

Half the Battle

by Jameson Simmons

This past March, when the bizarre Nicolas Cage sci-fi apocalypse movie *Knowing* opened at #1 on the U.S. box office charts, it simply blew my mind. I didn't expect the movie to fail completely – the marketing push was too huge for that – but I figured it might open around fifth or seventh, especially with a sparkling Julia Roberts/Clive Owen spy thriller/romance and a Paul Rudd comedy out the same weekend. I knew very little about *Knowing* – from the glimpses I'd seen of its TV spots as I sailed past at triple-fast-forward, it seemed to involve Nicolas Cage, numerology, a plane crashing into a subway train, and some sort of Earth-consuming firestorm. I guessed it was a mashup of *The Da Vinci Code*, Cage's forgotten rewind/replay actioner *Next*, and *2012*. Yet somehow, despite barely breaking 40 on Metacritic, it was a smash at the box office, earning \$25 million in its first weekend.

So, when the DVD came out this summer, I decided I would watch it as a sort of sociological experiment. What was it that caused people to want to see this? I'd record my reactions in real time: "live-blogging," as the kids say. The disc arrived from Netflix, and... as usual, I promptly procrastinated. But this week brings news of Cage's financial ruin – a puzzling oddity, but an explanation for one of Hollywood's enduring head-scratchers: what compels him to make so many horrible films? *8mm*, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, *Ghost Rider*, and *Bangkok Dangerous* have an average Metascore of 29. Surely he doesn't need the money – well, it turns out, with his spending habits, he does. He's still a rather good actor – in all the times I've rolled my eyes at yet another Nicolas Cage movie, I've never sneered at his performance, it's always been his declining integrity as he signs on to flimsier and flimsier projects. Now we know why. And, with that, I have a hook to dive back in and examine *Knowing*: a film with absolutely nobody in it you've ever heard of other than Cage. A paycheck film – clearly a way for him to pay off whichever island or New Orleans mansion was in arrears to the appropriate tax agency last year.

Without further ado, let's watch *Knowing*. Spoilers ahead, obviously – though, as I like to say, I couldn't spoil this movie much worse than the filmmakers already have.

0:01

Alex Proyas will be our director. He made *The Crow* and *Dark City*, which were cult hits with the genre crowd, and *I, Robot*, which was utterly absurd and spun Isaac Asimov in his grave. Asimov's first law of robotics, hard-coded into all the robots in the story, is that robots can't hurt human beings. The hubris-filled premise of the movie's first act is that the robotics company is certain its robots are so well designed that they will never, under any circumstances, violate this law. (Just like that "unsinkable" Titanic, and we know how that turned out – or if you don't, Victor Garber and I have a

spoiler for you for another time.) Yet, when the inevitable occurs and the robots go on a murderous rampage *en masse*, each one has a red light in its chest which lights up to show that it has "gone rogue." So, we're meant to believe that, despite the robotics engineers' unflinching confidence that their designs would never flip out and cause harm to humans, they still put in a tally light which would switch on *just in case they did*? That's a design meeting I wish I could've attended.

"Why don't we put in a red light, to show if the robot has become a danger to humans?"

Our robots can never become a danger to humans, Bob.

"Yeah, but just say what if it did?"

It can't. Could never happen.

"But what would it cost to put in that light, just in case it did – like, a nickel per robot?"

Yeah, about a nickel.

"Then, why not put it in? It's just an extra nickel."

0:02

We open at recess outside an idyllic middle school in 1959. There's a loner girl with flat hair and saddle oxford shoes staring into the distance – this is going to be creepy shit indeed. Back in class, her teacher says things like, "You'll remember that tomorrow is the dedication ceremony for our new school, and you'll remember that we held a school-wide contest to determine the best way to mark the occasion." (Verbatim quote.) This is called backstory exposition, and this is called troweling it on poorly. They may as well have distributed a backstory pamphlet to audiences as they bought their tickets – at least then the characters could've talked naturally.

