

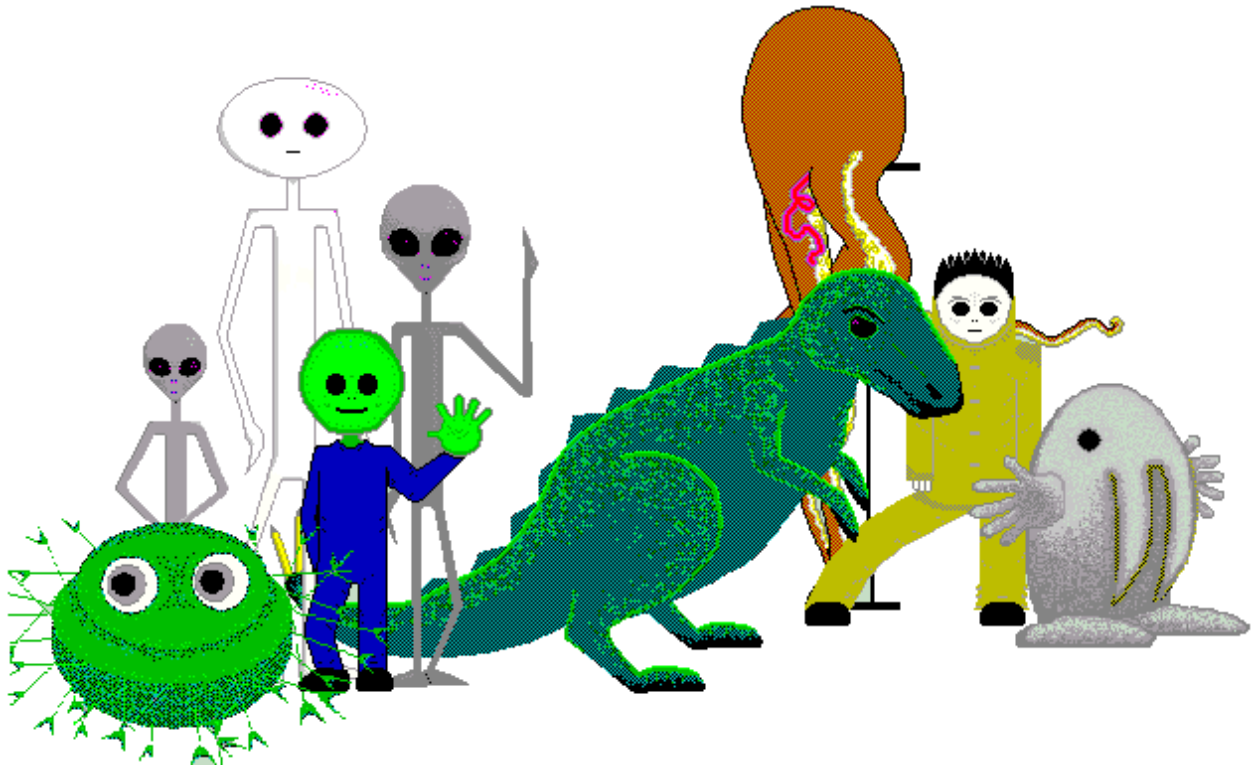
The Passage

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-Introduction-

The Passage follows several groups as they experience a pole shift and are increasingly introduced to friendly aliens. These themes and the cover-up over the approaching danger are introduced early. Martha, as a child, and her young son Billy are both shown to be contactees. The cover-up over the approaching rogue planet that will cause the pole shift is encountered when the public tries to use observatory telescopes.

Danny, a young journalist encounters the pole shift cover-up when he tries to publish a theory held by a local East Coast professor. The story follows Danny. Discouraged at being dismissed by his editor, Mr. Maya, he goes on a camping trip to the West with his girl friend Daisy. Hitting it off with another couple, Frank and Jane, up in the Rockies, they discuss professor Isaac's theories and the congruence of prophecy, folklore, and geographic evidence.

A local rancher, Big Tom, finds his cattle restless and his wife Martha drinking beer in the middle of the day when the earth starts moaning. The pole shift hits, preceded by days of darkness, red dust, and a slowing rotation. A tent city is erected. An old timer at the ranch, Red, keeps the family on an even keel. Martha and Red feed the group possum and earthworms and Red cobbles together a windmill from a lawnmower and car parts.

Various groups migrate to a local ranch, as the roads and communications are disrupted. Danny and his friends are looking for a working phone and some gas for their car. The local Mayor, Herman, along with a couple close to the ranch folks, Len and Clara, are looking for any place not devastated. Netty, the lone survivor at a resort, is being pursued by the Groggin brothers, who are dealt with in vigilante style justice. Mark, the pilot of a downed small plane, and his lover Brian are looking for rescue. The group shares stories.

Insanity due to the stress of the changes affect little Tammy and Brian. Young Billy receives a gift from the Zetas to cure his sister. Mark takes Brian back to the plane wreck to rig an air balloon, traveling under strong west winds to New York City, viewing the devastation as they go.

The group gathering at the ranch soon encounter a rogue military unit, lead by General Flood and his acquiescing assistant Sergeant Hammond. They must leave the ranch for their own safety after Jane has been killed during a rape attempt. The traveling band lives off the land as their supplies have run out. The group find evidence of cannibalism.

The traveling group then encounter another survival group led by Ian, established on a river bluff. There Frank meets a new love in Madge, a mute cook. Red helps an old timer at the camp cobble together a wood gas generator for the antique tractor.

The rogue military unit follows, as Colonel Cage and others assigned to quell the ranch rebellion have broken orders. On the move again, the group encounter an innovative houseboat city afloat in the river, using plastic bottles as floatation devices. They arrive at a dome city under the protection of benign visitors, the Zetas. The dome city is self sufficient, growing food indoors. The city mayor, Jonah, is an obvious contactee and hybrid children live at the dome city. After a battle in which the protection of the Zetas plays a part, the residents of the dome city find they have some friendly new neighbors, not entirely human.

Danny and Netty are taken on a tour to meet alien lifeforms. Billy is the tour guide. They meet an intelligent octopus, a hominoid pair with thick plate covered skin, an intelligent jellyfish in a living ball of water, and intelligent manta rays living on a poisonous gaseous planet.

-Prolog-

Martha, as a little girl, is in the swamp near the ranch home where she is being raised by her father as an only child. Martha is dressed in a short sleeved T-shirt and blue jean coveralls with the name "Martha" stitched in faded red lettering across the left side of her coverall bib. She is barefoot, hair in pig-tails, an obvious tom-boy. She is munching half a sandwich as she approaches a clearing at the edge of a pond. There is a large tree at the edge, with another nearby laid out on the ground with the top branches splashed into the pond. The roots of the fallen tree have pulled from the ground, forming a disc of tangled roots as tall as a man, leaving a shallow hole in the ground where the tree used to stand. Grass has grown around this area, as sunlight can now get through.

Martha is listening to the thrumming of the frogs, a chorus, and has stopped munching her sandwich in fascination, looking out over the pond in a type of rapture. There is a splash to the side, a racoon at the waters edge, and Martha forgets the frogs, turning her head sharply toward the sound with a slight smile. She knows this racoon. She leans over putting her sandwich on the grass and creeps back behind the huge roots of the fallen tree, which easily hide her small frame which is half the size of the root base. The racoon scuttles over to investigate the sandwich, then chitters at something it sees descending from the sky. The area is lighted, soundlessly, for a moment, while the racoon grabs the sandwich and runs off with it.

A sport size space ship, 25 feet in diameter, is descending rapidly into the clearing Martha is exploring. Motion is very rapid at first, slowing suddenly near the ground. A ramp lowers from one side, and a small beige Zeta bounds out, not bothering to walk down the ramp as much as touching the ramp only at a couple points. Another floats out, touching down on the grass. Martha has her mouth slightly open, is blinking a bit too much, and is stepping further behind the tree roots.

A small beige colored Zeta, no larger than Martha, comes around the root base, leaning forward head first as though to establish eye contact first, to not startle Martha. He walks up to Martha, takes her hand, and turns to lead her back into the grassy area at the edge of the pond. Martha displays no fear. Two other little Zetas are outside the ship on the grass, one bent over and reaching a hand out to the racoon who is also not fearful and standing on rear legs, as though the two of them were having a conversation, silent and telepathic.

Now in the current day, the fallen tree has rotted, is sinking into the ground, and more brush has grown up where the grass used to be. Billy wades along the edge of a pond, his jeans rolled up to just below his knees and his shoes tossed on the edge of the pond. The water is cool against his bare legs, taking his mind off the hot sun. A large fallen tree that has thrown its branches into the pond when it fell has rotten so that most of the branches are broken off and sinking into mud. The trunk of the tree is falling apart, covered now with moss in places, and brush has grown up along the sides of the tree. The rain has reduced to a steady drizzle and drip, the fallen tree looking wet and Billy's flannel shirt looking damp and clingy.

Billy freezes and moves slowly, his hands out in front of him as though to grab something as he lowers his body slowly toward the side of a tall grass clump at the edge of the swamp. He grabs a frog.

Gotcha!

The frog is struggling, long legs hanging down and kicking. Billy lets it go, the frog leaping out of his hands into the pond. He's good hearted, while being all boy. He leans back against the fallen tree trunk, digging a cookie out of his pocket and takes a bite. Billy looks around the swamp edge, scanning the water. All is silent, no chorus of frogs. A puzzled look comes over his face. He blinks.

Red is in the tool room in the barn, hiding out again. Retirement does not suit him, and where he has no cause to regret living with his daughter on the farm, being a perpetual guest is also a difficult role for the guff old man to maintain. Here, among the tools, he is in his realm, unchallenged as the authority, and feels he is adding something solid, something real, to the family's well being. Going by the nickname Red, more for his tendency to get behind issues quickly and passionately than the touch of red in his shock of graying hair, the old man finds these moments when he is alone and unchallenged restful. His kingdom may be a dusty room full of rusting tools, but increasingly, this is where he spends his day. Billy comes up to his Gramps, uneasy and wanting to share with the old man, who always has an ear and a keen interest in his grandson's exploits and discoveries. Billy is upset.

Gramps . . all the frogs are gone!

The old man says,

. . What you say Billy?

Billy is distressed.

*There's no frogs . . there's no noise, no jumping
around. Did someone else catch them all?*

Red considers for a moment.

. . . I just heard something about that on the radio, that all the frogs were disappearing and no one knew why, for sure.

Red turns, muttering to himself.

Maybe it's got something to do with those circles we found in the field.

Pondering mysteries comes to an abrupt halt for higher priorities when they hear Martha, Billy's mom, giving a dinner call from the house.

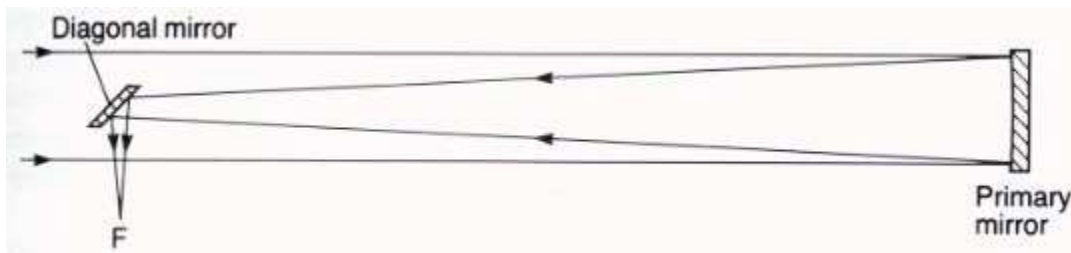
Dinner, don't be late!

An unnecessary warning. On a farm, the men folks are seldom late for dinner, and then not by choice. Red puts down his tools and starts walking towards the farmhouse.

Come on Billy.

Billy runs ahead towards the farmhouse.

A white-haired man, balding on top and with unkempt white hair springing out from his head in all directions, is bending over the viewing eye-piece of a telescope.



He's a bit wild-eye'd, clearly in his 80's. This is an older observatory, small, and thus one that has escaped the cover-up blanket as it is not seeking government grants. The Astronomer is retired, no longer under any employment restrictions, another arm of the cover-up. He looks up with glee in his voice, speaking to his middle-aged daughter at the side of the room.

Pourrait être une comète. Est sur un des bras d'Orion.



The daughter has her bland face toward her father, taking this in. She smiles and turns to a laptop she has on a table in front of her, typing.

From my father's observatory, his first comments. Could be a comet near the arm of Orion. It emits waves. Father is excited!

A young man with short sandy hair is approaching a modern day observatory, high in the hills in an arid region supporting only pine trees in the rocky soil. He opens the door and strides in.



The young man, an amateur astronomer, is greeted by the attending assistant astronomer. The attendant is wearing a lab coat over his sweater. The evening is cool. The amateur keeps his leather jacket on. He says,

Hi. I'm Joe. I rented this scope for this hour. I've got my coordinates here . .

The amateur is pulling out a piece of paper and hands it to the assistant. The attendant frowns on seeing the coordinates, gesturing toward some scaffolding placed to the side of the scope.

Can't look in that direction. I'd move this equipment but I'm not authorized. .. Huh . .

The attendant is puzzled, as there is no rational reason for the scaffolding, especially since the scope had been rented. He is muttering to himself, under his voice.

Why is that there?

The attendant's face brightens. He begins walking sideways toward a side door.

We can use another. Come this way.

Both are now huddled over another telescope, having pulled stools up to the viewing piece, side by side. The attendant is ready to enter coordinates into the scope, has his hands over a keypad, and looks at the amateur expectantly. The amateur has his piece of paper out and unfolded. He reads the coordinates off.

Right Angle 5.151245, Declination +16.55743.

The attendant says,

Orion, eh? Lots of interest in that area lately.

The telescope hums and moves to a different angle. The attendant leans back and says,

Take a look.

The amateur curls over the viewing piece, pulls back, moving away from the eyepiece with a scrape of his stool. He gestures toward the eyepiece with his hand.

Can we center on that light blob just to the left of center? Is that supposed to be there?

In the viewfinder are several bright to medium bright stars with a light blob off to the left hand side. The blob is lightest toward the center of the blob, the light diminishing toward the outsides of the blob. The blob overall is larger than the stars, which tend to be pinpoints of light.

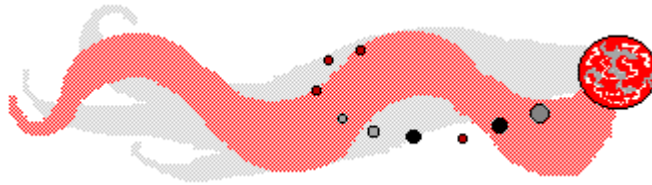
The attendant leans forward to view. He adjusts the telescope to center the object, takes note of a reading, and then gets up and walks to the side of the room where large star charts are laid out on a table. He pulls one to the top of the pile and locates the coordinates by checking the top and side numbers, running his finger first down from the top and then in from the side. He turns to answer the question, surprise in his voice.

No.

Out in space, Niburu, aka Planet X, the Planet of the Crossing, is seen approaching. The whole scene is bathed in red, with red dust swirling about, filled with debris. Stones and a type of gravel are on occasion seen in the swirling mix. The planet appears to be a water planet but this is not obvious because the red dust does not give it a blue hue. There is little land, less than 10% land in various small continents, basically islands.

The tail, seemingly never-ending, has an occasional moon sized object, most often in a dance with another such moon sized object. The debris continues, but always the swirling red dust. A number of moons swirling around each other curl like the tail of a scorpion. The red dust tail itself, electrically charged, is likewise whipping and curling. Gray gravel and fine debris forms its own cloud in the tail, and reacts to the motion of the moon swirls and red

dust swirls by swirling itself. The whole complex is a writhing monster as it moves off into dark space.



Helicopter blades can be heard pulsing as the chopper looks down through wispy clouds at a broad wheat field, golden in color. As the clouds part the crop circle laid into the wheat is exposed. The wheat has been bent at the nodes, not broken. Some grasshoppers are hopping across the bent wheat, trying to avoid the approach of the noisy chopper.



A crop circle investigator is sitting next to the pilot of a helicopter. The investigator has a video camera up to his face, but has pulled this away from his face in order to speak. He has a distinct British clip. Through the chopper window the wisps of clouds are still clearing in the early morning light. The investigator says,

What are they trying to tell us?

The pilot says something almost unintelligible, given the background noise of the chopper, and the investigator responds.

Yes, yes, overnight. . . There's not a foot print down there. We're the first here. . . This is huge!

Red and Martha are sitting on the porch swing just after dusk. It is summer and the night is filled with the thrumming sound of singing insects. Red has his elbow on the armrest and is holding a can of beer, one foot resting on the knee of his other leg. Martha is adjusting her hairpins, and sighs by way of saying that at last the end of day has arrived and she can rest as she drops her hands into her lap and looks out on the view. Martha points to the horizon at her left, at a Half Moon rising.

*Dad, has the Moon ever come up over there? It's always
more . . . over there . . .*

Martha gestures toward the right, more centered in the view from the porch swing. Red says,

*Been that way lately . . . but not in all my years
here, no. Damned peculiar.*

Big Tom's muffled voice comes from within the house, but we can barely hear what he is saying.

. . . bath night, kids . . .

Martha springs up and dashes off, with Red not able to catch her with his free hand as he gropes to catch her arm.

Rest awhile. Martha!

Martha throws a comment over her shoulder on her way into the house.

