slipped past me. Chuckled. “Hey,

get it? That's like an oxymoron. Best ground around. Freakin' salt water. *Dude.*"

Ham radio jargon. Tomlinson is a Morse code savant, and I'd recently gotten my FCC General Ham License. In this noisy computerized world, if the worst happened, satellites and cell towers couldn't compete with a coil of wire and a high-frequency radio transceiver.

I took a guess. "You dropped 'shrooms. Admit it. Is it starting to wear off? No way you're leaving here stoned, three or four days before a hurricane might hit. I'll throw a blanket over your head and tie you to a tree if I have to."

"Your fiancée is extremely pissed off," my friend responded.

Back on the subject of Hannah Summerlin Smith, finally.

"Who could blame a fine Christian like Captain Hannah for dumping a globe-trotting sinner like you? A dude who has stolen gold bars stashed under the house. And guns, all sorts of weird shit, hidden in the floors? Then runs off, doesn't tell her where he's going for the umpteenth time. Talk about an entropic boneheaded move. I'm *this* close to calling you a dumbass."

"Hey, not so loud," I said, because water also conducts sound. "You talked to her? She won't answer, but I left a bunch of messages. It's our kid I worry about most. This is my second chance at fatherhood, and I'm not going to screw it up this time."

"Dude, it's the guilt that kills us. Just because you don't believe in God doesn't necessarily make you a prick. Or an atheist. Just unattached. Sort of like walking on the field without a uniform so your balls are up for grabs. Not that I'm criticizing. Never forget, no matter what brand of twisted bullshit you pull, I'm always on your side." He grinned, tugged at his hair. "Come on. Who's your buddy?"

"She's that mad, huh?" I said.

Tomlinson replied, "Riddle me this: How many ancestors in her family named Hannah—we're talking Florida history—who

didn't fall for a dangerous screw-up of a man? Can't blame the woman for being a tad jumpy."

He was referring to the first of four Hannah Smiths in the Smith lineage, a woman whose corpse, after the 1910 hurricane, had been found in the Glades, murdered through association with an outlaw known as Bloody Ed Watson.

Watson, it was rumored, had killed without remorse until confronted by islanders determined to avenge the young woman's death. His shotgun had misfired, though, and that was the end of Bloody Ed.

"Knock it off," I said. "That was more than a hundred years ago. Entirely different circum..." I paused. "Hey—please tell me didn't you put that nonsense in her head."

My pal pressed, "And it didn't end too well for your fiancée's great aunt, Hannah-number-three, either. Dude, and we both *knew* that fine lady." This was said with emphasis for a reason. "People shoot the messenger, don't they? So, ask her yourself. You know I'm not the type to pry."

I'd nailed it, apparently. Hannah, my Hannah Smith, among the most decent, devoted people I'd ever met, wasn't just PO'ed. She was scared of adding yet another bad man to her family's history. *Me*.

It was serious this time.

We went down into the cabin odors of oiled teak, diesel, sandalwood incense. My pal hadn't exaggerated. The space was a straitjacket crammed with supplies. Water, food crates, fuel, cases of beer, stalks of green bananas, an inflatable raft, EPIRB emergency beacon attached. It was all secured by rope or bungee cords.

Portside, the settee table was forward of a little navigation station that held ham radio gear. The galley was starboard side. A pair of non-pressurized alcohol burners for cooking—less of a fire hazard than kerosene, but still gave me the willies in this claustrophobic space.

I said yes to a Diet Coke. He opened an iced bottle of Hatuey beer—spoils from Havana—that caused me to change my mind.

“I flew over Cuba this morning,” I said. “The western corridor. Pinar Del Rio and Vinales.”

Tomlinson had donned a sarong and a T-shirt that showed his ribs. He smiled in a dreamy way. “Farm village with the wooden baseball stadium. Yeah, man. Sweetest people there—I hit a dinger as I recollect. In jetliners, I can’t count how many times I’ve wished I had a parachute. You know, D. B. Cooper my ass down to a saner world.”

The man was sober enough not to ask where I’d been.