0:07

The creepy girl's idea has won the contest: a time capsule will be interred at the ceremony, filled with drawings from the students in the class to illustrate their view of the world of the future, rather than typical time capsule contents like hit records, Barbie dolls, and artifacts from the era. The girl (Lucinda) has decided to scribble a long string of numbers onto her paper instead of drawing a picture. This instantly makes me think of a great book called *Simple Simon*, which had a similar page of random numbers and a small child who could decode it. It was made into a bad movie with Bruce Willis. Before Lucinda can finish the last few digits, the teacher takes her paper away and scolds her that it isn't a picture. (But she puts it in the time capsule anyway.) Determined to finish the sequence, Lucinda hides in a janitor's closet and scratches the last few digits into the back of the door, tearing her fingers to shreds. Meanwhile, the typical shrill whispers overwhelm the sound effects track. Dude, Proyas, back down. We already saw the saddle oxfords – we know where this is headed.

0:08

Credits continue: Ryne Douglas Pearson co-produced and co-wrote this film. He wrote the book *Simple Simon*, which was the subject of one of those pre-publication bidding wars.

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It was a terrific book and, just as Larry Beinhart's *American Hero* was contorted and watered down into the subpar *Wag the Dog*, *Simple Simon* was stripped of all its best parts when it was made into the lukewarm *Mercury Rising*. If I were Pearson, I'd have gone back to the drawing board and tried again, too.

0:10

Present day. Cage and his son (Caleb) are looking at the stars, then Caleb calls it a night. He has to get to bed because it's a big day at school the next day:

"Tomorrow's the 50th anniversary, remember?"

"Of course I remember."

Moments later, as he tucks Caleb in, they talk about whether there are other places in the universe that can sustain life, and Cage, an astrophysicist, talks about the long odds. Then he stops himself: "I didn't mean heaven... I'm sure wherever mom is..."

All of this could've been in the expository pamphlets, people!

0:17

The 50th anniversary. Amazingly, in 50 years, the school hasn't been overrun by thugs, and all the students have actually showed up for the time capsule unveiling. You'd think they'd all be too busy skateboarding, shooting up, and sexting.

0:18

As part of the film's randomness vs. determinism theme, Cage's kid Caleb gets the envelope Lucinda put in the capsule, and it comes accompanied by the same creepy whispering on the sound effects track. Caleb seems to hear it, and it also sets his hearing aid screeching.

He spots a lone figure in the woods, observing from a distance, but when he looks again – he's vanished!

This is where I go from nitpicking about some clunky dialogue and robots with red "kill mode" lights into actually being disappointed with the movie. Why do we need these creepy stalker people in addition to what has the potential to be a pretty satisfying mystery plot? We've got these numbers and, according to the trailer, they're going to crash a plane or melt the planet – why do we need visions and whispers to round this out? Seriously, audiences – this is what you spend \$25 million on? What does Paul Rudd have to do?!

0:25

Despite initially scoffing at the page of numbers, Cage starts looking at it and the first numbers he sees are 911012996, which can be divided up to say 9/11/01: 2996. The date and fatality count of the terrorist attacks Rudy Giuliani likes to talk about. Of course, you could also divide them up

differently and get one of those dialing prefixes that saves you ten cents on long distance, or the bar code for a pack of Trident; or you could start with a different set of numbers – he just picks these right out of the middle. Nevertheless, he determines that the whole page is dates and fatality counts, the kind of numbers that are easy for your mystical list to get right when you're talking about a plane crash with a passenger manifold, but the Indonesian Tsunami? What are the chances Wikipedia and the whispery voices are going to sync up on that number? We couldn't get the Million Man March right!

At any rate, Cage freaks out. This is going to be one of those movies where he runs around trying to convince people that something bad is about to happen and they act like he's a wackjob. Sometimes it's a liability being Nicolas Cage. Nobody ever dismisses Clint Eastwood like that.