He always forgets their ears . . .

Red smiles affectionately at the backside of his hard-working daughter, as though he should have known better than to stop her. His gaze returns to the rising moon while his face gets somber.

What's chasing you lately?

Red sighs, as though to say that there is something amiss, but he doesn't know exactly what it is.

-Theories-

Zack Maya, the editor of the Daily News, moves slowly around his crowded office. His baggy pants, wrinkled around the seat and sagging unevenly below the knee announcing without fanfare the editor's priorities. The Daily is successful, but the margin, as with all products that depend upon the fickle public, required a nervous eye. Maya found he had to be a politician more often than a reporter, and where this did not set well with his perfunctory personality, he had learned to accept this as a fact of life. Some news came with a price, when printed.

Maya eases into his worn leather chair, flipping the pages of a story laid on his chair seat with barely time enough to grasp their meaning. Glancing up through his bifocals at Danny, who has been watching from his desk and has come to lean in the doorway, the editor is brief and to the point. Maya points a finger at Danny.

This won't fly. I won't print the story. He has no proof! It's just a crazy idea. Can I remind you that you write for a conservative newspaper? You could start a panic with this stuff.

Danny frowns and slips into a wooden chair in front of the editor's desk - the defendant's chair, not meant to be comfortable. Danny is listening but we can see he's not buying this explanation. Maya continues,

Who's going to pay the merchants for damages, for the riot that this might cause?

Danny protests.

It's a great article. The guy impressed me, and he had plenty of sources. We've done documentaries before, asteroids slinging by and all. I, I didn't think this was any different.

Maya just shakes his head, looking unblinkingly across the desk at Danny, peering up over his bifocals.

That was maybe, this isn't saying maybe. I can't print this.

Maya tosses the story across his desk to Danny, settling back into his chair.

You're not sitting in my chair, Danny, and I'm telling you, this won't fly.

Danny scoops up the story, his mouth opening and closing as he processes and rejects arguments, blinks twice, and slowly rises and walks out the door without a comment. Outside the editor's office he stops and is lost in thought, his face smooth, showing no emotion. Finally, under his breath.

Bull shit.

Danny grabs his jacket and strides out of the office.

The wooded campus at Brandon University backs up into the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, crisscrossed with trails worn smooth by the pounding feet of jogging students and faculty. For those familiar with the maze, the trails led to treasures in the woods known to few. Isaac is fishing with his cap down, back against a tree along the river. Isaac casts a fishing line when a phone rings. He reaches into his fishing bag, pulls out a phone and answers.

Danny is leaning against the edge of his desk, phone in hand.

Yes Professor Isaac, this is Danny at the paper. .. Well, I want to do the story but my editor says it's crackpot stuff and The Daily is a newspaper of integrity .. But I know we've done stuff like this before. Do you happen to know why he won't publish the story? .. I know the place. I'll be right there.

Isaac is fishing with his cap down, back against a tree along the river. When Danny arrives, in jeans, he is breathing heavily from the climb. He fishes a notebook out of an inside pocket within his lightweight jacket, and flips the pages, having tucked a pencil stub momentarily behind his right ear. During their conversation, Danny is alternating between believing what Isaac is saying and wanting to deny as to take it seriously is to be frightened, so he is coming up with plausible explanations for what Isaac is laying out. Isaac is familiar with this type of reaction and counters this by just laying out the facts until they are overwhelming.

Danny . . a friend of mine at a large observatory has been tracking an incoming object, but has been told to keep mum about it if he knows what's good for him. Says this has been going on for over a decade, what's reported to be Planet X for many years. It comes through the Solar System every 3,600 years or so and pretty well tears up the Earth. Well, that's the rogue planet I was telling you about. It's real! It's inbound! And none of us is ready for it, that's for damn sure. And that's precisely why the government doesn't want the public to know about it. They're not ready for it either.

Danny had been expecting this. The editor rejected his story too quickly, barely reading it.

Who's asking him to keep quiet and why?

Isaac lifts his pole and flips the line out into the shallows again before answering. Danny is relieved to be having a discussion over the issues, but is nonetheless taking this all in but not yet willing to buy it. Isaac says,

The government doesn't want the public to know about it. They're not ready for it, and they don't know what to tell people. So they lean on people to keep it quiet. Observatories don't come cheap, they're built by big money. Universities get government grants. And the government can always come in and say it's a national security issue.

Danny is confused. Why is a passing planet special?

National security, like, don't cause panic? They didn't do that for the Near Earth Asteroid scares, they were all over the news, TV and everything. How is this different?

Isaac explains - those on top fear losing the upper hand.

These asteroids either wipe life out or pass by, black or white, but this monster passes by and causes a pole shift, the globe survives, but civilization is pretty much wiped out, crashes. That's what happened during the time of Moses. Egypt lost their slaves, they walked away, and Egypt was in chaos for centuries. This is what they're really worried about. They're worried about the working man questioning their masters, gaining the upper hand. They're worried about mob rule.

Danny is beginning to connect the dots.

They think it's going to happen? This thing is coming? For sure, this is for sure? Boy, that explains Maya jumping on me. It was like somebody had leaned on him, like he knew more about it than he was telling me.

It's not just a theory, says Isaac.

My friend says they were looking for it, they found it and now they're tracking it.

An astonished Danny says,

They found it? They found it? Where'd they find it?

Isaac gives the long suppressed history, the discovery of Planet X in 1983.

In 1983, they were sending up infrared cameras above the clouds, in those days they didn't have the Hubble, and were looking toward Orion because astronomers have known there's something out there, something pulling comets and planets in that direction, some gravitational force, and by gum, they found it. Scared the heck out of them, and it hit the papers before they could squelch it. Was in the Washington Post, front page, in 1983.

But Danny is still missing the point.

Damn! But I don't understand why mob violence will ensue. I mean, so this thing passes. Why would civilizations crash?

Isaac points to the extent of devastation that accompanies a pole shift.

It doesn't just pass. Take a look at mountain building, fresh mountains like the Rockies or the Himalayas. If all we're having is a few quakes now and then, what would drive those mountains thousands of feet in the air? What force would overcome the resistance?

Isaac glances sideways at Danny, gauging his skepticism to be slight. Like most young people, he is loath to let go of his idealism, not believing the government would lie to the people. Isaac is familiar with this resistance and these arguments, and takes them in stride. Danny says,

Uh, well quakes drop buildings, and ..

Isaac quickly interrupts,

That's from the shaking.

Isaac is pondering a mountain building scene, where flat rock snaps and starts to angle upward at a 45 degree angle, climbing over foothills nearby, climbing up into the sky to the height of a Mt Everest. He says,

I'm talking about picking up a mountain and driving it up, up, thousands of feet. Whole mountain ranges, up. And look at the issue of Ice Ages and wandering poles! We just don't get it, we don't get it! You know the last Ice Age had ice over France, 11,000 years ago or so, but at the same time the grasslands of Siberia were warm and lush! Now, what did the Sun do there, blink on for Siberia, and off for France?

Isaac pulls his line in and slings it back out again, both men quiet for a moment. He says,

It's going to be a pretty rough ride, son.

Isaac is envisioning a mammoth is standing in grasslands, snow and howling winds descending. The mammoth is backing away from the direction of the winds, trunk high as though trying to defend itself, eyes crazed with fear at the maelstrom descending. The end of the trunk has grass with buttercups in it, as though this were a sudden event, mid-munch for the mammoth.

Mammoths were found flash frozen in Siberia, been frozen like that for thousands of years, with buttercups in their stomach. Buttercups, where there isn't a blade of grass for hundreds of miles, now. The Earth turned under them, son, and moved them to a polar zone. They weren't the only species to go extinct for no obvious reason. They've been dozens.

Playing the role of protester, Danny is still trying to lay out arguments. Danny's eyes are shifting from side to side as he rapidly searches for rational explanations. Danny is chewing his lower lip slightly but is clearly running out of arguments. Finally, he says, weakly.

Well, the ice formed over France because, uh, um ..

Isaac keeps up the pressure.

Makes no sense! Potsdam University documented that the axis of the world shifted, pulling Germany South, during the Jewish Exodus. The crust moved. The crust moved! Pull that back and you've got Greenland over where the N Pole is now. Got it? The crust moves, and during that last Ice Age, France was the N Pole, that's why it was frozen! We don't have wandering poles, we've got a wandering crust.

Isaac flips his line out into the river again, easing back against the tree trunk, knowing the argument has been won. Danny, now almost relaxed as he realizes he has lost the argument, is giving in, but is reluctant to admit defeat to someone in his father's generation. He says,

Is that why the weather's gone nuts and the compasses don't ever seem to work right anymore?

Isaac is still not done laying out his evidence, and has no intention of laying off.

And then there's the tidal waves, whale bones found on hills 400-500 feet above sea level in Ontario. In Sicily there's bone piles in the rock crevices that include just about every animal in Europe and Africa, all broken into bits as though the waves carried them there and smashed them into bits against the rocks.

Danny protests. Surely there is another explanation for tidal waves in our past.

So maybe a meteor fell, like what killed the dinosaurs, fell in the ocean and caused a giant tidal wave.

But Isaac has more.

Chief Mountain in Montana took an 8 mile trip over the plains, and the Alps have moved hundreds of miles overland. We're talking about slabs of rock thousand of feet thick. What force is moving those mountains?

Danny tries proffering the standard explanation for massive geological changes in the Earth's past.

Oh, that happened millions of years ago.

But as with all the other protestations, Isaac has the trump card.

Niagra Falls is running in a channel that's less than 4,000 years old, son, and several lakes on the West Coast have existed for only about 3,500 years. Sound familiar? Scientists have known for some time that the ocean level dropped 20 feet world wide, simultaneously, guess when - 3,000-4,000 years ago.

Finally, Danny submits.

Holy cow! This is big! Why wouldn't they let this out? They warn people about floods, about hurricanes, stock up for the storm, and all. How is this any different?

Having reached the end of the game, the contest between generations put aside, Isaac admits his own weakness, shows his softer side to Danny, as the argument is dropped and has become a discussion. He says,

Put yourself in the shoes of the people in charge, Danny, and look at the list of your worries. One, there's no way after the crust moves and all the cities are dust to house and feed the citizens. So they get into thinking about saving a select few, and the few always includes them, of course. They've built bunkers, you can be sure, and stocked them well, and the heck with the taxpayer. This is why that story gets resisted. You can believe they've got their guards at the newspapers watching for it. Gets shot down every time.

The light goes on for Danny, who realizes Maya's reaction is not the first.

You mean, you've tried this before?

Isaac says,

I was asked to contact your paper, give it another shot. A group of us have been trying to find an

outlet. So far, no one's gotten past the guard. They tell these editors that it's national security or something, can't have panic. God knows what they tell them, but one thing is clear, this is a story that the public is not allowed to hear.

Danny is new to the cover-up, and is searching for a route around it.

Someone could go to an observatory. I mean, our observatory has a public night, you can go there, point the scope anywhere you want, they help you ..

Isaac, older and wiser, knows what encountering a serious cover-up means.

You can try it. We did, when it was still able to be seen in the night sky. Got the runaround. It's not just the editors, it's the observatories, the astronomers you can't believe. You think the American people didn't want to know about what happened to JFK? They didn't get the story then, and they don't have it now. When the hammer comes down to protect the people in charge, in Washington, it comes down hard.

Youth perseveres. Danny says,

Yeah, but I bet I could. I mean, I can be pretty persuasive.

Too late, in any case, says Isaac.

Observatories don't cut it anymore, it's too close to the Sun now. They can't look at light, they need the night sky. It's arrived, Danny, we're not doing the waltz anymore, we're setting up for rock and roll!

Danny has fallen silent, but finally takes a big breath.

So what do we do?

Isaac explains that bottom line, one should be personally prepared.

I know what I'm going to do. I'm not waiting for anyone to tell me to do it, either. I've got a place up in the hills, and as soon as things get funny, that's where I'm headed.

Big Tom and Red are replacing wooden fence posts out in a field. They have a stock of posts in the back of the truck, are pulling a broken post, snipping the wire, hammering a new post in its place, and finally patching the wire with a new piece of wire. Meanwhile, they converse. Big Tom says,

*Heard that some rich folks come in from the coast
wanting to stock a bunker in big-top mountain. Wanted
this quiet, I guess, but you know Fred Harvey.*

Big Tom and Red glance up and grin briefly at each other through their sweat. Fred Harvey is apparently a known big mouth. Big Tom continues,
*Fred says they had him take enough bottled water and
canned good to feed an army for a year up there, one
truckload after another. Says the big shock was the
hole in the mountain.*

Big Tom stands straight, hand to his back, stretching. He continues while standing, gesturing, his two hands together punching forward to indicate the tunnel hammered in the rock.

*They'd had someone hammer a tunnel, then a room.
Lights everywhere. Furniture too.*

Red glances up from where he is crouched, mending the wire. He is not interrupting as he wants to hear the story. Big Tom continues,

Now what were they expecting? An invasion?

Big Tom shakes his head and puts the sledge hammer back into the truck. Muttering to himself and Red.

*Crazy rich people. Got more money than they know what
to do with.*

-Signs-

Danny and Daisy are driving to their campsite, a week into their camping trip, somewhere out west in Utah. Danny glances sideways to drink in the lanky body of Daisy in her shorts and halter top. Taking off for a camping trip, where he can have her near him around the clock, should make him forget the unease he has felt since that day talking to Professor Isaac, and the anger he still feels at having his story cut. Daisy, for her part, is also looking forward to two weeks alone with Danny. No phone. No editor. No assignments. Most of their friends are married, and many with small children in arms or on the way, and she rarely has opportunity to pry him away from his enthusiasms.

Danny is still upset in part as he is still angry about his story being canned, being silenced and feeling there is something to it. It is pouring rain, the windshield wipers flapping furiously and the car steamy. Daisy says,

Honey, you've got to let that go. It's all just theory anyway. This is your vacation, and all you've done is fume about it. We've been on the road almost a week already, and between you moaning about that damn planet and Maya quashing your article and this damn rain, it feels more like Hell than a vacation. How can it be raining so much! Dry as a bone in New Jersey and washing away in the rest of the country.

But Danny is still seething.

It's just that all those things Professor Isaac was relaying, that stuff really happened. No one can explain it, there's nothing that fits except the passage of this rogue planet. Even a friend of Einstein's, guy named Hapgood, figured this out. Said the sliding crust theory is the only explanation, and Einstein agreed! And then they stop it at the gate, block the story from getting past editors. And that observatory guy!

Danny is almost gritting his teeth in his rage, his anger at being blocked at all fronts palpable. As a young man, he is running into the reality of life in the grown up world, and not liking what he is finding. How dare the truth be buried, a cover-up occur in front of his eyes!

Daisy would just as soon put it aside, as she has other things on her mind.

All that stuff gets my stomach in a knot. There's nothing you can do about it, so forget it, honey.

Danny is ignoring her but reaches over to pat her thigh with a glance and a smile so she does not pout. Seeing that he is not going to comment, Daisy switches on the radio.

.. seem to have completely disappeared from most wetlands. Naturalists theorize that the damaged ozone layer may be a factor, allowing harmful sun rays to kill the frog eggs, but the disappearance of frogs is not just occurring in areas affected by the ozone holes. For those traveling on I-15, we have a flash flood warning near Fishlake National Forest. Drivers should take alternate routes, or drive with extreme caution. . .

Daisy quickly switches off the radio, not wanting bad news to spoil the mood. Daisy turns and looks out of the car window. It's still raining. She says,
Are we on I-15?

Danny's battered blue Toyota is beset by a downpour, moving slowly. Up ahead beyond some hills the highway is flooded, traffic stopped on either side of the washout.

Danny and Daisy sit around their camp site sharing a beer with some campers from the site next to them. Introductions have already been done, tents are setup, dinner dishes washed and put away, a fire roaring in front of them as Danny and Daisy and the couple camping next to them prepare to relax at the end of the day. It has stopped raining, but occasionally some water splashes off the rain drenched trees above them, causing the group to raise their hands to block the drops when this happens, or shake the drops off their shirts afterwards. Danny is perched on a convenient rock. Danny says,

Pull up a rock . . you wanna beer?

Jane is from California and a health nut. She quips back.

Do you happen to have any fresh squeezed orange juice?

Danny replies,

We have some fresh squeezed Coors.

Danny leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees, and gets a serious look on his face.

I'm in the newspaper business, and ordinarily we chase a story down and if it has any appeal at all, rush it to press. Well, I had a real live wire, a local professor who had a theory about crop circles. Gave a talk at a local club and someone in the audience was so impressed they sent me the flyer. Then he called the paper wanting to get some coverage. What the heck,

we print everybody else's theories about crop circles - its math, its DNA, whatever. His theory was that we've got another planet in the Solar System, comes orbiting around only once every 3,600 years or something, and these crop circles show up just ahead of another visit, like a warning!

Danny holds up two fingers, counting off on them.

Two things are bothering me here. One, he had a damn good argument, and two, my editor wouldn't let me print the story.

Jane's husband, Frank, is pleased that the campground has at least one party he can talk to, beyond the usual chatter about mosquitoes and barbecue sauce.

You're talking about Sitchin's theory. He claimed some ancient records showed that this planet exists. And that number - 3,600 years - these ancients had a term for it.

Danny sits up, back ramrod straight, suddenly energized.