His smile faded. “Storm trackers expect the storm to skirt South America, bounce off some islands and cross western Cuba. Damn, wish they licensed more of my ham radio comrades to operate down there. Hardly any—and most of those, they jam. I’m trying, though. Last night, I worked a station in Grenada. Guy said it wasn’t bad at all. Fifty-knot winds and rain. The standard kimchi, but it was still a day south.”

We were back on the subject of hurricanes.

I thought back to turbulence off a jungled coastline and realized the storm, after getting a head start off Africa, was following a flight path similar to my own.

“Tomlinson, do me a favor,” I said. “Let’s have *No Más* hauled out of the water. Or sail to Okeechobee. That’s where most of the liveboards are heading. I’ll pick you up and we can stop in Clewiston for barbecue. They do vegetarian and there’s a nice little museum, too. My cousin, Butch Wilson, runs the place.”

Like Mack, he shook his head and asked a similar question.

“Remember that Cat-Five supposed to hit us a few years back? If the same thing happens, a hundred thousand people on this coast are gonna feel butt-dumb ugly and stupid again. The sky is falling, the sky is falling. What a freakin’ shit show that was.”

My response was the same.

I remembered.

We all did.

★ ★ ★

Eight years ago, when the governor announced, “If you don’t leave now, it’ll be too late,” thousands of Gulf Coast residents fled north, a mass exodus on I-75, only to be trapped in traffic because there wasn’t an empty hotel room between Naples and Atlanta.

The rains came. Cars hydroplaned, semis careened. An unknown number of pileups and crashes added to the chaos. Hundreds more ran out of gas and were left stranded on the side of the road.

Worse—or best of all—the hurricane missed its projected landfall and did very little damage to the west coast.

Later, angry evacuees would argue that they should’ve never left. It was safer to ride out a storm at home than risk death on the interstate.

A group of us, Mack, Tomlinson, Pulpo and Twiggy—dugout friends with nicknames—came up with a wiser plan. Or so we thought. Boats trailered, generators aboard, ice chests crammed, we caravanned our trucks east to a defunct hunting lodge in Central Florida. A thousand acres of cypress, pines and lakes loaded with bass, all leased annually and privately by an odd-ball friend of ours.

Talk about the safest of wise choices. The place was forty miles inland and far north of where the storm was projected to hit.

This was long before I’d asked Hannah to marry me. So our escape had a bachelor party feel to it. Not the sordid type that degrades all involved. No, we’d sit out the hurricane in comfort, do some fishing, grill steaks over a buttonwood fire, and have fun for a couple of days. By then we’d be at each other’s throats, and presumably, a lot of storm damage would await us back at the marina.

That’s not the way it happened.

The Cat-Five ricocheted off Cuba. It weakened to a Cat-Three and hammered the Keys before buzz-sawing up the mid-

dle of the peninsula, missing the west coast by—yep, forty-some miles.

By evacuating east, we'd driven right into the heart of the damn thing. It wasn't too bad. At first. Then around midnight, the eye of the storm went right over us, blowing in windows and ripping off part of the roof.

After a soggy, sleepless night, we cursed our "wisdom" when we walked out to inspect the damage.

In Tomlinson's words, "Shit-oh-dear. It looks like freakin' Nazis bombed the only road out. Where's Bogart when you need him?"

Hundred-foot-tall pine trees and power lines down everywhere.

It took a full day with chain saws and axes to clear a path. By then it was dark. Didn't matter. Mosquitoes and flotillas of fire ants made the decision. We packed up and wagon-trained west, only to be turned away at the Causeway bridge to the island we'd fled.

Closed for security reasons, we were told. And the bridge would stay closed "until further notice."

It was a smart call by authorities, in my opinion. Storm or not, an island that's been evacuated is a temptation to lawless types.

So we caravanned east, back to the leaky lodge. Days later, evacuees up and down the coast were finally allowed to return to their undamaged homes.

After the "deadly Cat-Five" debacle, Mack was not the first to vow, "Never again."

The sky is falling, indeed.