0:32

A car shows up outside Cage's house, accompanied by more whispering on the sound effects track. Presumably the whispers are coming from the people in the car. They reach out and hand an onyx pebble to Caleb, while Cage watches in horror from an upstairs window. God damn it, movie. Why do we need creepy shit like this? Isn't it eerie enough that the little girl wrote down all those numbers that described every major catastrophe in the last 50 years, including the hotel fire that killed Cage's wife a while ago?

By the way, it makes me wonder how many deaths it takes to get on the whisper list. 48 people died in the hotel fire, so it's under 100. But there has to be a cutoff, because the page is only so big.

0:34

Cage's sister shows up out of nowhere (he had a sister?) and mentions that he should call his dad more often. As she says it, "I get that you don't like being the son of a pastor." Hey – save it, lady. Put it in the pamphlet!

0:36

On today's date, the whisper list says 81 people will die. Cage starts flipping through the news channels right at midnight, looking for the number 81. When an oil rig explodes, he leans in, but when everyone is evacuated safely, he seems almost disappointed. Seems to me he could check on this later, online. No need to see it happen live to prove it happened today.

0:37

He's off to pick up Caleb at school and he's late because he nodded off in front of the news. The freeway is crowded and it's pouring rain. Today's the day! If that weren't portentous enough for you, here's some ominous music!

A glance at his GPS navigator reveals that the extra numbers on his paper that have been puzzling him all along are latitude and longitude, and that the coordinates for today's

disaster happen to align with the spot right where he is. He gets out and starts walking, as though a person could outrun such a thing.

0:39

Yay, movie! Instead of a freeway pileup, we get a fiery plane crash! Excellent switcheroo. Even though there was a plane crash in the trailer, this was still a complete surprise – I like that. Now there are a lot of people burning alive, which seems strong for a PG-13 movie. Cage runs into the wreckage to try to save people.

Ahh... interesting. There are supposed to be 81 deaths today. If he dies trying to haul someone to safety, will it be 82? If he successfully CPR's a guy who collapsed, will it be 80? Coincidence vs. determinism. Game on! Cage saves at least three people.

0:42

Newscasters covering the aftermath say the body count is 81 now. This leaves us to determine that Cage was destined to run into the wreckage and save the people he saved, and his foreknowledge couldn't have prevented the crash – no matter what he did, 81 people were going to die. (Just like in *Oedipus Rex*, when his parents learn of the prophecy that he'll grow up to murder his father and sleep with his mother, they send him off to be killed – but precisely this action is what causes him to come back not knowing they're his parents, and history's first Marry/Boff/Kill is the predestined result.) At this point, a smart Nicolas Cage would look at the other two tragedies on the whisper list and think two things:

1. No matter what I do, these things are going to happen, and these exact numbers of people are going to die. I might as well stay home and catch up on the *Buffy* DVDs, because nothing I do will make a whit of difference.

2. If there are only two more catastrophes on the list, gosh that second one must be a whopper! Anything I want to do before I go to not-heaven, I better get on it. (Again, those *Buffy* DVDs are calling...)

And yet.

0:45

Meanwhile, Caleb is trying to sleep. A figure watches the house from the woods across the street.

It's a shame there always has to be this extra, sinister explanation. There's plenty to be interested by just with what we already have! Why do we need to add in this weird cult of people tampering with the scenario? Why the unseen high-pitched whisperers on the sound effects track? I hate to rail on *Lost* yet again, but this is exactly the sort of thing that ruined *Lost* for me.

0:47

Sinister Man is at the boy's window now, all backlit and

pointing at him sinisterly, causing a Close Encounters glow and rumble. Jesus. (I mean, if he actually *were* Jesus, at least that'd be something.) He shows the kid a vision of the entire forest ablaze. Elk running while burning alive in agony. That's healthy. Why do we need to see this? Why does anybody? This is like *Bambi* meets *Saw*, for Christ's sake!

The kid starts screaming, and of course Cage thinks it was all just a bad dream.

0:56

Cage has mapped the coordinates of the next disaster and it's in New York City. On the news, there's chatter of a terrorist attack on the East coast, so the DHS alert level is back to "red." Remember when we used to hear about that thing all the time?