Well, dang! My editor went ballistic when I presented the story. I've never seen him like that. So now I'm wondering, if there's nothing to it, why did he react like that? So I went out to see this guy, the professor, and he told me the media is being silenced. He told me the government knows about this, has the dang thing in its sights and is watching it barrel towards us, and is saying nothing to the rest of us!

Danny starts demonstrating what's going to happen with his hands, relaxing now that he can talk about his worries and has an intelligent ear.

Mountains pushing up, tidal waves rolling across the coastlines, howling winds, and of all things, red dust. Red dust.

A slight flicker of a smile plays over Frank's mouth, seeing Danny's consternation. Having lived with the legends, and with a wife well into New Age prognostications, Frank had come to find these theories almost stale.

Oh, there's something to it all right, at least all the prophecies point to it in one way or another.

Finding an opening, Jane leaps in.

The Hopi speak of the Purification Day, when the whole world will shake and turn red. And White Buffalo calves are being born, that's another Indian prophecy coming true.

Loath to let his wife take the center stage completely, a constant battle between them, Frank joins in again.

There was an obscure channeled work by an Ohio dentist, about a hundred years ago. Oashpe, I think it's called. Talks about a Red Star that travels and causes a lot of death. Says that souls are harvested at that time. That's the term used - harvested.

Glancing at her husband, and seeing an opening, Jane jumps in.

Edgar Cayce saw California covered with water.

But Frank has the prize prophecy.

And then there's Mother Shipton, several hundred years back, who pretty much predicted the same thing back in merry 'ol England. She had a good track record on predicting our technology, too.

Frank stands up and quotes Mother Shipton.

*For seven days and seven nights
man will watch this awesome sight.
The tides will rise beyond their ken
to bite away the shores and then
the mountains will begin to roar
and earthquakes split the plain to shore.*

Still emotionally unwilling to accept the situation, even if his intellect is telling him otherwise, Danny interrupts.

Aw, come on! You can't be serious! Do you really think that's going to happen?

Jane comes to the rescue, as she always does when opinions differ.

Let's see what the cards say.

Jane pulls out her Tarot Cards and shuffles them, spreading them out in a fan like fashion, face down on the blanket below which has been spread out over the pine needles. She turns the top cards over, one by one. The first card is the card of Death. Danny, eager for some reassurance at this point, raises his eyebrows. Danny says,

Oops!

Colonel Cage is talking to a Zeta from the Zeta Reticuli star system. The room is dark, lights off, as a private conversation is going on. Standing in the shadows is a middle-aged man, fit with no signs of middle-aged spread or slack muscles. A military man, Colonel Cage considers being fit the first bastion of discipline. Tightly disciplined, he lives by rules both military and personal, which often are at war with each other.

The colonel is talking to a figure taller than he, bone thin, with an enormous head seemingly too heavy for the stick thin body. But there is grace in the

motions made by the long lanky arms, and the colonel seems not to notice or be alarmed by the shape of his companion. He has long been accustomed to conversing with this visitor from Zeta Reticuli. Where a conversation is going on, only the voice of the colonel can be heard. Yet the intensity of his words shows that an interchange of ideas is clearly going on.



We can't tell them. Don't think I don't want to. It's orders, and orders are orders

Colonel Cage breaks down a bit, moving his hands in front of him in an emotional way, as though groping for an answer, a resolution that will not come.

My God, don't you think I want my neighbor's children safe? They practically live at my house. But if I say anything I'll disappear. What will my Mary and the kids do then, for God's sake.

Back at the campground, the foursome has been camping together for a few days, hitting it off. During this time the days seemed inordinately dim, as though overcast to the point of not being able to see the Sun. Due to the cloud cover, they took this to be an extremely cloudy day, but Frank has been nervous. Danny as he is leaning into his car, retrieving some item with the car door open. Frank comes up behind Danny. He says,

It's so damn dim I can hardly make you out! I've never seen it this overcast, it's eerie. We've not seen the sun for the past few days.

Danny ducks out of the car, looking around him to ensure that Daisy and Jane are not in earshot, before replying in a low voice.

Did those prophecies you were quoting the other night say anything about something like this? This gloom?

Frank raises his eyebrows, suddenly realizing something he'd forgotten. He raises his hand.

Be right back.

Frank dashes off into his tent, rummaging around, coming out with a book he is flipping through frantically. Finally, after pausing, he quotes.

Here it is. The Biblical three days of darkness predicted. And in the Book of Amos 'I will cause the Sun to go down at noon and I will darken the Earth in the midst of daytime.' And the Greeks, in the Phaethon, 'One whole day went without the sun. But the burning world gave light.'

Frank pauses, looking at Danny.

Damn!

At NASA in Houston the darkened skyline can be seen on a video, as though stalled at the pre-dawn hour when the sky is light but no sun can be seen. Rows of gray metal tables are placed to look forward at this wall, which has several video screens, all currently meshed together to show the same scene, an enlarged skyline. This is one of those high tech video screens that can show individual shots, or can mesh together to show a large single shot. Monitors and keyboards and various other electronic equipment are on the tables, computer chairs that can scoot about with wheels, and some papers and folders here and there. This is a work room, a war room, and it is filled with men and women in business attire, ties pulled open, shirt collars unbuttoned, some hair frazzled as hands have gone to heads now and then, the situation, not appearance, the only concern.

A NASA employee, his hair up in the air on one side, his hair grease holding it there, stands numbly staring at the screen, saying not a word to anyone as though frozen in stance and speech. A second employee walks through the room hurriedly, brushing past others as he passes, intent on talking to another whom he stops to engage in animated conversation. Others in the room are on the phone, shuffling papers, talking with each other, or sitting with their heads in their hands. Yet a third employee has a mobile cell phone in his ear, is gesturing with strong forward thrusts of his hand, an angry look on his face. He says,

.. time to go to the bunker!

Leaning over a table and bringing his fist down now on the table, in anger, easing himself into his chair as he is trembling with rage.

You told me when this started to happen we'd leave.

Now I want to know where the God damn bunker is! Now!

At the McGregor ranch Martha is normally up before dawn preparing breakfast for her hard working husband. Big Tom wolfs down his breakfast, slurping coffee and shoveling in eggs and fried potatoes like there is no tomorrow, talking between swallows about the chores he has lined up for the day.

. . found a broken fence yesterday, better get that fixed before the cattle discover the break.

Big Tom glances up to gesture in the direction of the broken fence, and stops mid-sentence as it is stone dark out and the dawn should have painted the horizon with orange streaks by now. He is silent for a moment, his arm outstretched in mid-gesture. Then he falls back to eating, but keeps glancing out the window, nervously, a puzzled look on his face. He checks his watch, glances to the clock on the wall, and asks his wife what her stove clock says.

. . Martha, what time do you have?

He holds up his watch and she stares at her clock and then they both stare at each other. When he discovers they are all in sync, he shakes his head and goes back to wolfing his breakfast down.

Martha has gone into her garden behind the house, but is too upset to be tending to the garden. She has her basket with her, to collect the produce, her hair tied back with a bandana to keep it out of the way as she would normally be bending over a lot, but is just standing there between the lettuce and onions and tomato plants, a worried look on her face. Suddenly she jerks her face up, though not a sound has been made to alert her to the presence of a Zeta beside her. She comes close to tears seeing a friend, her face showing relief at being able to seek counsel.

My God, what's happening!

A tall Zeta comes up to her and puts his right hand on her left shoulder, lowering his head to touch his forehead to hers. Martha rises her right hand and puts it on the Zeta's left shoulder at this, and they stand there briefly for a moment.



They pull back from each other, now gazing into each other's faces. Martha's face now reflects calm. She is no longer frantic and afraid.

Danny's eyes pop open in the darkened tent, though no sound or motion has awakened him. He shines a flashlight on his watch and a puzzled look comes over his face, as it shows 10:12 in the morning. Yet it is still dark. Feeling him stirring, Daisy wakens. She says,

Can't you sleep either?

Danny says,

Normally I sleep like a log on camping trips. Odd that we're both having trouble sleeping. I know what'll fix that.

Danny reaches for Daisy, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close, nuzzling her neck. The couple assumes they are having insomnia, the watch broken, and Danny is just settling into snuggling with Daisy when they hear voices from the New Age couple next door. Danny says,

They're awake too? Something's not right here.

Danny pulls on his pants and goes out to investigate.

The campers all meet by the smoldering camp fire, now out, and look around and at their watches. Daisy says,

Our watches seem to be fast.

A bit stunned and confused, the campers stand around the remnants of their campfire, looking first at their watches and then at each other. Frank and Danny compare times, then stare at each other. Danny says,

10:16

And Frank's concurs.

10:14

Danny goes to check the clock in his car, which also reads 10:16. He says,

Whatever it is, it's made all the clocks fast. We'll probably hear about it later on the news. Weird!

Jane is stirring last night's campfire, adding kindling, and puts some water on for coffee. Having no explanation for why their clocks are wrong, and not wanting to admit to themselves how frightened they are, the campers joke around. Jane says,

Everything looks better after a cup of coffee.

Frank smirks and says,

Yeah, we're all still just dreaming.

Daisy is sitting on a rock, a slight frown on her face, blinking and saying nothing, not willing to let go of her anxiety. Gradually the dawn rises, and the group shows their obvious relief. Daisy brightens like the rising Sun when the light of dawn shows, her face almost estatic.

Oh, there's the Sun!

Back at the Daily News in Newark, New Jersey, Zack Maya, the newspaper editor, is frantic, red in the face with anger, and standing as he phones a friend from his office as he is too agitated to sit. He is looking at his watch and where it appears to be dawn outside, his watch and the clock on the wall say 1:07 pm. He shouts into the phone.

What the hell's going on! You told me there wasn't any danger, you asshole. I did what you asked me to do, now what are you going to do about this!

It becomes apparent that the other party hung up on him. The editor is holding the phone away from his ear, staring at it, then muttering under his breath and hanging it up, looking decidedly despondent. The sound of beeping traffic and hysterical shouting can be heard out the window.

The clock at the New York Stock Exchange reads 1:11 pm. Life goes on, even in the face of the inexplicable. On the trading floor of the Stock Exchange, there are shouts and traders running to and fro with mobile cell phones to their ears, but the floor is uncharacteristically empty and quiet. Traders and dealers are standing around, staring at the big clock which now reads 1:11.

There is some trading going on. Some shouts and people running around with mobile cell phones, but a lot of traders and dealers are just standing and staring at the big clock reading 1:11. People talk with each other, gesturing and pointing excitedly. Small groups watch TV monitors hanging from wires on the floor. CNN team talks about the daybreak being hours late.

.. scientists have yet to come up with an explanation for why this day is getting a late start. Most businesses and schools are operating at their normal schedule, but the confusion has ..

Out on the busy street outside, in Times Square, a drug dealer who would normally move through the crowd rapidly, making his contacts and moving to safer streets, stands with his back against a brick wall, eyes scanning the sky, cigarette in hand. A bum comes up to bum a smoke.

Got some smokes, man?

He is absentmindedly handed the entire pack by the dealer, complete with lighter. The dealer pulls out a joint and turns to the bum, asking for a light, apparently forgetting that he just handed the bum the pack and lighter, distracted.

Hey! Gimme a light, would ya?

Cars are stalled and people are looking out their windows at the sky. A group of farm kids get off a bus and look around in a big huddle.

So this is New York? Boy, they sure do have traffic jams! Mom was right!

An executive in a dark gray suit steps out of a cab, smooth black briefcase in hand. He notices a fine red dust powdering the sidewalk, and squats to pick up a pinch between his fingers, rubbing his fingers together. The fine dust is everywhere now - blowing off the tops of moving cars, settling into cracks in the sidewalks, and coming down onto the anxious up-turned faces like a fine mist.

It's now 11:30 am in the Rockies. At the campground, the fine red dust is powdering everything, but this passes notice due to being scattered by the branches overhead. Danny has come back from picking up groceries at the local Stop-n-Shop, and goes to open the trunk, finding that his finger leaves a mark on the trunk lid. He runs a finger through the dust, staring at the tip, puzzled.

Frank is returning from the stream, fishing pole in hand but otherwise empty handed.

The stream is turning red, like blood, and the fish are bobbing up one after another, belly up, dying from whatever it is.

Daisy puts her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide open, an anxious look in her eyes. Jane says,

My God, the prophecies are coming true.

Danny is punching the buttons on his mobile cell phone now, listening, then punching another set and listening again. He's getting static, no ringing.

I'm not getting through, nothing's working.

Danny glances up into the sky.

These things work off the satellites . .

Frank is already bringing their camping supplies to their car, breaking camp. Jane is taking down their tent, throwing the poles in a pile as though she were racing against time. Danny is rubbing his forehead, trying to understand.

The campground store didn't have any news either. Their newspapers haven't been delivered, nor any of the regular delivery runs.

Seeing everyone in the campground starting to break camp, as though what others are doing is an imperative, Danny also starts to break camp. He walks to the campfire and starts stacking supplies in a box, silently. Daisy pulls her makeup case close to her as she sits on a log and begins to do her nails with great concentration. She begins a monologue about polish types and broken nails that she or her friends have experienced, though no one is listening.

I just can't get my nails to grow! . .

-The Horror-

Big Tom has his tool box open along the fence he is repairing. His jeep stands several feet away on solid ground, as cattle tend to walk along fences, creating deep ruts well hidden by the tall grass. Like many ranchers, Big Tom tended to take better care of his equipment than himself.

The cattle begin milling about and mooing, groups starting to bolt in this direction or that, then changing their minds and bolting in the other direction. Some groups are even running into each other, like a misdirected stampeded. They are alarmed yet confused, getting some signal that Big Tom can't sense. The earth emits a low moan, barely perceptible at first. However, this low moan keeps up, rising and falling, as though the earth were in agony.

Big Tom has turned pale, drops his tools, leaving them where they lay on the ground, stumbles back toward his jeep and drives off crazily, not even shutting the door until well on his way up the dirt road. Big Tom careens up to the ranch house, screeching his brakes and walking quickly to the house. He barges in the kitchen door and heads for the phone. Martha says,

Won't do no good. I can't get through. Nobody can get through.

Martha is calm, her daughter Tammy leaning into her where she sits in a kitchen chair, having a beer. Martha and Big Tom exchange a long look, no words spoken. Finally, Big Tom breaks the silence, glancing at the beer.

That looks good, think I'll have one.

Red comes into the kitchen and announces he's stocked the storm cellar. He has Billy in tow, his helper, who goes to wash his hands as he has been brushing his hands together, but glancing at them sees they are dirty. Billy casts a glance at his mother Martha and heads toward the sink, not realizing that something more serious than getting a reminder is pending.

A loud knock on the front door stops Big Tom from easing into a relaxed posture in the familiar wooden chair he has just dropped into, beer in hand, and he recoils to go answer it, his curious Billy at his heels. Danny is at the door, dust streaked in the sweat running off his face, the others in the foursome (Daisy, Jane, Frank) standing alongside the car in the drive. Danny says,

Do you have any gas to sell, the stations don't seem to be open.

Big Tom, surveying the visitors and sensing they pose no threat, allows himself to be relieved to be getting some news.

Not surprised . . . Jed probably took his hounds into the hills already, he's been talking about the end of the world, and probably figures it's come.

Danny doesn't answer for a few minutes, the sounds of insects singing in the sun loud in the silence between the two men. Then he says,

Well, has it?

Big Tom motions to the foursome now all on the porch.

Might as well come in for a spell, the day's getting hot already and it doesn't look like its going to end.

At the mention of time, Danny glances at his watch and gasps.

My God, it's almost midnight!

What seems like days have passed, and the long dawn that doesn't end and the accumulating heat are wearing at the group. Grim and focused on the drama being played out on the world's stage, which they all sense will end at some point soon, the adults are being civil, not wanting to add to their problems. The men are simply quiet, looking out the window as though expecting something to happen.

The women peel potatoes and help Martha with her mending, making small talk to keep the youngsters from realizing the seriousness of the situation. Jane says,

Let me see if I can find a matching button. Want to help me, Tammy? I'm looking for a small brown one like this.

Everyone is in shorts, a film of sweat evident, but no one complains about the heat or worry except Daisy who is almost whining, a continuous expression of exasperation on her face. Daisy is going through the motions of being an adult, but makes little noises of frustration when drawers don't open smoothly or something isn't where she expects to find it in the cabinets. Finally she looks pointedly at Danny but he just looks grim and shakes his head. Danny says,

Don't start again! We're not going to drive off and escape this. This is everywhere, Daisy, everywhere, and we've just got to wait until this breaks or we get news. Not going to be better anyplace else.

This has been a long running argument between them, one discussed whenever they retired to one of the bedrooms for a nap together. Daisy is trying to initiate the discussion again, publicly, hoping to win support, and Danny has about had it with her. One of the children in the group is likewise having

problems understanding the situation. Tammy leans against her mother, Martha, who is sitting in her place at the kitchen table.

When can my dolls go to the swimming hole for a picnic?

Tammy is obviously asking when she can go again. Martha wraps her free arm around her and gives her a little hug, understanding that the child wants to cool off, and get out of the tension in the kitchen.

Soon honey, soon.

The pumps have stopped, are stopping repeatedly due to the erratic power supply coming off the grid lines, the switches tripping as soon as the reset button is pushed. Big Tom is squatting at the pump by the well, tools on the ground next to him, tinkering with the pump. The pump is starting and then cutting out immediately every time he starts it. He scoops up his tools and rises, muttering softly.

Damn!

