**Earth Abide excerpts**

**By George R. Stewart**

**Summary:** Isherwood Williams, a college student working on his thesis, is in the Black Creek Area when he finds an old miner's hammer and is bitten by a rattlesnake. After he recovers, he encounters no one other than a single dead body on the side of the road then finds a newspaper reporting of the crisis. He finds a few survivors but they seem to represent the dregs of society or have gone insane from the shock. He loads up a station wagon with supplies for a trip east, is joined by a dog he later names Princess and heads for New York City, hoping to find surviving communities along the way. His search is largely futile, and he finds only a scattered few survivors, none that he wants to settle with.

Ish and a woman he meets named Em early on began numbering the years and giving them names. Ish always chiseled those names with a miner's hammer he'd found on the day the rattlesnake bit him. Ish also eventually comes to abandon the idea that he and his kids will rebuild civilization and turns instead to searching for things he might teach them that will actually make a difference in the lives they live. He teaches the younger ones to make bows and arrows and to make fire without matches. By the fourth generation, the young men are skilled at both and have begun to drop their dependence on items scavenged from the area stores. Ish is pleased and when his time comes to die, he's asked to hand off the hammer. He does so, choosing his great-grandson, Jack, as the recipient.

Of half a million species of insects only a few dozen were appreciably affected by the demise of man, and the only ones actually threatened with extinction were the three species of the human louse. So ancient, if not honorable, was this association that it had even been used as an argument for the single origin of man, anthropologists noting that all isolated tribes scratched and picked at the same parasites and therefore inferring that the original age-men must have carried the original insect-ancestors outward with them from their point of dispersal.

Since that first departure, throughout hundreds of millennia, the lice had adjusted their life nicely to their world, which was the body of man. They existed as three tribes, taking as their domains, respectively, the head, the clothing, and the private parts. Thus, in spite of racial differences, they amicably maintained a tripartite balance of power, setting for their host an example which he might well have followed. At the same time, becoming so exactly adapted to man, they lost the capacity of existing upon any other host.

The overthrow of man was therefore their overthrow. Feeling their world growing cold, they crawled off in search of some new warm world to inhabit, found none, and died. Billions perished most miserably.

At the funeral of *Homo sapiens* there will be few mourners. *Canis familiaris* as an individual will perhaps send up a few howls, but as a species, remembering all the kicks and curses, he will soon be comforted and run off to join his wild fellows. *Homo sapiens*, however, may take comfort from the thought that at his funeral there will be three wholly sincere mourners.

—*Earth Abides*, p. 64-65

Stretched out between its rivers, the city will remain for a long time. Stone and brick, concrete and asphalt, glass—time deals gently with them. Water leaves black stains, moss shows green, a little grass springs up in the cracks. (That is only the surface.) A window-pane grows loose, vibrates, breaks in a gusty wind. Lightning strikes, loosening the tiles of a cornice. A wall leans, as footings yield in the long rains; after years have passed, it falls, scattering bricks across the street. Frost works, and in the March thaw some flakes of stone scale off. (It is all very slow.) The rain washes quietly through the gutters into the storm-drains, and if the storm-drains clog, the rain runs still through the gutters into the rivers. The snow piles deep in the long canyons, drifting at the street corners; no one disturbs it. In the spring, it too runs off through the gutters. As in the desert, a year is like an hour in the night; a century, like a day.

Indeed the city is much like the desert. From the asphalt and concrete-coated soil the rains runs off both ways in the rivers. Here and there in a crack the subtle grass and the hardy weeds grow up a little, but no tree or vines or tall grass takes root. The very shade trees by the avenues, lacking man’s care, die in their shallow pockets. The deer and the rabbits shun the empty streets; after a while even the rats go away. Only the flying creatures find there a refuge—the birds nest on the high ledges, and at morning and evening the bats fly out and in through the few broken windows. It will remain a long time, a very long time.

—*Earth Abides*, p. 72-73

With Power-and-Light it was all so carefully contrived that even in the disaster there was no need of adjustment. The men fell sick, but the generators still sent out along the wires their finely timed pulsations. So, when the brief agony of mankind was ended, the lights still burned.

So it continued through the weeks. If a wire broke and cut out a whole town from the flow of power, the system adjusted before that wire had had time to fall to the ground. If a power-house failed, just as quickly the other power-houses in the system stretching across hundreds of miles took up the slack, and sent out more power to fulfill the need.

Yet in any system, as in a chain or a road, there is always a weakest link. (That is the fatal flaw of all systems.) The water would continue to flow; the great generators could spin upon their oil-bathed bearings for years. But the flaw lay in the governors which controlled the generators. No one had ever bothered to make them wholly automatic. Once every ten days they were inspected for oil; once a month, perhaps, there was need to add oil to them. After two months without care the oil supplies grew low, and one by one, as the weeks passed, the governors began to go out of action. When one failed, automatically the great water-nozzle changed angle and the water flowed through without touching the wheel. Then the generator ceased revolving, and sent out no more power. As generator after generator was thus cut out of the system, the strain upon the few remaining ones became greater and greater and the decline of the system became cumulative.

—*Earth Abides*, p. 99-100

* **Directions:** After reading these excerpts about what happens to things on Earth after humans just vanish one day, write your own 3 paragraphs about what happens to one specific place or system when humans are gone one day from Planet Earth.