He uses a pay phone to warn the FBI about the intersection where the coordinates indicate, then dumps Caleb with his sister and drives through the night. Um, hello? *Buffy* DVDs?

(Wouldn't that be awesome, by the way? If the last hour of the movie were just him watching a really good TV show? Someone drags you to a Nic Cage movie you're not that wild about, and then halfway through, it stops and you get two kickass *30 Rock* episodes – man, that would be awesome!)

0:57

Methinks the subway smash from the trailer may be imminent. Whether or not the police cordon off that intersection at street level won't make much of a difference in that case. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that there's no actual terrorist plot, just a run-of-the-mill accident like the plane crash. So often, terrorist chatter turns out to be nothing more than chatter, anyway. Of course, I'd be super happy if Cage himself causes the crash in some inadvertent way. *Oedipus* lives!

0:58

He runs up to the intersection, frantic, yelling about why hasn't it been sealed off. Turns out they were just waiting there to nab the wackjob who called in the phony tip from the pay phone the night before. He has to run for it. Never happens to Eastwood, dude. Get a haircut.

0:59

So of course he's downstairs on the subway platform and he sees a vaguely swarthy dude who spooks when a middle-aged white guy looks at him funny. (On a New York subway platform? In today's "If you suspect anything, do everything" age of paranoia? Makes sense to me!) When the guy runs, Cage gives chase, which causes major commotion. Subway cops start chasing, too. Please cause the crash, please cause the crash...

1:01

The swarthy guy with the hoodie was just carrying bootleg

DVDs. See?

The switch in the rail line shorts out. Sparks. Derailment. Weeee!

1:02

If I were a subway station engineer in New York, I'd be really offended by scenes like this where an errant subway car can just smash through support columns and staircases, leaving nothing but dust. You've got to believe those columns are stronger than that. But it sure does look cool in a movie.

1:03

Cage emerges from the subway tunnel, covered in soot, surrounded in ash and dust, walking through Manhattan. All he needs is Michael Peña by his side, and he could be in a bad, exploitative Oliver Stone movie.

So of course he didn't fix anything – all the whisper list did was give him a front row seat for some mayhem. I guess he's just really not into *Buffy*. Maybe this is what he wants to do with his last few days of life. It takes all kinds...

1:07

Along the way, Cage has tracked down Diana, who is the surviving daughter of Lucinda (the little girl from the opening, who transcribed the whisper list in the first place). She and her daughter Abby now accompany him – at first he freaked Diana out, asking about her mom's prophecy, but now she's starting to see the reality of it. Her mom always told Diana she would die on October 19, which happens to be the day of the last event on the whisper list, so she's kind of intrigued now.

As they drive to a trailer in the woods where Lucinda used to live (for some reason), Cage tells an interesting story about how he was doing boring yard work at the exact moment his wife was dying in a hotel fire out of town (unbeknownst to him, of course). Since the movie kind of wimped out on its whole determinism vs. randomness premise and refuses to confront the fate question head-on by having Cage cause the very catastrophe he's trying to prevent, this is probably my favorite moment so far. It's a thought-provoking idea: where are you and what are you doing at a fateful moment that you don't yet know is fateful? He thought he'd be connected to his wife across great distances because of the strength of their bond, but it doesn't really work that way.

Then the movie tries to tie this story back to the whole random vs. fate concept, and it loses me. He even says if he'd had the list before she went on that trip, he'd have saved her, which proves he hasn't been paying attention because she was already on the list and what's on the list always comes true.

1:14

Scratched on the underside of the bed in Lucinda's trailer is

the explanation for EE, an abbreviation on her whisper list next to the final event, where the death toll number should be: "Everyone Else." A whopper of a catastrophe, indeed!

1:16

While Cage and Diana were rifling the trailer, their kids were hanging out in the car. The whisper people showed up and started bugging them, so the parents came out and Cage gave chase. After confronting one of the whisper people, it opened its mouth and out came a blast of light like a movie projector – it blinded him with one burst. Crazy. See, this is the sort of additional stuff this movie simply does not need.