Big Tom is walking back from the spring house with a bucket of water in his hands. Big Tom stops in his tracks, feeling a slight but continuous tremble in the ground. His wife Martha comes running out of the house and into his arms, the buckets now dropped to the ground, sloshing and spilling over. The kids are running up behind her.

Mom! Mom!

Panic is in the air. Danny and Red come around the corner of the house, from the garden, onions and tomatoes for the gumbo Martha was preparing in their hands. Red's pale face accentuates the red tinge in his graying hair.

The moon is on the move!

Suddenly everyone standing is thrown several feet. Big Tom is thrown backwards, skidding on his rear, Martha on top of him. Tammy sits up, holding her scrapped and bleeding elbow, rocking back and forth in pain and crying hard. Billy staggers to his feet, standing pale and shaken, his arms out to either side and slightly crouching. Big Tom, rolling up to a sitting position and easing his wife to the side, frowns. He says,

What the Hell! . .

The barn, laid on a concrete slab, has been lurched off its foundations and moved halfway into the sloping barnyard. The house has crinkled in the middle, the walls folding in on a broken support, but is still glued to its foundation. Daisy emerges from the house, screaming, accompanied by Jane who is holding both hands to her bleeding head.

A massive split in the earth begins ripping across the field behind the barn, opening and closing again, yawing open several feet and then quickly closing again. The sky darkens as a hailstorm of what appears to be gravel starts peppering the landscape. The group reacting to their injuries and shock in the yard put their hands over their heads and dash back and forth, needing shelter but leery of going into the broken house. Lighting crackles overhead repeatedly, though there is no rain, and in the distance there is a whooshing sound, as a falling blanket of fire drops on some trees along a stream, setting them afire.

The group, led by Red, dashes into the storm cellar. Red says,

Knew this would come in handy.

Daisy is hysterical and keeps screaming at Danny. Everyone is ignoring her.

Make it stop . . . Make it stop.

Martha is wrapping her apron around Jane's head, instructing her in a calm voice to press her head to stop the scalp wound from bleeding.

There, right there.

Jane's face is covered with blood. Despite all, Frank is matter-of-fact.

I think my arm is broken.

Frank's arm is seen dangling at an odd angle, the trauma of the moment so great that he didn't notice this until they were safe in the storm cellar.

The winds outside are howling louder, and the bolted metal door of the cellar is rattling with the force now and then. The only light in the cellar is a battery operated lantern.

Big Tom is setting Frank's dislocated arm, Danny holding Frank from the back, his arm coming around the front and holding Frank's good arm in a grip tight enough to keep him from striking out in pain. Big Tom calls out.

Now!

Big Tom pulls as Frank cries out and lurches back, kicking his feet. Red is standing at the ready, a splint made from a chair leg in his hands, with Billy at his elbow, trying to help. Behind them is a drama just as compelling, going unnoticed. Tammy is squeezed back into the corner of the room, hugging one of her dolls, her face a frozen mask and voice silenced.

An hour later the winds have stopped howling. Red throws the bolts holding the storm door tightly shut, and pushes on the door slightly, opening it a crack. Big Tom, hesitant and cautious, sticks his head out, glancing around. All is calm, only the broken landscape attesting to what had occurred only an hour before. Big Tom is closely followed by his Billy, with Red and Martha bobbing up and down behind them, trying to see. Martha blinks and struggles to hold back her tears, seeing the life they built so painstakingly devastated.

Every building tossed a kilter, branches torn off any trees left standing, and the windmill a twisted tangle in the corner of the barnyard. Big Tom says,

At least we're still alive.

And then, showing his practical nature.

*I'll go see if I can get the pump to work . . . we need
to store and hold any clean water in the tank before
it drains away.*

Big Tom walks through the splintered wreckage that was the house and barn. Red remains behind, his hand on Billy's shoulder, as they both stand silent and still. Martha has her hand to her mouth, the family frozen at the sight.

Where cataclysmic forces tear civilized trappings asunder, nature often remains unruffled. Except for an occasional tree limb tossed into the tall weeds, the pasture lands look much the same. A horse and rider emerge from the cow path that wends through the woods, riding hard.

Netty, her hair coming apart and looking like it hasn't been combed in days, is on the run. Her cream colored jodhpurs are black in places, soiled beyond hope, attesting to the fact that Netty has been living in them for days. Her face is oily and dusty, and the horse is covered with dust where the sweat is now rolling off its flanks. They are on the run. She slows the horse when she gets to the next clump of trees, turning to look over her shoulder. Netty sees what she fears, coming behind her, and speaks quietly to her horse, setting off again.

Haw

The group at the farmhouse has constructed a makeshift tent set up over a rope strung between trees, weighed down by rocks along the edges of blankets hung over the rope. Bedding of all kinds has been stuffed inside the tent, with some laundry hung on another rope strung nearby. Life goes on. A fire is smoldering between some stones and a pot is hung on a hook overhead, some metal from the wrecked barn used to rig a metal beam over the fire. A menage of wooden chairs salvaged from the house is set near a table with three legs, the fourth corner stabilized on a barrel.

In the distance Netty comes into view, ridding hard. At first only a few puffs of dust are visible, but then the figure of a horse and rider. Netty is raised high in the stirrups, English style, leaning forward over the big bay's shoulders, helping the weary horse carry its burden as easily as possible. Martha rises from where she is washing and peeling potatoes and carrots for soup, watching Netty race toward the tent city.

Netty dismounts before the horse stops, swinging her legs alongside the horse and under its nose, signaling the horse to stop short. The bay braces its front legs, its rear haunches splaying outward in a frantic bracing motion. She says,

They're coming . .

Martha, stuttering, her hand to her throat.

Wwwwho, wwho's coming?

Big Tom is rushing up, a rifle in his hands, setting the rifle to the firing position. He has a grim look in his eyes, his jaw set, as he has been braced for intruders and needs no explanation from Netty. She sees an ally in his face, their eyes meeting, and she quickly explains.

I'm Netty Finley, Buck Finley's granddaughter. I was at the Clearwater Resort when it happened.

Among friends at last, Netty allows her face to show the strain of the past few days. Big Tom glances at the horizon, scanning, impatient for her explanation. Netty is shaken.

They killed them all .. all .. even the baby. .

Netty is having a hard time talking, overcome, but fighting the urge to collapse into weeping, clearly due and coming. Glancing up into Big Tom's eyes, Netty pointedly explains.

I think they're following me.

Big Tom, meeting her eyes, nods at her briefly, his jaw set, a silent understanding between them.

An open top jeep is following puffs of dust in the distance and soil recently pounded with horse hooves, tracks evident, following Netty. Engine revving and the voices of young males, the Groggin brothers, whooping it up as though on the hunt for a prey that can't get away.

Yeehaw!

Big Tom is leaning against a large tree trunk, his rifle resting on a lower branch. The sound of a jeep is heard in the distance. The open topped jeep is seen bouncing along a dirt road through the field, approaching. Big Tom lowers the rifle, moving his eye close to the sight, bracing himself against the tree trunk. A shot rings out as Big Tom jerks from the recoil.

Red has herded the group into a cistern room, where spring water is drawn and food stuffs are placed for cool storage - an old fashioned cooler. Red is at the door, peering out through a crack, his finger to his mouth reminding them all to hush. Red has his rifle resting along his leg, not cocked but there just in case. He is standing in for Big Tom, second in command.

Martha has her two youngsters close to her, one under each arm and leaning into her. Everyone is silent, scarcely breathing. Danny has his hand over his hysterical girl friend's mouth, her wide eyes looking up steadily and unblinkingly into his. He has taped her wrists and ankles and secured her to a chair, taking no chances. Netty stands behind Red, peering over his shoulder. Frank and Jane are in each other's arms, Frank running the fingers of his good hand lightly up and down Jane's arm as she rests her head against his good shoulder.

Big Tom is in the distance, walking down off the hillock, his purposeful stride showing no tension or hurry. He takes his hat off and waves it in the direction of the cistern room, signaling the OK. The door opens and Red emerges as Big Tom comes within voice shot.

They won't trouble anyone anymore.

Behind what used to be the barn, the ladies are bathing, and a sheet has been hung between the trough and the tent city, for privacy. Martha, dressed in a bathrobe, is toweling off Tammy's head, while Tammy stands with a large bath towel wrapped around her tiny frame. Daisy is complaining that the water isn't warm, shivering and muttering as she quickly washes off with a wet cloth and slips into one of her boyfriend's large wool shirts. Netty is washing with relish, for the first time in days, soaping repeatedly and rinsing as though she thought this day would never come again.

Jane has recovered from her scalp wound, but still has a thin strip of white cloth tied around her head. She is being cheerful, or at least trying to be, telling stories to Tammy about pioneer women, how brave they were, and the hardships they bore. The obvious point is that these things can be survived. Jane continues with her monologue.

*They washed like this all the time, and in winter,
while standing by the stove! Never hurt them a bit.
Can be kind of fun if you think about it.*

The ladies are walking back in a leisurely manner to the tent city from the horse trough, a laugh now and then heard from the group, tension gone now that the threat is past. Mark and Brian walking up the dirt road toward the group, relieved to find others still alive and well. Martha breaks from the group and runs toward the tent city, to warn Big Tom, with Tammy reacting to the sight of two strangers approaching by standing stock still, staring in their

direction, so that Netty has to return, taking her by the hand to lead her along.

Mark and Brian are seen as limping, dusty, Brian almost staggering. Big Tom is striding into view, coming from the direction of the tent city which the woman are now jogging toward. He holds the rifle pointed straight up in a warning fashion, clearly stating that the visitors are to stop and identify themselves.

Mark is the larger and more handsome, is almost twice the bulk of the slender Brian, who has a thin face and light fine hair which he wears on the long side. Mark is dark haired and tanned, hair on the short side and a commanding look about him. He's used to being in charge. Mark puts his hand up, signaling to Big Tom that they mean no harm.

We're unarmed . . . We mean you no harm . . . We're just trying to get to a phone.

At this point he glances past Big Tom and notices for the first time that the farm buildings are devastated, scanning the view in silence. His question is more of a statement than a question.

I don't suppose your lines are up, though.

Not yet at ease, Big Tom is on guard.

Put your hands on your heads. We've had some unwelcome visitors and I'm taking no chances.

Red has come up behind him, hands him the second rifle to hold while he quickly pats the visitors down, nodding at Big Tom when no weapons are found. Big Tom hands the spare rifle back to Red and welcomes the two men.

Come on back and have some soup, you look like you could use some.

-Stories-

It's suppertime, the last traces of the setting sun fading rapidly, and the group is gathered around the coals of a small fire, kept small and low so as not to attract attention. Martha is putting her outdoor kitchen away, stacking chipped plates and dented pots and pulling a sheet over them as cover, to keep them clean. The new guests ate everything put before them. Martha has seasoned the water used to cook carrots and given it to them as soup, a bedtime snack. Nothing goes to waste.

Brian's slender hands are trembling as he brings the bowl up to his face, slurping the soup repeatedly, still famished. Mark is telling what he heard on the radio before the plane hit rough up/down drafts due to incipient hurricane winds at the shift.

The winds were like a hurricane, but different. Our plane hit some bad drafts. I couldn't hold it. We could hear the radio news guy talking about . .

Cars are abandoned on the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco, which is blocked due to this, but people are flooding across from both directions, a look of desperation in their eyes. An abandoned toddler is crying where he stands, no one bothering to pick him up.

Rioting in cities, where panic stricken people were crowding the bridges, trying to move in both directions at once, just trying to get someplace else, anyplace else.

Looting is rampant, like the LA riots but more widespread in all areas of the city. Fires are everywhere.

And looting in the cities. The police just weren't around, at least not paying attention. No law, and anything goes.

Mark's face is like a mask as he relays all this, keeping his emotions disconnected so he can get through it.

Services were failing. People failed to turn up for their jobs. Power outages went unrepaired. Phone lines went dead. Gas pumps were locked and the stations closed.

Mark pauses a minute, keeping his emotions in control. Mark shakes his head.

A never-ending mid-morning on the East Coast, taking its toll . .

Then Mark's story gets personal.

We saw some of that too, from the plane ..

Cars are littering the road, pulled over to the side, and a bridge with traffic lined up on both sides. Abandoned cars on the bridge had created a traffic jam that was only getting worse as more cars were pulling up at both ends. People were walking in small groups across the land, too, setting out on foot.

Highways and especially highway bridges were blocked with cars that had run out of gas, abandoned where they stood. And all the while we could hear the Earth moaning. I don't ever think I'll forget that sound.

Big Tom nods in agreement with Mark on the sound, and Mark continues.

We heard that religious groups thought the end of the world had come, and lots of people, even atheists, were committing suicide, taking their whole families with them, taking the kids out first, just like that Jim Jones crowd.

Mark leans back, resigned, his eyes dropped to the feet of those around the campfire, as the story gets personal.

Brian and I were overland when it hit .. We lost control, first the compass went crazy ..

In the cockpit of the small plane the compass starts behaving erratically. Brian grabs for their maps as guidance. Mark has one hand on the controls and with the other is shaking open a map, a frantic look on his face. Brian's slender hands are fluttering in now and then, trying to help open the map.

Then the sky started to dance around .. And when the winds kicked in, we had no choice but to land and land quick!

Mark falls silent for a minute, searching his memory for what he might have missed.

We've been to the beach plenty, and I can recall looking out at that broad expanse of water and wondering once what it would be like to have it rise up and rush at me. You know, a really big wave. Happens, after a quake or something.

A large coastal city is in profile and at a distance so that both the water and city have half the view. The water begins to rise on the water edge side of the scene, then raises rapidly, a huge wave as tall as some of the sky scrapers moving toward the city. The wave moves steadily, steadily rising as a tide rather than as a towering wave about to crash down. This is seen inundating the city rather than crashing at it from the side.

The last thing we heard was the radio announcer, screaming.

. . It's coming . . "Oh my God, we're all going to drown." Then the radio suddenly went dead.

Netty has been brushing Tammy's hair as she sits numbly, her stony lack of emotion being taken for a quiet nature. Netty puts the brush aside.

We were at the Clearwater Resort, waiting it out as the phones had gone dead and no one knew what was happening. I was up in my room, changing .. I heard a woman's voice pleading .. Not my babies, please, they're so little. Then I heard gun shots, then silence, and slipped under the bed, quiet as a mouse.

Martha reaches across, and taking Tammy's hand, leads her away from the unfolding story.

It was the Groggin brothers. I later realized they'd killed the other guests for target practice when they came up from the fishing hole. Almost everyone went there to escape the heat, you know. I saw them when I went to the barn to get my bay - fishing poles and fish in hand, laying there in blood and twisted in agony. All dead.

Vacationers were walking toward the main house, fishing poles and a string of fish in hand. They were gesturing and talking. One of the guests jerks backward, blood on his face and neck, splattered all over his shirt front. The others get a frantic look on their faces, jerking their heads around to look in the direction of the shot, trying to discern what is happening. Netty says,

I realized they were shooting everybody!

The Groggin brothers were downstairs, getting drunk and laughing about their exploits. Netty lies trembling under the bed, not daring to move.

They were laughing about what they'd done. Laughing. Talking about how people looked when the bullets hit, how they reacted, the look on their faces. Then they'd howl and carry on. I was sick, trembling so hard I was afraid to move. I slipped under the bed, lay there trying not to breath, not to move, not make any sounds that could be heard.

The Groggin brothers now considered themselves masters of the resort they were never welcomed at. They swaggered around, putting their muddy boots up on the stuffed furniture, and raiding the bar and tossing empty bottles at lamps and vases. No phones, no law, and the brothers can do as they please.

.. more fun than moving weed ..

They moved room to room seeing what they could find, looking for valuables. Netty says,

I held my breath when they came into my room, didn't breathe, and they missed me.

Netty slipped down the stairs, cautiously, shoes in her hand and back to the wall so she can see the main room before the Groggin brothers see her feet.

Later I slipped down the stairs when it got quiet. They were asleep, drunk and snoring.

Netty is in the stables at the Clearwater Resort, heaving an English saddle over the back of her big bay, a horse she has brought with her to the resort, her favorite. She is seen stroking its ears after she slips the bit into its mouth, talking to it.

I went to the barn and saddled my big bay. He follows me like a baby after I pet him a bit. Quiet as a mouse.

Netty leads her horse away from the stables, her free hand on the horse's mouth now and then, as though to quiet it. Netty leads the horse along a hedge, away from the resort lodge.

I thought I had gotten away, had walked along the hedge where they couldn't see me unless I mounted, and I didn't mount to ride until beyond the trees there.

Then Netty is on her bay, cantering, while looking over her shoulder toward the resort lodge.

But when I was riding away, I thought I saw something move near the house. I figured I'd been seen. They chased me, and there was no hiding as the Sun never went down. I was the only witness to their crimes.

Netty glances around the group, and seeing all eyes on her, attentively, continues.

I was the only living witness to their crimes, and they weren't about to lose me. Dead women tell no tales. But I think they were on a power trip too. Their guns ruled, I guess. These guys are sadistic. Once they got on top, no telling what they'd do.

Netty falls silent for a minute, putting the fear she felt away in that compartment she never wanted to open again. Taking a deep breath, Netty glances around the group to signal a change in the story. Netty walked her bay along the bed of a stream, water up to her hips in places. Suddenly she and the horse were thrown sideways, the horse's legs up in the air and kicking

as it tries to right itself. She lands flat on her belly on the water, rises up sputtering and coughing. Both unhurt.

