James Morrow.

**THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS**

Doctor Michel de Nostredame, who could see the future, sat in his secret study, looking at how the world would end.

The end of the world was spread across the prophet’s writing desk – one hundred images of destruction, each painted on a piece of glass no larger than a Tarot card. With catlike caution he dealt out the brittle masterpieces, putting them in dramatic arrangements. Which should come first? he wondered. The iron whales? The ramparts of flame? The great self-propelled spears?

By late afternoon the paintings were properly sequenced, and Nostradamus made ready to compose the hundred commentaries that would accompany them. He opened the window, siphoned sweet air through his nostrils.

Tulip gardens. Sun-buttered fields of clover. Crisp, white cottages. A finch chirped amid the nectar-gorged blossoms of a cherry tree. Now, thought the prophet, if only a cat would come along and devour the finch alive, I could rise to the task at hand.

He consulted the finch’s future. No cats. The bird would die of old age.

He pulled a drape across the window, lit seven candles, dipped his crow quill in a skull filled with ink, and began to write. The gloom, morbid and relentless, inspired him. Like blood from a cut vein, words flowed from Nostradamus’s pen; the nib scrabbled across the parchment. Shortly before midnight he completed the final commentary. The painting in question showed a bearded man standing alone on a boundless plain of ice. *And so our hero*, wrote the prophet, *last of the mortals, makes ready to fly into the bosom of our Lord. Such are the true facts of history yet to come*.

The dark oak of the writing desk had turned the painting into a looking glass. Etched in the ice field were the prophet’s raven eyes, craggy nose, and black tumble of beard – a face his wife nevertheless loved.

A boy wandered into his secret study.

‘You were about to give your name,’ said the prophet.

‘I was?’ The boy was fourteen, diminutive, olive-skinned, his curly black hair frothing from beneath a cloth cap.

‘Yes. Who are you?’ said the prophet.

‘They call me—’

‘Jacob Mirabeau. Tell me, lad, was the invitation that brings you to my private chambers printed on gold-leaf vellum or on ordinary paper?’

‘What?’

‘That was sarcasm. The coming thing. Mirabile dictu, what a reversal Bonaparte will suffer once he reaches Moscow!’

The boy yanked off his cap. ‘I know you! You are the one who sees what will happen. My mother collects your almanacs.’

‘Does she buy them, or does she merely find them lying around?’

‘She buys them.’

‘Would you care for a fig?’ Nostradamus asked cheerfully.

‘Merci . My mother places great store in your predictions. She thinks you are God-touched.’

‘Opinion about me is divided. The Salon rabble think I am a Satanist or, worse, a Huguenot, or, worse still, a Jew.’

‘You are a Jew.’

‘We are quite a pair, lad. I can see your future, you can see my past.’

‘I am a Jew as well.’ The boy gobbled his fig.

‘Do not trumpet it. Being Jewish is not exactly the wave of the future, believe me. The Inquisition has not yet run its course, the Pope would have us in ghettos. Get yourself baptized, that is my counsel to you. Forget this whole enterprise of being a Jew.’

‘Can you see some piece of the future right now, Monsieur le Docteur, or must you stare at the constellations first?’

‘The stars are unconnected to my powers, little Jew.’

‘But you have an astrolabe.’

‘Also a brass bowl, a tripod, and a laurel branch. My readers expect a full complement of nonsense.’

‘What do you foresee at the moment?’ asked the boy, rolling a fig seed between his tongue and teeth.

‘You are up too late. Do you realize it is almost midnight?’

‘What else do you foresee?’

‘Myself. Writing a large book.’ Nostradamus wove his crow quill through the air. ‘One hundred prophecies, in ill-phrased and leaden verse. Gibberish, every last line, but the mob will love them.