It comes out that Abby (Lucinda's granddaughter) and Caleb are somehow linked together in all this – she admits the whisper people have been following her, too.

Diana whimpers that she can't let anything happen to Abby. I think she's missing the concept of *everyone* else. If everyone's gone, nobody's going to miss anyone. We'll all be together (or not-be together, depending on what you believe).

1:21

Cage, who you'll remember teaches astrophysics at MIT, even though it was barely mentioned, now thinks the big "everyone else" event is a solar flare event (superflare) that's going to nuke the planet. It's related to a research paper he wrote years ago, but at the time he didn't think the superflare was going to happen and now he does – and it's going to happen in a few days.

At this point, I would almost be able to understand the \$25 million opening weekend, but *Knowing* was #1 the second weekend also. I get that March Madness was going on, so people ideally suited to go watch Paul Rudd be awesome were probably saying "I'll get to that later." But people were coming out of *Duplicity* and talking about what a fun ride it was, and how Clive and Julia were cute together but not so much that it felt like a chick flick and it had fun twists and turns, and then people were coming out of *Knowing* and talking about how, yes a plane blew up and a subway car blew up, but the rest of the time it was creepy whispers and when it was time for it all to be tied together and make some sense, they just pulled this solar superflare out of their ass at the last minute like Laurie Metcalf in *Scream 2*. People heard this information, and they went to see *Knowing* in droves. I just can't explain that.

Also, if you're going to have a movie where albino whisper people with projector bulbs for mouths are going around bestowing onyx pebbles on prescient children and doling out information about future fatal catastrophes in the form of numerical sequences, why are you suddenly hung up on having a realistic-sounding scientific explanation for the big apocalyptic finale? How about "the whisper people did it?" How about "a billion simultaneous worldwide subway crashes?"

1:26

Diana is in a panic and wants to hide from the planet-melting solar superflares in some caves where she used to play as a kid. Cage calls his dad, breaking the silent treatment to warn him to at least hide in the basement or something. (Temperatures in the basement should stay at a relatively temperate 4000 degrees.) Dad, being a pastor you'll remember, says he'll go when the Lord calls him. Oh, fate vs. randomness! This movie will flirt with the fascinating conundrums of your philosophical intricacies whenever it has a few minutes to spare!

1:28

Cage finally realizes it'd be a good idea to get his hands on that janitor's closet door where Lucinda scratched her last few numbers with her fingernails, 50 years ago. They'll be the coordinates for the "everyone else" event, although if the planet's going to melt, you'd think "everywhere" is where it's going to happen. Is it going to "extra melt" in one particular location?

Diana, wanting no part of this dallying, grabs the kids and high tails it for the caves. At this point Cage takes the gloves off and tells her the radiation will penetrate a mile into the Earth's crust. That's just mean. (And evidently Father Dad has a lead basement, or Cage was just humoring him all along, too.)

1:31

Diana, on the run with Abby and Caleb, learns that the whisper people can find them anywhere because they can whisper directly into their heads. See, with them failing to properly deal with that problem, it seems like it renders everything else more or less moot. Who cares how many caves you hide in if your pursuers can always pull that trick?

Then she pulls into a gas station and tells the children to stay put in the car while she goes to pay. It's astonishing how often these parents tell their children to wait in the car when they know whisper people who know their exact location are on the prowl for them.

1:33

Over the Emergency Broadcast System, the Pentagon is warning everyone about the superflares and telling them to head underground. They're asking them politely not to loot or riot, though.

Caleb calls his dad from a pay phone, which results in Cage and Diana bickering about where to take the kids. She wants the caves, he wants Lucinda's trailer (where the door's coordinates say to go). While this is happening, the whisper people jump in Diana's car and take both kids anyway.