I was lucky enough to be in Clearwater Creek when it hit. I took a dunking, had the breath knocked out of me when I landed, and when I came up all I saw were kicking legs and splashing around. It was a good thing I hadn't been riding. My bay was almost upside down. There were hooves everywhere, but we were OK.

Netty pauses to pull the story together, piecing it together for herself at the same time.

Apparently the Groggin brothers were drunk, loose as a goose. Drunk drivers are always the ones to survive the crash. That was like them.

Netty falls silent again, having reached the end of her story. Netty ends her story with a question.

I wonder if this isn't happening all over ..

Not everyone around the campfire is silent, as Brian has begun giggling, but this goes unnoticed by the others rapt with the stories being told. Brian stares off into space, his face a mask, giggling softly though nothing seems to be funny. Some of the repeated shocks to weak individuals show mental illness setting in - Tammy, who develops symptoms of catatonic schizophrenia, Brian, who says inappropriate things indicating he is seeing another reality and is either hallucinating or delusional. Brian says,

.. Happening to the goats ..

Everyone stares at Brian quietly while he giggles softly to himself, looking off into space, though nothing is funny.

The dim light of dawn shows Big Tom trudging back from the creek, a towel thrown over his shoulder. He meets Red, who is sipping coffee at what serves as the kitchen table now, both men alone as the others sleep in. Big Tom glances up at the sky and then comments quietly to Red.

Seems like this cloud cover is never going to lift.

Red rubs the tips of his fingers together, examining them briefly.

I saw this when I was stationed in the Philippines - some volcanoes have been burping, somewhere.

Big Tom bends over a smoldering campfire, picking up a blackened coffee pot, and while pouring himself a mug of coffee speaks in a quiet voice.

Have you noticed what's happening to Tammy?

Red had been dreading this moment.

I think she'll snap out of it, she just misses her doll house. The way she holds that rag doll of hers, you'd think it was all she had in the world.

Clearly eager to talk about what he sees happening to his little girl, Big Tom is not going to be put off so easily.

She's never been like that, so quiet! I couldn't even get her to talk to me yesterday, wouldn't say a word. Damned peculiar.

Martha steps out of one of the makeshift tents, brushing hair away from her placid sleepy face. She smiles slightly at the two men in her life as she walks over to the fire, flipping open the coffee pot lid to inspect the contents.

I heard you two talking about Tammy. I know she's not right, and if we could I'd take her straight-away to Doctor Townsend, but there's no way what with the roads torn up.

A wailing sound floats through the air, coming from a distance but unmistakably human. Mark bolts out of one of the tents, beating back the blankets that act as the tent walls in his haste. He has a worried look on his sleepy face.

Where's Brian, did you see where he went?

Red points in the direction of the wail, his face blank as though this is nothing new. Mark heads off in haste in that direction, tucking his shirt into his pants and stomping his feet into his boots as he goes.

That's another one who's not right. The other day I found him talking to thin air.

One week later some townsfolk arrive, having walked from the nearby small town. Several people are straggling in the dim dawn, along the winding road that leads past the farm. One of them pulls a wagon meant to be pulled by a pony, hauling another. The man inside is gripping both sides, bracing himself against the jolts, his bruised body complaining at the motion. Herman, a large man in the lead, stops and points toward the ranch house and the others look up, lifting their gaze from the road and then looking in that direction. They move forward with more pep now, taking hope now that they have found other survivors.

Big Tom has been watching this procession from where he is sitting at the table with Martha and Red, his hands wrapped around a coffee mug.

We've got more visitors.

Red jerks his head around, and then rises to go off to get his rifle. Big Tom puts his mug down and heads in the direction of the arriving travelers, apparently deciding that by their appearance they are anything but a threat. Big Tom walks with a firm step past the wreck of the Ranch House and out along the entry road. He is approaching with his hand outstretched, recognizing the lead man. The group closes up around Big Tom, everyone is attempting to talk at once. Clara, a thin graying woman, has rushed up to Big Tom. She describes fire from dropping firestorms that consumed one group, the charred bodies found.

*They were all burned, as though there was no escape,
as though the fire dropped on them from the sky!*

Her husband, Len, a thin bent man, joins in.

*Don't know where else, as the house was fine, and that
ain't the weirdest thing we seen neither!*

Clara glances at her husband.

You talking about that man pelted to death?

Len, not accustomed to be displaced as the story teller, jumps back in. Hailstones had killed another which they found along a road, having left his abandoned car. This man's car had shattered windows and a pock marked car.

*It was like he was stoned to death, those little
stones all over the road, and his car looked even
worse.*

Clara is too excited to stay silent.

*Poor man, looks like he tried to run from it when the
windows shattered, and there was just no escape.*

Big Tom asks,

These town folks?

Len and Clara glance at each other, but then Clara drops her gaze, looking down at the road with tears welling up in her eyes, temporarily overcome. Len is pointing toward the broken farm house.

*Didn't fare any better then you, and those that
survived went off just like ourselves, looking for
help.*

Clara adds more detail, finding her voice again. In the town some who were standing on a broad veranda porch at the time were thrown and dashed where they fell, broken and bloody with no chance of surviving the experience.

*Miz Farmington got throwed clear across the creek, up
against the flood wall, looked like one a them
tomatoes the boys throw on Saturday nights, all red
and smashed.*

Big Tom hasn't registered any surprise at any of this.

Where are you headed?

No one answers, but after a moment of silence, Herman does.

Anywhere it's not like this.

Big Tom nods in understanding, and invites them back to the camp.

*We're not much better off, but we have some coffee and
fried potatoes we can share.*

Then Big Tom gestures toward the camp and turns to walk back there himself.

Come on back.

-Friend and Foe-

In the wooded foothills fringing the valley, quiet preparations have taken place. In the swirling mist rising from the ground after a recent shower, construction is going on. A large silver dome is being erected, cranes lifting a section as orders are barked. The military, it seems, were not taken by surprise. They prepared for this day with construction supplies, and have quickly completed the construction of a dome with military hands assigned to the duty. The dome design is one fashioned after the remnants of sites on the Moon and Mars, scientifically studied to withstand high winds, earthquakes, and large enough to enclose their own atmosphere with comfort to the inhabitants. It is also a design coerced from a contactee, a type the Zetas inhabit. However, to their surprise and as we later learn, a second dome has been constructed in the locale, one not inhabited strictly by humans, much less the military.

General Flood, a vein in his bull neck throbbing, is impatient.

I want this done yesterday! We can expect stragglers to start arriving, and I'll be damned if they'll find us out in the open!

His non-commissioned companion, Sergeant Hammond, is hurrying to catch up to the general. Shorter and slight of build, he looks up at the general, his voice full of worry.

Sir, I still haven't been able to get through to my wife and kids. None of us have.

General Flood snaps back.

I told you that'd have to wait! We've got bigger worries than that right now.

As General Flood and Sergeant Hammond continue walking toward the construction site, another couple steps out from the tree bank. Jonah is wearing jeans and a white shirt worn thin by many washings, his dusty boots and ruffled hair attesting to his careless attitude toward appearances. He is standing next to a tall Zeta whose post thin body and stick arms are almost shocking when seen side by side next to the slender Jonah. The Zeta is gesturing toward the receding military men, his face turning toward Jonah, silently communicating. In response to this telepathic conversation, Jonah replies.

I know. They stole it from a contactee. But they don't have much besides the shape. It's not like our domes.

The Zeta puts his hand on Jonah's shoulder, and glancing up, Jonah replies in agreement.

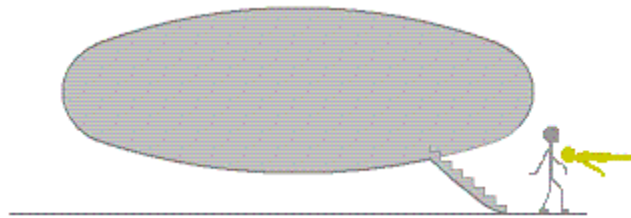
Yeah, I know, before we're spotted.

At this both, of them rise in the air a few feet and float off, backwards and away from the scene before them, then dissolving into another dimension.

Jonah and his Zeta companion walk up through the mist in the direction of the camera, out of the trees that are surrounding a natural clearing. Jonah says,
*The injured you brought in have been getting restless
and want to help with the work, they've been asking
for a role.*

They are walking toward a large silver dome, toward the entry port at the ground level.

Off to this side there are several thin Zetas, transporting injured people or assisting those too weak to walk into the domed city from a dull gray saucer shaped craft suspended a couple feet off the ground. Those who can't walk are being transported by levitation, their prone bodies floating alongside a walking Zeta who is apparently in charge of the levitation and transport.



Billy is out digging for potatoes in a field behind the tent city. It is gloomy as though early dawn, the trees along the creek starkly outlined against the gray sky. Their leaves have fallen off, not as they do in fall when they color and then drop, but because about half have turned a sickly yellow and dropped while the remaining leaves are still green. Billy is scrapping and chopping at the soil with a short hoe and digging tool, turning the earth, looking for potatoes.

He has a cloth sack lying on the ground beside him, lumpy with the few potatoes he has found. He is dusty and frankly dirty in places, as much from his work as from infrequent baths. Billy looks solemn and forlorn, with a slight frown on this face. Billy drops to his knees to dig by hand, failing to notice that he is no longer alone.

Suddenly Billy notices a thick gray Zeta foot, developed over eons to deal with a heavy gravity draw, and the thin leg above it. The foot appears to be booted in a seamless gray material. Billy sees the foot and freezes, but does

not look concerned. He eases back into a sitting position, putting his legs out in front of him a bit, and looks up, squinting.

The Zeta holds a capped vial of smoky colored glass. The long slender fingers in the Zeta hand are wrapped around the vial, held in place by just a hint of a thumb, a bump where the thumb should be. Billy starts talking to the Zeta as though he has been doing this all his life, as though there were nothing unusual about the scene. He blurts out, in a natural and relaxed voice, as though talking to a family member he trusts, speaking quickly and with fervor.

She just won't talk to any of us.

At this tears well up in his eyes. Billy continues, with a quiver in his voice.

She stares at me like she doesn't see me.

His breath quickening as though he were about to start crying in earnest, tears starting to stream down his face.

I asked her to come with me, digging, so we could skip stones like we used to, and she didn't even say nothing. Nothing!

Billy wipes the tears away with the palm of his hand against one cheek, suddenly jerking his head up and looking clear faced at the Zeta, whose face we never see. There is a moment of silence as he is obviously listening to something intently. He glances at the vial and raises his hand to take it from the Zeta. He smiles slightly through his dusty tears, glancing at the Zeta briefly during this, by way of thanks.

Though it is mid-day, it is still gloomy, as though a very overcast day during early dawn at the ranch city. Martha is sorting laundry, looking for items to be mended, seated on a chair in an open area, the laundry scattered about her in little piles on the ground. Her two children are behind her on the grass, Billy bringing Tammy what appears to be a glass of water. Billy sits down beside her, holding the glass up near her face. Tammy weakly raises a hand, and Billy uses his own hand in addition to her hand to steady the glass as she raises it.

Issues around the food shortage and what to eat have come up continually lately, with creative meal-making resulting. Martha cooks what she and Red decide is good to eat, and the others are told not to ask. This has included atypical menu items such as earthworms picked up off the damp grass after the last rain and some slow moving possums Red has caught, as well as edible weeds.

Big Tom strides in to talk to his wife, squatting before her so they can talk face to face. He looks up into her face.

We're out, plumb out, and the canned goods are going fast too.

Martha is unperturbed, as she and Red noticed this long before the others. She keeps on mending through all of this without missing a stitch, though looks up and into her husband's eyes a lot, letting him know she has heard him. She smiles.

Red is bringing some possum back, and I've got some special soup tonight, you'll see, it'll be all right.

Big Tom pauses, then rises to his feet.

Special soup?

Martha starts picking the laundry up off a pile, folding it on her lap as though getting ready to go.

Never you mind, it'll be good for you.

It is supper time in the tent city, where the group has gathered around a glowing camp fire in the center of the makeshift tents. Martha is ladling out soup, handing bowl after bowl to the group as they come up one at a time. Some members of the group eat heartily, others sniff and hesitate. Herman says,

What's in this?

He receives no answer nor even a nod from Martha. All eventually start eating.

Billy and Tammy who are sitting in the grass behind and somewhat to the side of Martha as she stands next to the fire and soup pot. Billy takes a bowl to his sister Tammy, sitting without motion or expression at the perimeter. Tammy says,

Thanks.

Tammy starts eating matter of factly in a casual manner. Martha has stopped ladling, her ladle frozen in the air, tears forming in her eyes. She catches herself, taking a deep breath and tries to disguise the emotion in her voice.

Anyone for more?

Tammy glances at her brother and giggles, sharing a joke, both of them unaware of the waves of emotion buffeting their placid and reliable mother.

Len and Big Tom sitting at a table. Len says,

There are a lot of stories going around about these camps. Trucks were seen going in on a regular basis just ahead of the upheavals.

Big Tom is intrigued.

Maybe we should get together a scouting party and find out what's what?

Always loving a good gossip line, Len continues.

*Repeatedly, repeatedly and sometimes on a daily basis!
Jed ain't the only one who seed it either, plenty others seed it too.*

Len scoops some soup up with a piece of bread and after biting a piece off continues with great seriousness.

I'm telling you, they've got a camp there, they got supplies, and that's where we should be heading.

What they find is not a warm welcome, but interrogation.

Crossing an open field, Big Tom, Len, Herman, and Jane who has insisted that the woman's touch was needed, are trudging through the overcast day, backpacks or cloth sacks thrown over shoulders, boots on and jackets open, wearing their clothing supplies rather than carrying them in suitcases.

Jane brings up the rear, though she is following Len who is actually the slow one. Jane is doing this out of consideration, steadying him now and then if he loses his balance by putting a hand up against his back pack, unbeknownst to him. A kind hearted person, she can see this veteran is a weakened man, struggling not to show it.

Len is pointing toward a cleft in the hills looming up ahead.

Over there, they drove up and just plumb disappeared between those hills. Ain't nothing in there that anyone knows, and the signs say 'Private Property'.

A lookout on the hilltop is watching the four-some trudging toward him. He picks up a portable phone and talks into it, softly.

Incoming, 4 o'clock.

The group is approaching a cleft in the hills, trees on both sides. Len is talking animatedly, waving his arm in this direction or that while he describes what he or others have seen from a distance. Jane is glancing slowly from side to side, scanning the skimpy forest they are approaching with a half-curious look on her face. Suddenly Jane freezes, her hand raising in the direction of the woods they are fast approaching, her warning frozen in her throat as a military warning booms out.

Halt! Halt or be fired upon! Identify yourselves.

A single table is furnished in the large bare room, the lights dim everywhere but in the center of the room over the table. The foursome come stumbling into the room, glancing over their shoulders, more worried about what is behind them than in front of them. General Flood comes walking out of the shadows opposite their entry.

*Who led you here? This installation isn't on the map!
Who led you here!*

His voice is firm and his questions posed as though he didn't expect any resistance. Len is almost squirming, and the others glance at him.

Well Sir, I was formerly in the military and ..

At which point Len gets rudely interrupted by General Flood.

Stick to the point! Who led you here!

Len gulps.

I did.

Big Tom and Jane have been taken aside to another interrogation room by a group of military interrogators in shirt sleeves with their sleeves rolled up past their elbows, ties off and shirt collars open. This room is small and close, so the interrogators are literally in the faces of those they are questioning. Big Tom and Jane are being questioned relentlessly with staccato questions meant to rattle them. The questions are broadly based. Colonel Cage asks,

How many in your group?

Big Tom responds.

My family? Are you including the townfolk?

Another interrogator asks,

Where did you say you were when it happened?

Big Tom starts to respond.

I was at the ranch, but ..

But is interrupted by a second interrogator.

Herman, who?

Still struggling to answer the questions put to him, Big Tom says,

He's, he's the major of the town.

Big Tom is trying to answer the question as though they are factual, not understanding, as Jane does intuitively, that they are intended to rattle them. She is composed, and finally confronts them in a clear calm voice.

*How long do you think it will be before the whole town
arrives? What will you do with them?*

Her question silences the interrogators, as she has seen past their bravado to their point of panic.

Finally allowed out into the camp yard, Big Tom and Jane come out a door to join Herman and Len. They are all standing close together, waiting, in the center of a complex of bland colored huts.

General Flood and his ever present attaché, Sergeant Hammond, are to the side, being briefed by the interrogators, Colonel Cage among them. Colonel Cage is shaking his head slightly as he walks up to the group, indicating their lack of success. General Flood reports.

It doesn't matter, the little rat broke. They came from the Shaw ranch just north of here.

The General pauses, then says:

Make sure they aren't followed.

General Flood turns abruptly and walks off, leaving his orders ambiguous.

A despondent Big Tom and Jane and their guards are returning to the farm, backtracking along the path taken to reach the camp. The path is going along a narrow valley between rolling hills. All are walking single file. The half dozen military men are holding weapons, casually pointed down and to the side as they walk but nevertheless at the ready.

Big Tom is in the lead, and is walking slowly, trying to think of escape and stalling, not wanting to lead them back to his family. The soldier behind him gives him a shove, making him stumble slightly. Colonel Cage, who has been walking behind Jane, comes forward quickly, reprimanding the soldier in a quick aside, and begins walking side by side with Big Tom. Colonel Cage picks up the pace to put a little distance between themselves and the others, and begins to talk to Big Tom quietly.

