



*Alas, Babylon*

Pat Frank

Foreword by David Brin

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“Alas, Babylon.” Those fateful words heralded the end. When a nuclear holocaust ravages the United States, a thousand years of civilization are stripped away overnight, and tens of millions of people are killed instantly. But for one small town in Florida, miraculously spared, the struggle is just beginning, as men and women of all backgrounds join together to confront the darkness.

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“An enthralling and vivid story of the follies and failures of people, their courage and cruelty, their treachery and triumphs. Mr. Frank is a magnificent writer.”  
—*Chicago Sunday Tribune*



**PAT FRANK** was born in 1908. His books include *Mr. Adam* and *Forbidden Area*. He died in 1964.

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## About the author (2005)

Pat Frank" was the lifelong nickname adopted by the American writer, newspaperman, and government consultant, who was born Harry Hart Frank (1908-1964), and who is remembered today almost exclusively for his post-apocalyptic novel *Alas, Babylon*. Before the publication of his first novel *Mr. Adam* launched his second career as novelist and independent writer, Frank spent many years as a journalist and information handler for several newspapers, agencies, and government bureaus. His fiction and nonfiction books, stories, and articles made good use of his years of experience observing government and military bureaucracy and its malfunctions, and the threat of nuclear proliferation and annihilation. After the success of *Alas, Babylon*, Frank concentrated on writing for magazines and journals, putting his beliefs and concerns to political use, and advising various government bodies. In 1960 he served as a member of the Democratic National Committee. In 1961, the year in which he received an American Heritage Foundation Award, he was consultant to the National Aeronautics and Space Council. From 1963 through 1964 the Department of Defense made use of Frank's expertise and advice, and this consultancy turned out to be his last response to his country's call. His other books include *Mr. Adam* and *Forbidden Area*.

**David Brin has degrees in astronomy and applied physics but has been a full-time science fiction writer for many years. He has won the Hugo Award for Best Novel for both "The Uplift War " and "Startide Rising, " which also won the**

**Nebula Award. He has also won the Hugo Award for short story. His novel "The Postman " was recently made into a feature film starring Kevin Costner. He lives near San Diego, California, with his wife and children**

In Fort Repose, a river town in Central Florida, it was said that sending a message by Western Union was the same as broadcasting it over the combined networks. This was not entirely true. It was true that Florence Wechek, the manager, gossiped. Yet she judiciously classified the personal intelligence that flowed under her plump fingers, and maintained a prudent censorship over her tongue. The scandalous and the embarrassing she excised from her conversation. Sprightly, trivial, and harmless items she passed on to friends, thus enhancing her status and relieving the tedium of spinsterhood. If your sister was in trouble, and wired for money, the secret was safe with Florence Wechek. But if your sister bore a legitimate baby, its sex and weight would soon be known all over town.

Florence awoke at six-thirty, as always, on a Friday in early December. Heavy, stiff and graceless, she pushed herself out of bed and padded through the living room into the kitchen. She stumbled onto the back porch, opened the screen door a crack, and fumbled for the milk carton on the stoop. Not until she straightened did her china-blue eyes begin to discern movement in the hushed gray world around her. A jerky-tailed squirrel darted out on the longest limb of her grapefruit tree. Sir Percy, her enormous yellow cat, rose from his burlap couch behind the hot water heater, arched his back, stretched, and rubbed his shoulders on her flannel robe. The African lovebirds rhythmically swayed, heads pressed together, on the swing in their cage. She addressed the lovebirds: "Good morning, Anthony. Good morning, Cleo."

Their eyes, spectacularly ringed in white, as if embedded in mint Life Savers, blinked at her. Anthony shook his green and yellow plumage and rasped a greeting. Cleo said nothing. Anthony was adventurous, Cleo timid. On occasion Anthony grew raucous and irascible and Florence released him into limitless freedom outside. But always, at dusk, Anthony waited in the Turk's-cap, or atop the frangipani, eager to fly home. So long as Cleo preferred comfortable and sheltered imprisonment, Anthony would remain a domesticated parrot. That's what they'd told her when she bought the birds in Miami a month before, and apparently it was true.

Florence carried their cage into the kitchen and shook fresh sunflower seed into their feeder. She filled Sir Percy's bowl with milk, and crumpled a bit

of wafer for the goldfish in the bowl on the counter. She returned to the living room and fed the angelfish, mollies, guppies, and vivid peons in the aquarium. She noted that the two miniature catfish, useful scavengers, were active. She was checking the tank's temperature, and its electric filter and heater, when the percolator chuckled its call to breakfast. At seven, exactly, Florence switched on the television, turned the knob to Channel 8, Tampa, and sat down to her orange juice and eggs. Her morning routine was unvaried and efficient. The only bad parts of it were cooking for one and eating alone. Yet breakfast was not her loneliest meal, not with Anthony ogling and gabbling, the six fat goldfish dancing a dreamy oriental ballet on diaphanous fins, Sir Percy rubbing against her legs under the table, and her cheery friends on the morning show, hired, at great expense, to inform and entertain her.