1:35

Diana steals a car from the gas station and tears off after them, but of course she runs a red light trying to catch up and gets T-boned by a semi. As the clock strikes midnight on

10/19, the paramedics at the scene call her time of death. Momma said there'd be days like this. Can't outrun fate, my dear.

1:36

People at the gas station are really rioting and looting a lot. It's like they don't believe the Pentagon can see them or do anything about it right now. Meanwhile, despite all the mayhem, the attendant is a remarkably reliable witness when Cage screeches up and barks a lot of specific questions about the kidnapping and ensuing chase.

1:41

He gets to Lucinda's trailer and the car is already there, but the whisperers and children aren't in it. When he catches up to them, the whisperers are, as always, maddeningly mum. Caleb emerges at the last minute with a white rabbit. "We have to go with them," he says. "They won't hurt us." Abby also has a white rabbit.

1:42

A spaceship shows up. Oh, what the hell. So the whole thing was sort of a Noah's Ark deal, to get Caleb and Abby aboard to preserve the human race (and the white rabbit race gets to live on, as a bonus).

I'll give Proyas credit for the spaceship. It's weirdly organic, mainly shifting forms of ethereal light, and completely vague. So much better than some spaceships that are way too intricate. It's just a hint of a spaceship, and you can do the rest with your imagination or not.

1:44

It's tough, but Cage doesn't get to go. Even worse, his kid has to break the news to him, because the whisperers only speak in whispers, and only directly into the children's brains. But when you're repopulating a species, the last thing you need is extra dudes, so Cage has to stay.

1:49

This whole launch area is covered with more of the black pebbles, which have never been explained – maybe each one represents a soul? Anyway, some of them hover when the ship takes off. Would it be too much trouble to ask you to swing by the sun on your way out, and cool it down a tad?

There are about a dozen other ships, so maybe Caleb and Abby don't have to recreate all of humanity all by themselves. (Good news, minorities!)

1:51

Cage drives back into town. Fires, rioting, looting, aurora borealis during the day. Nobody kills him and takes his pickup, though. He heads to his parents' house. The TV shows a newscaster who is nobly vowing to stay on air "for as long as possible" – as though in our dying moments we would draw some comfort from their repetitive speculation and patter. Cage gives his dad a hug, and then the Earth

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explodes. Damn, it's a good thing he didn't hit any red lights. Five seconds later and that whole reunion would've never happened. But this way, he has closure.

1:54

Everything on Earth is destroyed in a fireball that heads across the planet from one end to the other. Luckily the camera stays around so we can see it all burst into flames in some very elaborate effects shots. I'm thankful no forest creatures are involved – that one shot was enough for me, thank you.

1:55

Then it's an extraterrestrial Eden where Caleb and Abby frolic in fields of computer-generated wheat with their rabbits under the benevolent eye of their lightship. Other ships hover in the distance, as though they dropped off other couples. But it does seem like a repopulation effort. A weird way for it all to begin again, just a few sets of kids. We all saw how CBS's *Kid Nation* went.

Overall, less bad than I expected, given the material I had seen on TV. But still staggeringly preposterous – even by its own terms. And, worst of all, every time it got close to a fascinating existential question, it backed down. That made it hard to feel like the whole experience was very worthwhile; the same premise could have been rendered far more interesting with only slightly more daring choices. But terrible movies make tons of money all the time – look at the *Transformers* franchise. What boggles me is why a relatively unexciting and unfriendly movie would do so well. As I understand it, free will is one of most people's most closely held beliefs, and this movie shits all over that. But, on the other hand, it does present itself as a very thoughtful and intricate mystery, even though it isn't – so maybe if you're too dumb to follow *actual* thoughtful, intricate movies, this one gives you the rush of what it might feel like to be able to do it, without the effort.

My estimation would align with that of James Berardinelli of ReelViews: "Science fiction fans will feel gypped, disaster movie fans will appreciate about 10 minutes of screen time and be bored by the rest, and no one else will care." #5 opening weekend, tops. But Roger Ebert gave it 4 out of 4 stars and it dominated its first two weekends, so what the fuck do I know?