Is there a break up ahead where we can take a stand?

Big Tom doesn't miss a beat, having sized up the colonel as a good man, and after a moment of mulling it over, answers.

At the creek up ahead. It gets rough ..

The conversation is interrupted, Colonel Cage jerking his head around, hearing a slight but familiar sound, and immediately bolts back along the line. He says,

Where is she!

His question is met with a cold stare, but as Jane and two of the soldiers have disappeared, the Colonel has his answer.

Colonel Cage continues back along the trail, picking up his pace, and soon finds what he feared. Behind a group of trees, Jane is struggling with one of the men who is trying to tear her pants down, while the other holds the automatic weapon in a relaxed manner, watching and leaning back against a tree.

The soldier with the gun jerks his head around, seeing Colonel Cage running up to them. The rapist shoves Jane away and quickly adjusts his pants at the fly, trying to conceal what he was up to. The soldier with the gun raises his gun and shoots Jane, who has staggered back, in the face with a short burst from the automatic. Colonel Cage wrenches the gun away from the soldier. The soldier says,

She was trying to escape.

Without missing a beat, Colonel Cage lowers the weapon and shoots this soldier in the stomach, swinging it quickly to do the same to the rapist. While the two of them are writhing on the ground, in agony, Colonel Cage walks over to Jane, determining at a glance that she is solidly dead as her head is essentially blown off. He turns on his heels and strides back the way he came, his face full of tension and a film of sweat on his pale face. He is breathing heavily, from the run and adrenaline, and runs his fingers through his hair, front to back, combing it as he strides back to the waiting line of men.

Lets go.

He walks to the front to rejoin Big Tom who is waiting with an anxious look on his face.

They're all dead, it's over.

The women are washing clothes on some rocks along the creek. Netty is snappish with Daisy, who is sitting back and barely dipping her batch of laundry into the water, as though she expects to be rescued. Netty snaps at her.

I'm not going to do it for you this time. Wake up to it, it's this or living grungie.

Clara is washing vigorously, a worried look on her face. Finally she sits back on her haunches, facing Martha.

Do you think we'll ever see them again?

Martha glances quickly over her shoulder, seeing her children playing along the creek bed behind them, out of ear shot.

Big Tom knows this area and Len knows how to talk to them.

Martha hasn't answered the question, but it is apparent by her face that she too is worried and just trying to keep a calm front. Suddenly Tammy shouts.

Dad!

Tammy is running and Billy jumps to his feet to follow her. Big Tom and Colonel Cage walk out of the woods, followed by the three remaining soldiers. The women have risen to their feet as Big Tom walks up to Martha with a grim look in his face. Martha is anxious, glancing over his shoulder and flitting her eyes back to meet his quickly.

Where's the others?

The grim look on his face is her answer, and she flutters a hand quickly to her mouth, and utters quietly.

Oh, no!

Clara is next, standing just behind Martha where we can see her anxious face.

Where's Len? Where are they! In God's name tell me what happened!

Big Tom puts his left hand on her shoulder.

They're fine, fine, don't get excited. They stayed behind and they're all fine.

Martha is leaning her face into her husband's shoulder, biting her trembling lower lip and fighting tears, trying to use an embrace and joy over seeing her husband again to disguise her grief from the rest of the women and her children.

-On the Move-

Danny is explaining to Mark and a restless Brian about the pole shift, relaying what he can remember from Professor Isaac's rambling dissertation.

It happens ever few thousand years, and what's left of mankind starts over again. I guess we're lucky to be alive.

Brian is moving continuously but in a slow manner, pausing after each move for a moment, first raising partially up and then sitting down again, crossing one leg and then uncrossing and crossing the other leg, putting his hands on his knees and then crossing his arms, swatting behind his neck and looking at his hand for a bug that isn't there, moving his head from side to side as though looking in every direction - restless and a bit paranoid.

Mark is in denial about what has happened, the pole shift, even though he has experienced it.

Yeah, well, I don't believe any of it. If something like that was going to happen the government would have told us. I think it was just an earthquake.

A look of relief crosses Mark's face as he sees Big Tom and the women approaching.

Hey, there they are.

Mark starts to rise from his seat to greet the group coming back from the creek. Danny turns also, a smile on his face, but the smile slowly disappears as he sees missing members. Brian has bolted into the tents at the sight of the military men. Big Tom sets the tone and takes charge of the big lie.

They're waiting for us and we have to pack up and join them.

Happy to hear this news, Danny starts nodding his head and muttering.

Cool, we're out'a here.

Daisy comes up to him, immediately starting her whining mode again as she thinks things are back to normal again.

I'll need to see the hair stylist right away, my hair's a mess!

She is tugging at her pants and blouse, trying to straighten up and adjust back into appearance expectations she had put aside.

Big Tom crawls into the tent where a sleepy Frank is just waking up from a nap.

Come on, guy, time to move out.

Frank blinks and says,

You're back? Where's Jane?

Big Tom keeps up the big lie, speaking calmly.

We're going to meet them. Hurry up, grab your things.

Martha is sorting items to take, putting most aside after a moment's hesitation on some items, as though she has regrets about leaving them, selecting only a few. She signs, sits back from being on her knees in the tent to sitting on her butt with her legs tucked under her. She looks up from the items she has been sorting. A Zeta has come to sit across from her, long thin legs folded Yoga style and elbows on each knee, hands held out in the center as though a dialog were going on. Martha says,

I'm going to miss you. ..

Suddenly smiling and brightening, even laughing a bit in relief as she realizes how foolish was her thought that contact was somehow tied to the ranch, where she has lived all her life.

Oh.

Rolling back onto her knees and continuing to sort, now with more fervor and energy, getting back to the urgent task at hand. Martha is smiling to herself.

The group is leaving the farm, carrying only pillowcases stuffed with personal items. Martha stops briefly, turning slightly to glance back at the ranch with a long lingering sad look at the home and lifestyle she knows she will never see again. Tammy is at her side. Tammy says,

Do you think they'll have a doll house?

Martha, wanting to encourage her daughter's recent return to normalcy, chatters back brightly.

Wouldn't be surprised. I'll bet they'll even be some other little girls your age.

In the background, Netty is letting her big bay run free, removing its harness and giving it a slap as it canters out into the open field. On the run, the horse could not be concealed.

Colonel Cage is walking with Frank, who has just been told of his wife's death. He is talking this stoically, and they are walking at the side of the others who have spread out and are not in a line any longer. Frank is pale and barely moving.

At least she didn't suffer.

The Colonel is still enraged at what had occurred.

No, but I made sure they did!

Big Tom and Danny are taking the lead. Big Tom is explaining the situation to Danny.

*.. Don't know where we're going, but we had to leave,
and soon. They were sent to kill us.*

His face is grim, and he glances repeatedly at Danny's face as he says this, checking out the terrain ahead of them in between these glances. The pace is not slow, and the field is rough so one has to watch their step. Danny looks confused and troubled, keeps looking like he wants to say something but stops when the words don't come together. Finally he manages.

So they're all dead, Len and Herman?

Big Tom pauses, faced with a question he himself does not want to face.

*I don't know, but we have to assume that, I guess.
Just don't say anything to the women.*

Mark and Brian have lagged behind, Brian repeatedly sitting down and crying, curling up into a ball and wailing softly. Mark looks consternated, as the others are ahead of him already. He glances at the retreating line of people ahead of him, debating whether to call for help, and decides not. Mark sits down beside Brian, putting his arms around him, rubbing his back, cradling his head against his shoulder. Brian is almost imperceptibly.

I just want to go home.

Mark has a calm, thoughtful look on his face, and then pushes Brian back so he can look into his face.

Well, maybe we can do just that!

Mark is almost surprised to find the plane wreck looking as they had left it, the plane nosed into trees at the edge of a creek, the propellers twisted and one wing bent at a right angle. Mark and Brian are walking toward the plane, hurriedly, while Mark is talking excitedly.

*Remember that air balloon jet I was taking to the
club? I'll bet we can rig something up! We've got
the parachutes, and heck, if we can just get out of
this earthquake zone ..*

Night is falling, and the group leaving the farm is making camp. Straw beds have been made from straw gathered from a wheat field. No campfire has been lit, for safety, so they are eating cold food scraps they have brought - boiled potatoes and water from a nearby creek. Daisy is making a face after taking a swig, and Colonel Cage explains.

It's chlorine, so you don't get the runs.

Clara makes a nervous aside to Martha, in a quiet voice.

Why won't they let us start a fire? I don't like the feel of this, something's wrong!

Big Tom, overhearing this, senses that he needs to calm the group. He addresses the group, speaking in a loud voice so all can hear.

We're being careful not to alert anyone that we're traveling though. We don't want any trouble. Just taking precautions.

Billy is helping Red spread some straw they've brought in from the nearby field, and complains to his grandpa.

It's all itchy. Why did we have to move?

Red, who has apparently been briefed by his son earlier, replies.

We couldn't stay at the ranch forever, son, running out of food and all like we were.

The group eases down onto the straw as the last of the daylight fades, too exhausted to object any more.

The next morning the group is stirring at dawn. The Sun not yet up but the early dawn provides enough light that we can see the outline of trees in the distance and here and there a member of the group rising to stand and stretch. When it is clear that they are all awake, Martha has an announcement.

I've nothing for breakfast. I'm sorry. Here's what I suggest we do. Each of us keep our eyes out for something edible during our walk today. Maybe by nightfall we can have a feast.

Frank pats his shirt pocket and smiles when he feels a familiar friend there. He draws out a pocket sized guide and holds it aloft.

I've got a book, a book on edible weeds and mushrooms. Take it camping every time just in case I get lost in the woods or something.

Then, under his breath to himself as he realizes for once he, Frank, is the hero. A slight smile touches his face. Alive again, with a role to play after the loss of his wife Jane.

How about that.

The group is limping along with less energy than the day before. Clara, who is middle aged, is frankly dragging, and Netty comes up to her to take her

sack. The group is strung out in a line. Big Tom and Colonel Cage are at the front of the line, approaching some low rolling hills.

Frank is walking side by side with Billy, who is leaning close now and then to look at a picture in Frank's small pocket sized handbook on wild edibles. Frank is gesturing, and Billy glances up now and then to look at Frank in the face, to be polite, but clearly would rather just have the book.

*. . These are safe, but there's some others in here
that we don't want ..*

Martha and Tammy are scouting as they go, only stepping off the trail for a moment to pluck a likely weed, then sampling a leave or flower as they pick up the pace to return to their place in line. Martha has grabbed a purple flower off a thistle, takes a nibble and hands a bite down to Tammy for her to taste test too. They smile at each other.



A large black rat snake has been startled from its nap in the sun and has started to wriggle into the protection of some tall grass. A military boot suddenly stomps down on the snake toward its tail, nailing it to the ground. One of the soldiers drops a rock on the snake's head and the snake stops wriggling.



A creek, gurgling through the woods, is under both sunlight and shade as it winds its way past tall trees and dense woods. Red has stepped into the water on one side, scooping up a lacy light green plant growing in the water along the bank. Red loads his left arm with the harvest while grabbing handfuls with

his right hand, oblivious to the fact that his left side is getting muddy and wet. He has a smile on his face. Water cress is a find on a day when even a plain salad will be appreciated.



Netty and Danny are walking together, Netty almost on top of Danny who is in the lead. She is earnestly explaining something to Danny, who has a worried look on his face, not wanting to hear, and seems to almost be trying to put distance between the two of them to avoid it. Netty keeps closing the gap, though, talking nonstop.

. . All over the world. We're about the only culture that doesn't do it. Lots of fat and protein. . . Well what else are we going to bring to the pot tonight? Got any better ideas?

They round a large tree and find a fallen tree trunk at the side of the path, moldered halfway into the ground, the bark falling off. Netty points and strides over to the trunk.

There! Lets check this for grubs.

Danny has a horrified look on his face, but stops to watch as Netty kicks at the trunk, pushing it over and dropping to her knees in the soft wood chips, digging with a piece of bark. She pulls another, larger piece of bark toward her and is putting white grubs on this, working quickly so the grubs don't escape into the soft ground. She looks over her shoulder at the reluctant Danny, tossing him a smile.

Oh for heaven's sake! Get over yourself, city boy!

Big Tom and Colonel Cage are at the head of the line. Big Tom looks over his shoulder as they walk along a tree line and sees that many in the group are not keeping up as they are taking time out to hunt and gather. The group is stretched out at least a half mile long, with a gap between those following and the two leaders. Big Tom says,

I know there's trout in these streams, and I've been trying to think of how to catch them. No time for a hook and line, that's for sure.

Big Tom is shucking off his jacket and hands it to Colonel Cage while he shucks off his long sleeved shirt. He ties a knot in each sleeve and buttons the neck as high as it will go. Not missing a stride as he does this, he veers toward the stream that they have been following as it runs along the tree bank and steps into a pool.

You go upstream a bit and chase them toward me. Lets see if this works.

Big Tom straddles the stream at a narrow point at the end of the pool, holding his shirt bottom like a net between his two hands. His fingers are splayed open, holding the shirt open, and his feet are braced on either side, blocking the way. Colonel Cage can be seen in the background, stepping gingerly into the stream and turning to move toward Big Tom.

The group has taken shelter for the night against a rock outcropping, in part for shelter against a threatening rain storm and in part to hide a small cooking fire they plan to light. Hungry and weary, they ease themselves into the soft dirt, looking discouraged and dusty. Big Tom has hung his wet shirt on a branch, and jacket open is laid back with eyes closed, a sleepy child in each armpit curled up against him.

One of the soldiers has arranged a fire pit - a circle of rocks with all litter cleared away for several feet. He is using a branch as a brush, sweeping the ground clear. Next he moves quickly through the woods nearby, grabbing at kindling. He kneels and starts twirling a sturdy branch against a flat piece of bark, and within a minute a spark forms, which is quickly fanned and fed with dried moss.



Martha is to the side, out of the shelter of the overhang, arranging the camping pots and plates the group has carried with them. She is digging

through backpacks, and Clara and Red step forward into blowing mist to help. Martha will prepare what the group has gathered in the rain, if need be, because there isn't enough room under the overhang for all the activity. The fire and dry sleeping quarters are more important, in her mind. The three lay out what has been gathered and washed - water cress, grubs, mushrooms, thistle flowers, and fish and snake fillets.

Red and Clara are arranging the cress, thistle flowers, and mushrooms on a plate and passing it to the group huddled under the overhang. Red says,

Here's your vitamins, eat hearty.

The platter is being passed down the line, each taking a pinch and stuffing it into their mouths. Danny brightens.

This is not bad! Wish I had some ranch dressing. .. Ah well.

Martha is at the fire, fish and snake meat in a pan with a little water. She puts a lit over the pan and nestles it into the fire. Martha has a bowl filled with the white grubs which are twisting from side to side. Martha takes a large spoon and starts mashing the grubs, then frothing them with a fork. She pulls the covered pan out of the fire and using her skirt as a hot pad lifts the lid, showing cooked fish and snake inside with only a little water left in the pan. Martha forks the meat onto the platter, which has now been returned free of salad, and serves up the next course with a smile. She passes the platter to Red, who can be seen turning to take it to the group huddled under the overhang.

And here's your protein - fish and, ahm . . chicken.

Martha pours the frothed grubs into the pan, and holds it over the fire, stirring feverishly. When the mess looks like cooked egg whites, she quickly turns and scoops it onto another platter, pulling a sprig of some herb she has collected during the day from her pocket as a garnish.

And for desert we have pudding.

Billy's face as he pulls a grub's brown leg out from between his teeth, his eyes widening at the sight.

Big Tom and Colonel Cage are out ahead of the others. They round a bend and stop short. We can't see what they're seeing, but gauge it to be horrific from the look on their faces. Big Tom glances quickly at Colonel Cage, understanding passing between them without words, and turns on his heel quickly to stop the others from rounding the bend. He jogs up to Danny and Frank who are next in line.

Keep the others back, but send Netty forward.

Danny nods in understanding while Frank stands stock still, pale and worried, the continuous trauma and events beyond his ability to cope. He has given up, essentially.

The scene before Colonel Cage is horrific, even for one with military training. Some clothing is strewn about, a child's shoe. A man's shoe and pant leg, covered in blood. A woman thrown into the bushes, her head bloodied as though bludgeoned. Danny, Big Tom, Colonel Cage, and Netty stand next to the fire taking this scene in, their faces grim. Colonel Cage finally breaks the silence.

I've heard this was going on. Cannibalism. We got some reports, places where they had the radio up, and they were under attack like this.

Big Tom is staring at him with an alarmed look on his face, the obvious thought that they are walking into danger, danger that he hadn't been told about, on this mind.

What the fuck did you bring us here for! What were you thinking!

Colonel Cage glances at him briefly, then back at the scene.

We got other reports too, some groups were doing OK, and I figured out their general location.

His face darkens as he realizes this might not be a local affair.

I hope to God my wife and kids are OK. The general didn't let any personal calls go through.

Netty says,

We can't let them see this!

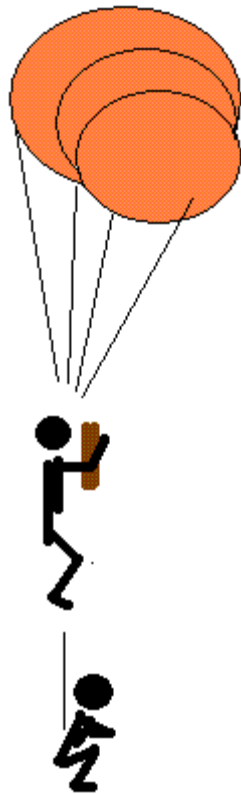
Her comment brings them all back to the immediate situation.