As soon as she saw Dave's face, Florence could sense whether the news was going to be good or bad. On this morning Dave looked troubled, and sure enough, when he began to give the news, it was bad. The Russians had sent up another Sputnik No. 23, and something sinister was going on in the Middle East. Sputnik No. 23 was the largest yet, according to the Smithsonian Institution, and was radioing continuous and elaborate coded signals. "There is reason to believe," Frank said, "that Sputniks of this size are equipped to observe the terrain of the earth below."

Florence gathered her pink flannel robe closer to her neck. She glanced up, apprehensively, through the kitchen window. All she saw were hibiscus leaves dripping in the pre-dawn ground fog, and blank gray sky beyond. They had no right to put those Sputniks up there to spy on people. As if it were on his mind also, Frank continued:

"Senator Holler, of the Armed Services Committee, yesterday joined others of a Midwest bloc in demanding that the Air Force shoot down Sputniks capable of military espionage if they violate U.S. air space. The Kremlin has already had something to say about this. Any such action, the Kremlin says, will be regarded the same as an attack on a Soviet vessel or aircraft. The Kremlin pointed out that the United States has traditionally championed the doctrine of Freedom of the Seas. The same freedom, says the Soviet statement, applies to outer space."

The newsman paused, looked up, and half-smiled in wry amusement at this complexity. He turned a page on his clipboard.

"There is a new crisis in the Middle East. A report from Beirut, via Cairo, says that Syrian tanks of the most modern Russian design have crossed the Jordanian frontier. This is undoubtedly a threat to Israel. At the same time Damascus charges that Turkish troops are mobilizing. . . ."

Florence flipped to Channel 6, Orlando, and country music. She did not understand, and could not become interested in, the politics of the Middle East. Sputniks seemed a closer and more personal menace. Her best friend Alice Cooksey, the librarian, claimed to have seen a Sputnik one evening at twilight. If you could see it, then it could see you. She stared up through the window again. No Sputnik. She rinsed the dishes and returned to her bedroom.

As she wrestled with her girdle, Florence's thought gravitated to the equally prying behavior of Randy Bragg. She adjusted the Venetian blinds until she could peer out. He was at it again. There he was, brazenly immodest in checked red and black pajamas, sitting on his front steps, knees akimbo and binoculars pressed to his eyes. Although he was perhaps seventy-five yards distant, she was certain he stared directly at her, and could see through the tilted louvers. She ducked back against the bedroom wall, hands protecting her breasts.

Almost every evening for the past three weeks, and on a number of mornings, she had caught him at it. Sometimes he was on the piazza, as now, sometimes at a second-floor window, and sometimes high up on the captain's walk. Sometimes he swept the whole of River Road with his glasses, pretending an interest elsewhere, but more often he focused on her bungalow. Randolph Rowzee Bragg a Peeping Tom! It was shocking!

Long before Florence's mother moved south and built the brown-shingle bungalow, the Braggs had lived in the big house, ungainly and monolithic, with tall Victorian windows and belly-ing bays and broad brick chimneys. Once it had been the show place of River Road. Now, it appeared shabby and outmoded compared with the long, low, antiseptic citadels of glass, metal, and tinted block constructed by rich Northerners who for the past

fifteen years had been "discovering" the Timucuan River. Still, the Bragg house was planked and paneled with native cypress, and encased in pine clapboard, hard as iron, that might last another hundred years. Its grove, at this season like a full green cloak flecked with gold, trailed all the way from back yard to river bank, a quarter mile. And she would say this for Randy, his grounds were well kept, bright with poinsettias and bougainvillea, hibiscus, camellias, gardenias, and flame vine. Florence had known Randolph's mother, Gertrude Bragg, well, and old Judge Bragg to speak to.

She had watched Randolph graduate from bicycle to jalopy, vanish for a number of years in college and law school, reappear in a convertible, vanish again during the Korean War, and finally come home for good when Judge Bragg and Mrs. Bragg were taken in the same year. Now here was Randy, one of the best known and most eligible young men in Tumucuan County, even if he did run around with Pistolville girls and drink too much, a-what was it the French called it? - a voyeur. It was disgusting. The things that went on in small towns, people wouldn't believe. Florence faced the bureau mirror, wondering how much he had seen.

Many years ago a man had told her she looked something like Clara Bow. Thereafter, Florence wore her hair in bangs, and didn't worry too much about her chubby figure. The man, an imaginative idealist, had gone to England in 1940, joined the Commandos, and got himself killed. She retained only a vague and inexact memory of his caresses, but she could never forget how he had compared her to Clara Bow, a movie star. She could still see a resemblance, provided she sucked in her stomach and lifted her chin high to erase the fleshy creases in her neck-except her hair was no longer like Clara's. Her hair had thinned, and faded to mottled pink. She hurriedly sketched a Clara Bow pout on her lips, and finished dressing.

When she stepped out of the front door, Florence didn't know whether she should cut Randy dead or give him a piece of her mind. He was still there on the steps, the binoculars in his lap. He waved, grinned, and called across lawn and road, "Morning, Miss Florence." His black hair was tousled, his teeth white, and he looked boyish, handsome, and inoffensive.

"Good morning, Randy," Florence said. Because of the distance, she had to shout, so her voice was not formal and frigid, as she had intended.