We'll tell them there's a washout.

Mark and Brian are floating through a low-lying cloud. The day is continuously overcast, gray with blowing clouds almost at ground level, and drizzling continuously. All is gray, and they both are being powdered with a fine volcanic soot which has turned the pair and their clothing light gray and streaked. Brian is hanging down below Mark, in a parachute seat, looking around with wide frightened eyes.

Mark is holding the hot air jet gingerly in his arms, pointed up into a double parachute arrangement above him. He rarely puffs the jet, as the wind catches them and propels them with rapid bursts now and then. Mark is using the jet

sparingly, only when the wind dies down between bursts and they begin to drift toward the ground.



Below them are flooded farmlands and a town, a church steeple and silo sticking up above the water, and occasional rooftops with people huddled in the center. One waves frantically at the floating pair, hoping to be rescued. Off to the side, in the distance, is a new cliff where the land has been sheered upward by a couple hundred feet. Shreds of city housing are clinging to the top of the new cliff, as well as crumpled along the bottom, with wreckage clinging to the cliff itself.

The group traveling overland has arrived to find the highway bridge they hoped to use to cross the river in shambles. The middle section of the reinforced concrete bridge is completely displaced, sticking up from the river, 100 feet away from where the bridge is, having moved. The day is overcast, as usual, but as the group is standing on the river bank there is a slight breeze, which all appreciate. There is no evidence of activity. No boats, no people on shore, nothing but the expanse of water and the breeze ruffling the calm surface and the soiled and tattered clothing hanging from the tired bodies of the group as they arrive, one by one, to look.

Clara raises her skirts and wades into the water up to her hips, a look of relief on her face. Seeing this, Billy looks up into his mother's face and begs.

Mom, can we go swimming?

Big Tom, looking over the torn bridge, is trying to come to grips with the forces that would have rearranged this familiar landscape.

I wouldn't do that until we learn what might be under the water, and there might be an undertow.

A fog horn blares softly. The group sees a large boat being rowed from the opposite side toward them. The boat is a raft, cobbled together from various boards, with half a dozen men rowing, three on each side. The fog horn has been to signal their approach. Martha glances nervously at Colonel Cage, whose face is calm as they would not be announcing themselves if the approach was malicious. Big Tom's face relaxes, and he walks over to his wife, putting an arm around her shoulder as they watch and wait.

As the boat approaches they see that the men are thin but energetic, many with bare very tan arms sticking out from their tattered shirts. They look over their shoulders as they row, for aim, as there appears to be no leader in the group. As the boat approaches, Big Tom and Danny step into the water to help guide it to shore. The men in the boat are obviously unarmed, and dismount the boat by clinging to the sides and sticking a leg into the water. These are not boatmen, but landsmen who have learned how to cross the river.

Ian, the first man to step out of the boat, approaches with a broad smile on his face, his hand extended.

Welcome, we're the group that survived at Bridgewater, and we've set up a camp on the bluff over there. Where are you from?

The last boat is arriving at Bridgewater. Big Tom and Martha are with their children, gathering their things, obviously having arrived on an earlier boat. Several crossings having taken place. Colonel Cage and Danny are among the last group to cross, having stayed behind to guard the rear while Big Tom went across with his wife and children, whom everyone agreed should be first. Colonel Cage is feeling a bit of relief, and feels he can talk to those on the boat openly, now that the women and children are not present. With a backdrop of steady sloshing as the oars dip and pull, he queries Ian.

How many groups like yours are you aware of?

Ian says,

We're the only one, though for awhile there seemed to be a group in the foothills, but their fires stopped after a few weeks and we feel sure they're dead.

Colonel Cage gets right to the point, his jaw firm and face relaxed as he has been trained to look danger straight in the face without flinching.

Have you had any run-ins with gangs, cannibalism?

Ian takes a moment to respond.

We've got a good position here, the river on one side and the mountains on the other. Not many can get to us unless we bring them over, like we did you. So I guess we've not been the best target, thank God.

Colonel Cage and Ian are walking up the hill toward the camp from the river bank. A group of women at the side of the trail are stirring something in a pot over an open fire. Colonel Cage and Ian pass a woman pouring water into a V shaped trough while another woman removes a drainage tray from under the trough, replacing it with an empty tray. The trough is filled with gray ashes with some chunks of blackened wood here and there, clearly ashes from a fire.

Phew . . . Is that for supper?

Ian says,

They're making soap. Fat and lye. Works well enough but it'll take the hair off your chest.

Ian has flashed a smile at Colonel Cage as they continue walking up the trail, past a low table where a metal rack of soap forms is sitting inside a square cake pan, a crisscross of metal sides where a dozen or more soap bars can harden. The pot from the fire is brought over and a thick, beige colored, steaming mixture is poured across the rack.

It is evening at the River Camp, where the women are having their first hot tub bath in weeks. There is relaxed laughter from the steamy bathing hut. A stocky town's woman approaches from the hut with several clean towels over her arm.

Inside the bathing hut Daisy is scrubbing her hair vigorously. She sinks back into the tub to rinse her hair off, going under the water totally and emerging with an ecstatic look on her face. She's home, once again, to where she can expect the pampering she thinks is her due. Martha is toweling off Tammy, who is chattering brightly about some friends she's met.

.. and they're making a doll house too, but right now they only have the mice to run through it. So maybe we should call it the mouse house!

Tammy giggles, putting her hand to her mouth and looking up at her mother. Her mother is visibly relieved, a calm contented look on her face. Clara is soaking in a tub, submersed up to her chin and not moving.

I think I'll be here forever.

Netty is not among them.

Outside along the river bluff Colonel Cage and Big Tom and Netty are watching the Sun go down, with Ian. They stand quietly, watching the brilliant display. Ian says,

Compliments of the volcanic dust.

Netty asks,

Dust?

Breaking out of his thoughtful mood, Ian explains.

Oh, I mean we wouldn't have such a sunset if it weren't for the volcanic dust. That's what I've heard. When the Philippines went up we'd have these kind of sunsets for awhile, but these are more brilliant than anything I've ever seen. Guess that's why we have such gloomy days, too.

The group turns their faces back to the sunset and falls silent, all in thought.

It's dawn, and birds are starting to chirp and sing irrepressibly. The river water is placid. Big Tom and Red, who have arisen, used to farm hours where everyone gets up at dawn or earlier. Big Tom is reaching into the back of his shirt collar, pulling out a piece of straw. Their clothes have not been washed as yet, nor have the men had a bath, having giving the women folk the first opportunity.

I hear there was an old timer living here. Had a garden and all.

Red says,

I talked to the guy last night. Trying to make the tractor run on wood chips. Dangest thing I ever heard of, but he claims it's done.

Then pondering the mechanical challenge, Red voices his decision in a soft voice with a hint of determination. This old man doesn't back away from a challenge.

I'm going to give him a hand.

Red and the old timer, who is scrawny and dressed in a very dirty cover-all, are in the old barn of the original homestead at Bridgewater. The barn is tilting badly to one side, but has fallen against some trees so did not topple entirely. The old barn has lifted off its foundation, on the opposite side, so the light of day is giving the barn workroom plenty of light. Red is inspecting tools laid on the workbench and casting his eyes along the rack of tools hung on the wall, taking an inventory.

A gas, you say? Never heard of it.

The old timer is now seated on a low stool at the front of a small tractor. The tractor is almost antique, many decades old with the paint almost entirely worm off or covered in grime, rusty in places. The tilling blades in the rig drawn behind the tractor are held in the raised position, some dried grass stuck to them here and there. The tractor engine cover is lifted up. Red grabs a pail and turns it upside down to use as a stool, squatting next to the old timer. Both their heads are almost pushed into the engine, side by side, along with the old timer's right hand, pointing, his elbow stuck out into the air at a right angle. He says,

Put the fire bin here, and just kinda heat the wood slow, that's the ticket. It's a gas! We need a coil here, and a cutoff . .

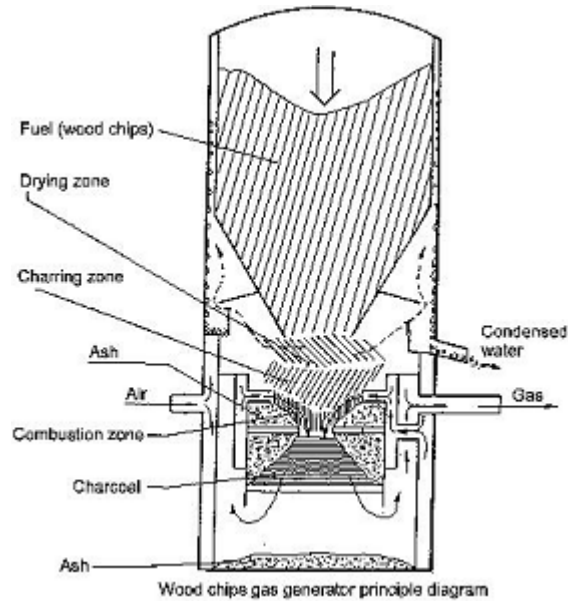
Big Tom is standing in the doorway of the tilted old barn, leaning against the raised side of the door with his arms folded over his chest. He now looks as though he's had a bath, and is wearing some fresh clothes, borrowed from others at the camp. The borrowed shirt is too tight, too small, and the pants too short.

Need a hand?

Red looks up from his work, an almost ecstatic look on his face.

I believe we got it!

Red gestures back toward the work bench where a square metal container has had a door cut into the top for loading wood chips. A hose is looping out from one side to collect the wood gas, with a collection jar below the loop to collect the distilled wood gas. Wood gas is dripping into the collection jar. There are slits cut into the side of the firing chamber, toward the bottom, for air intake. There is another drain on the other side where steam has condensed into water and is dripping out.



The old timer rises to dismantle the apparatus, eager to bring the firing chamber over to Red. He pulls his hand back quickly, realizing it is still hot.

Damn!

Billy appears in the doorway, alongside his father. He quickly brightens into an ecstatic look that mirror's Red attitude.

Cool!

The camp folks have their backs to some woods with a fallow field in front of them. The faces reflect skepticism. A chugging motor is starting up very haltingly. Finally, the motor is doing a steady chug-chug. The faces of the camp folk reflect astonishment, some blinking, one a bit teary eye'd, some just gap jawed.

The antique tractor is slowly plowing a row in the fallow field, the camp folk to the side along the woods. The wood gas apparatus can be seen stuck to the side of the tractor engine on one side. A couple camp folks, men, have come forward to talk to Billy and Big Tom who are squatting on the stool and upturned pail from the barn, energetically chopping some branches gathered from the nearby wood into chips with an ax.

Mark and Brian have floated rapidly from the Rockies to an approach to New York City. The strong wind is obviously dragging them along at a fairly rapid

clip, the parachutes ahead of them and filled out like a sail. They have been traveling for days, are dirty with smeared faces where they have wiped the dust off but not bathed, when landing for some sleep. A week has passed since they left, and they appear thinner than when they left. Brian has pulled his legs up and appears to be pulling himself up into a fetal position, his arms around his knees. We see his long hair floating out in the wind. Mark is excited.

*Brian, there it is, there's the city! We're home,
home! Lets find a good place to bring this down.*

Mark is looking up while he positions his hands on the ropes. When he glances down, to mentally prepare his descent path, a grim look comes over this face. The Statue of Liberty is seen tilted at a 45 degree angle, with the remnants of a sailboat caught in and dangling from the flame, seaweed shreds up to her chin. No high rises remain standing, but the city skyline looks like a rubble instead, black in outline against the gray skies. Bridges are disconnected with most sections down. No boats are seen on the water, but a couple large ocean going vessels can be see floating, bottom up.

Mark's eyes have filled with tears, and he glances upward, not wanting to look down. Finally he glances down to check on Brian, talking to himself.

*At least you're not there to see all this. Time to
say goodbye. Nothing left to live for.*

Mark points the hot air jet directly at the parachute lines, melting them one by one. The rig begin to tip to the side, suddenly plunging into the ocean below.

-Harms Way-

Colonel Cage is fluffing the bedding he's been given, a cloth bag filled with straw. He's laid his clothing out across the end of the bed, neatly as a military man would do, and is down to his underwear, a grimly T-shirt and pair of boxer shorts. He adjusts the back of his T-shirt collar, and then leans back into the straw tick bedding, with a sigh. A puzzled look comes over his face, and he fusses with the back of the T-shirt collar again, this time getting an alarmed look, pulling the T-shirt over his face and staring at the collar now in front of his face.

Oh, my God ..

Colonel Cage and Ian are in the council room. The light is dim, only a single oil lamp burning, placed on the table. Colonel Cage has gotten Ian out of bed. He's holding his T-shirt in front of him, under Ian's nose, shaking with rage.

Damn them to hell, they've bugged me, they know where we are, and they'll be coming after us!

Ian looks puzzled and glances up into Colonel Cage's eyes, staring steadily by way of asking for an explanation. Colonel Cage sighs and seeing he has to fill in the pieces, struggles to calm down.

It's a wire. I didn't know I was carrying it. If it's live and I've got no reason to think it's not, they can trace me, trace this thing, and it'll lead them right to where we're at.

A thought crosses his mind and he suddenly drops the T-shirt to the floor and grinds the shirt collar under his heel until he hears a crunch.

But you don't know how long it's been there, or even if it works.

Colonel Cage's face goes blank, as he realizes that he can't give Ian and the others all the insight that he has, an impossible education in too short a time. He finally explains, after struggling with himself over the issue.

Expect the worst.

The fog horn blowing softly again, a signal that some visitors have arrived at the river bank across the river. Colonel Cage, uneasy from the night before, jerks and twitches in his sleep, his eyes suddenly opening with a start. The men's hut is a bunk for over a dozen men, all with similar primitive bedding arrangements, all out in the open. Colonel Cage slips into his pants and takes off toward the door, even before his pants are buttoned.

Ian is standing under a tree where he is barely visible in the shadows. Colonel Cage walks up to him, his white T-shirt visible as a waving flag as he moves between the trees. Ian says,

You've been seen.

A sleepy Colonel Cage quickly flattens himself behind a tree.

Too late, they've sighted you.

A group of men is on the shoreline across the river, dressed in dirty casual clothes. Colonel Cage, his jaw tight and slightly twitching with the tension, speaks in a soft voice, almost to himself.

I'll bet that's them. They've been killing and eating families.

Ian glances at Colonel Cage, not shocked as he's suspected as much.

I'll post a watch to make sure they don't cross.

Frank is vigorously chopping at a pile of green chunks, the original vegetables no longer recognizable, both hands on the chopper and heaving his shoulders into it. He is chatting away non-stop with Madge, the stocky cook, who is reaching into her herb jars.

The Death Card came up, and we all knew this was coming ..

Madge has a grim look on her face, her perpetual expression, and says nothing, but Frank is not put off. She hands him another handful of roots to chop. The soft sound of a chopper's blades are barely heard at first, but increase in volume. Frank stops, mid-chop, to listen intently. A silent black whisper chopper is coming along the river, in the center of the river, but veers toward the bluff.

Ian touches each camp member as they hurry past him, their personal belongings clutched in their arms. All are rushing, single file, into the woods and into a ravine, out of sight of anyone on the river or in the air. No one is hysterical or challenging Ian's decision.

In the woman's hut, Danny is pleading with Daisy to come along. She seems unaware of any danger, is brushing it all off, and is treating him like a hysteric.

.. You don't understand, people have been killed, women raped, we just haven't told you!

Daisy says,

Danny, don't you see how good things are here? I've gotten my nails to grow out again, and we can bathe anytime we want to!

Danny looks dismayed, is speechless, a consternated look on his face. He realizes for the first time how deep her self obsession runs. A tall couple walks in, picking through the belongings left behind, and Danny stares at them with comprehension. She won't be alone!

Well, I'm not staying here to die with you, suit yourself.

Danny turns away, heading out the door to catch up with the rest.

In a clearing in the woods, Ian is taking a head count as the group silently passes by him in single file. Ian admonishes.

Stay together now, stay close together!

The stragglers at the end are coming with larger breaks between them. Ian turns to his assistant, a tall thin woman with her gray hair in a severe bun.

I didn't see the little boy and his granddad, or the last of that bunch.

The assistant has a clipboard in her hands and has been checking things off as the group passed.

That young woman and the newspaper man, they're missing too.

Netty comes trudging into the clearing, trying to keep the end of the group ahead of her in sight. She sees Ian and his assistant standing there and smiles broadly, reassured that she hasn't lost them. She looks over her shoulder as she walks on to the right, keeping track of those behind her.

Billy is some distance behind her on the trail, pausing to pick something up off the ground, bending over, his boyish curiosity at play. As he does this there is rustling in the bushes at the side of the path. Billy jerks upright, his mouth open and eyes wide. The alpha dog in a wild pack, a large boxer so lean he looks almost skeletal, his ribs showing, snarls.

Netty doesn't hesitate. She turns and returns along the path, breaking into a strong running stride, covering ground silently with strong legs and broad hips that have been strengthened through riding English style for many years. Netty covers the clearing silently, racing toward the frozen Billy standing like a statue.

The dogs are a mix of former pets - shepherds, boxers, and hounds - all kinds. The smaller ones hang back and yip from the woods, excited at the possibility

of a meal ahead but not yet willing to attack humans, still recalling their former owners. Netty reaches Billy and lifts him off the ground into her arms. Red and Danny come running up, Red whacking at the retreating alpha dog with his jacket. Red says,

They're starving!

Netty says,

*Come on, we'd better keep up with the others. Common
Billy, no more dawdling.*

Netty takes Billy by the hand and strides off, practically dragging Billy along. Red and Danny do their best fast walk too, Red's elbows sticking out and jerking up and down, Danny breaking into a trot now and then.

The laggards catch up with the rest of Ian's group, who are standing around on a river bluff, staring out at the river. Netty and Billy, still being towed along behind Netty, arrive first, but instead of a welcome from the group, they are ignored. No one turns to pay attention to them other than a quick glance, then return to stare at the river. Danny and Red bring up the rear, huffing and puffing and sweating slightly.

The group hears what sounds like music, various tones, the sound plastic bottles make when filled with air and forced in close proximity to each other in a net, or tied together. These tones are various, like some kind of drum set composed of small plastic drums, almost tinkling rather than booming.

A series of houseboats are moored to the trees of a small island in the middle of the slow-moving river. These are strung out in a line, a couple rafts moored to the strong trees on the island, then other rafts moored to these, so the lot stretches out along the center of the river.

Plastic bottles have been filled with air and either tied together or stuffed into a net. These form a floatation device for plywood or rafts made of boards crudely nailed together from the wreckage caused by the earthquakes and hurricane force winds. The rafts are raised at least a foot out of the water, more than enough floatation, the obvious consideration being that some of the plastic bottles might fail, so more is better than less in this regard.

Some of the rafts have tents on them, some have one room structures made from scrap lumber and tarps, and one is a two story rickety structure that looks like it might fall over in a strong wind. Laundry is hung out to dry here and there, on lines tied between boards nailed to the edges of the rafts and whatever serves as the sleeping quarters in the center of the raft. Most of the rafts have container gardens of some sort, plastic pots of various size and colors, growing tomatoes or lettuce or chard.

Fishing lines are hung from the rafts, trailing off into the river as they draw downstream. The fishing lines reflects light, and so many of them are strung out that it looks almost like a spider web with the rafts caught in the center. A boy comes up to one line and starts drawing it in, pulling up a good sized fish as he does so, and turns to take it to a wooden box nearby where he knocks it on the head with a wooden mallet, killing it instantly.

Toddlers can be seen on the decks of some rafts, their watchful mothers keeping them no more than an arm's length away. Some are tied in a harness so they can't fall into the river. A woman is on her hands and knees at the edge of one raft, washing her hair. Her hair is full of soap suds as she vigorously scrubs, then dips a cup into the river to rinse.

Someone on the raft city notices the group on the bluff and points, calling a notice out to the others, and waves at the group on the bluff. Some calls are exchanged between the two groups, but the distance precludes anything more than a vigorous wave and hello. Ian says,

They raided the recycling facility up at Middleton.

Red says,

*Well . . . they're safer there than in these woods. . .
And no lack of fresh fish to eat!*

Ian is standing beside Colonel Cage, looking directly at him with slight worry on his face, an unspoken query. Colonel Cage glances quickly at Ian, reading his mind, then returns his gaze to the raft complex, which is fascinating, transfixing everyone in the troop.

They won't be bothered, nor will those we left behind at Bridgewater. It's us they're after, those from the ranch. We know the location of his headquarters, and he's not ready for visitors yet. He means to kill us, us from the ranch . . . and anyone else that gets in the way.

Colonel Cage motions with a wave of his hand toward the raft city while looking directly at Ian again.

But this is no threat to him. And no advantage. Just trash in the river, that's how he thinks.

Fog is blowing in the very early morning along the river. Ian has just wakened his traveling group, not letting them have more than a few hours rest during the night. Ian is seen moving among the members, who are sitting up on the ground and stretching. He is touching them on the shoulder, rather than using his voice to announce that the march is to start again. Now that they

can see where to put one foot in front of the other, he intends to have them on their feet and moving again.

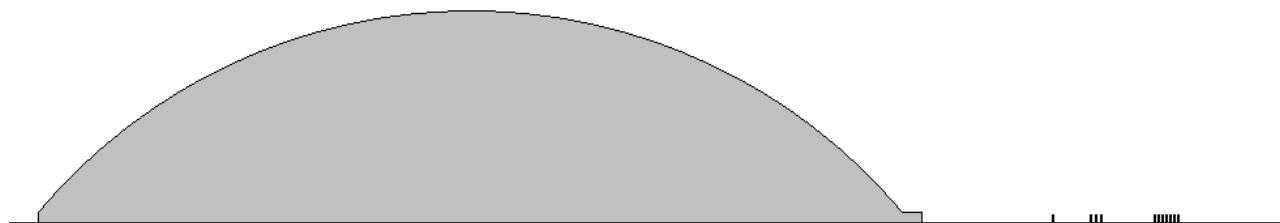
The group looks bleary eyed, as though they've just wakened and could use a cup or more likely a full pot of coffee. No one is complaining, however, and when one stumbles and drops something, the one behind helps them pick it up and get adjusted with their belongings again. This group assists each other, in a non-competitive way, and there is never a need to ask for this assistance.

Ian, in the lead, stops the group behind him by raising his hand. There, hidden by fog most of the time but visible when the wisps clear momentarily, is a huge dull gray dome, several stories high. The dome doesn't reach above the trees, but covers an area as large as a football field. Placed on a ridge along the river, where there are trees on all sides and no ground above the ridge, the dome could not be seen unless a plane flew over.

Several of Ian's group crowd around him, coming up behind him and staring at the dome over his shoulders. They are all silent, staring, taking this in and trying to place it in their concepts of what goes on.

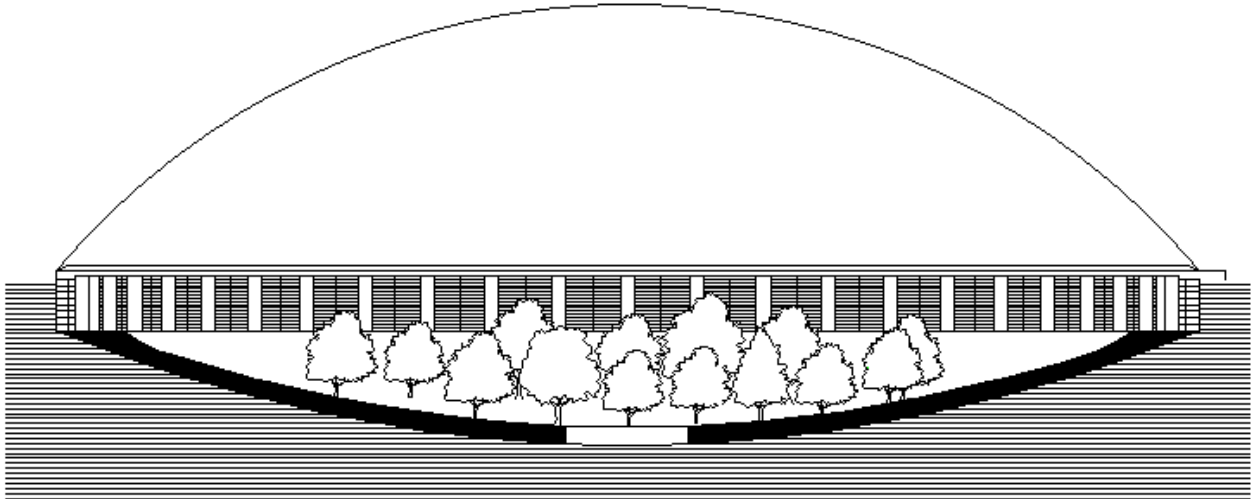
Ian finally moves forward, the group straggling behind him. There is a large space in the line between Ian and those following him, his assistants, and an even larger space before the rest of the group follows. They are clearly hanging back, not so far that it would be taken to be a lack of faith in Ian, but far enough back that escape is possible. As Ian nears the entrance, the entry doors splits open and slide to the side.

Several humans walk out, Jonah in the lead, extending his hand. Ian hesitates only a moment, then himself walks forward with an extended hand. The group following Ian noticeably pick up their pace, seeing a friendly welcome.



Just inside the dome city entrance, the newcomers are gawking at the raised but diffusely lit ceiling and lush vegetation growing in the center of the dome, where there is a fountain and grassy areas with children at play. The

dome has housing units in a circle around the edge, several stories high, as the dome drops down into the ground as well as rising up above the ground.



Tammy breaks the silence as she has been discovered by another little girl her age. Tammy is clutching her rag doll, which by now is so dirty and tattered that it almost looks like a black rag. The little girl welcoming her has a clean cloth doll, similar in size and dress, and hands this to Tammy with a smile. Tammy blinks, a hint of tears forming in her eyes at the kindness and understanding shown her, and smiles slightly. She hands the other girl her tattered doll, and they make an exchange, laugh spontaneously afterwards at the silliness of Tammy's gift, and run off together, the dome city girl in the lead. Not a word has been spoken between the girls during this exchange.

Billy is right behind Tammy, and has watched this. He raises his face to his mother Martha, standing behind him, sharing with her an unspoken understanding that this is a good place. Ian is standing at the side, in intense conversation with Jonah, but we don't hear their conversation. They have stepped to the side as the rest of the group is crowding the entryway as they enter the dome and react. Madge, the fat cook, comes in and stands stock still, her perpetual frown refusing to be displaced on her face. Frank is just behind her, raising his arms up with an ecstatic look on his face, mouthing things we can't hear but what we are sure are comparisons to Atlantis or other mythological cities.

It is very early dawn in the dome city, which has lighting controlled by lights affixed along the dome wall on the upper pram level. These produce intense carbon arc light, the equivalent of sunlight, and shine it on the dome ceiling. This light does not go directly into the faces of anyone, due to a long cone over the arc light itself, pointing upward. The cone is several feet

long, wider as it fans toward the ceiling. The cones are painted the same color as the dome ceiling, sky blue.



A man is walking along the upper pram, toolbox and stepladder in hand. He goes from light to light, doing maintenance. Standing on the stepladder he turns a switch alongside one of the lights and it turns off. Using a special tool he quickly turns hooks up and down the cone shaped funnel so as to remove the funnel. The tool is an odd, unique shape so that children can't accidentally remove the cones. The carbon points are exposed, and he adjusts each to move more toward the center, toward each other, then measures the gap. Satisfied, he drops his gap measure back into this pocket and reaches for the cone again, ready to reassemble.

Sheep are grazing on the dome city lawn, in one section. A portable wooden fence can be seen in the background, keeping the sheep in one section at a time. The dome city does not use lawn mowers, as sheep crop a grassland close to the ground. They can also ruin a grassland if allowed to graze too long, reducing the grass to stubble.

A worker is seen folding the portable wooden fence like an accordion, and walking across some lush grass to the edge of the next section. He quickly unfolds the fence, used more as a guide for the sheep than a containment, at the edge of the next section. He strides back, turns sharply when he reaches the end of the small herd, and starts herding the sheep into the lush area, talking softly to them.

Hik . . Common . . Soosh . .

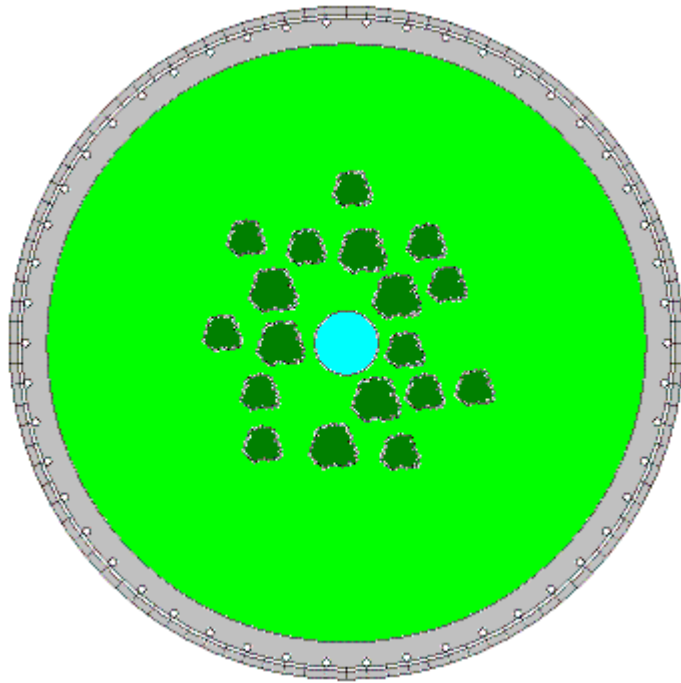
Along the edge of the wall circling the garden areas there are occasional doors to rooms where hydroponic gardens and other food production efforts are contained. The walls are colored the same as the upper residential area walls, so look at first glance like foundation walls, integral to the city itself. A door swings open. The label on the door reads "Compost Consolidation". As the door swings back shut we see that a man pushing a heavily loaded wheelbarrow has emerged. His load is rich, loamy earth swarming with earthworms. He has a

pitchfork stuck into the load. He quickly pushes the barrow across the lawn toward some grape vines on an arbor toward the center of the dome city gardens.

As he crosses the lawn, a flock of banty hens and roosters come dashing toward him, some flying, some running. They know this routine. Some hop into the barrow, not waiting for their treat. The worker does not break his stride, as all morning tasks such as this are to be complete before the residents awake. He strides up to the grape vines and tips his barrow forward onto the roots of the grape plants. The eager banty hens cover the pile, cleaning up the worms, and scratching furiously for worms within the compost.

-Helping Hands-

The evening meal is in process in the dome city. The roof of the top layer of residences, the upper concourse, is a general prom area where exercise and community activities take place. Tonight, due to the newcomers, a special dinner is laid out, buffet style. Children run along the roof and down the stairs on ramps that periodically descend to the center, chasing each other and playing games. A home-town band is playing some music, a banjo and violin and snare drum in an odd combination, along with a few singers who are remarkably good given the circumstances. Some couples are dancing along with the music, in front of where the band has congregated.



Jonah and Ian and Colonel Cage, seated at a table, holding and sipping from their cups and chatting. Ian and Colonel Cage are trying to adjust to this new measure of plenty and security. Ian is anxiously asking about security, whether they have had any raids or intrusions. Jonah answers, in a matter-of-fact manner.

We're protected

This brings a frown to Ian's forehead. Have they walked into the enemy camp, by mistake? After hesitating for a minute, he blurts out a question.

Protected by who?

Colonel Cage has been watching the conversation, his eyes flicking from one to the other, growing calmer as something momentous is about to emerge, his military background coming to the fore. Jonah says,

We're not alone, haven't been, but now they can come forward more.

Ian has a blank, uncomprehending, look on his face. Jonah says,
You know, the space people, they're here, and they helped us build this. Oh, you won't see much of them if at all, but they're always around, and we've got some special children to prove it.

Ian's eyes widen, staring at Jonah's face. What next?
Come on, I'll show you.

Jonah has taken Ian and Colonel Cage to the gardens in the center of the dome city, where the children play. Jonah is sitting on one of the benches there, speaking warmly and quietly to some children standing in front of him, as though he frequently does this, is familiar to them, and has a good rapport with them. They have large frontal lobes and delicate chins, larger than normal eyes, and listen more than they speak. They seem to anticipate each other's movements, stepping back in sync with a step forward by another and the like. The din of children's voices can be heard in the background. Jonah says,

.. planning to have an art fair, a craft fair, on the concourse soon, right?

The hybrid child in the center responds to something other than what Jonah has been saying, responding to his thoughts, not his words.

They'll adjust quickly because they've been living like us already. You'll see, there won't be any adjustment at all.

Colonel Cage leans forward to ask a question.
How do you know?

The child looks calmly at him.

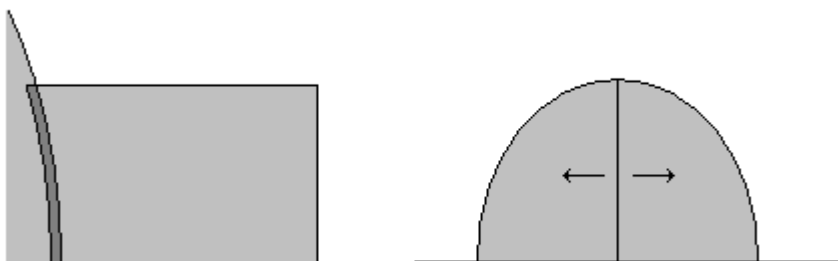
You're right to be worried, they need you. They don't know how to find you, don't know where you are.

There is a silence, but finally Colonel Cage responds, an obvious knot in his throat.

They're in trouble? The Army had facilities! They said . . . they told us that . . . that ..

Outside the dome city entrance, Colonel Cage is taking his leave, saying good-bye to Jonah. They stand in front of the dome entry, at the end of the long

igloo style tunnel that acts as a weather shield before the sliding doors at the edge of the dome itself.



I've got to try, even if I die trying. I have no idea if these maps are any good anymore, it's 200 miles away as the crow flies, and God knows if I'll make it or what I'll find.

Colonel Cage is traveling light, holding a black cloth satchel that he slings over his shoulder as he turns and walks into the woods.

A tall gray Zeta comes forward into view, moving up to be shoulder to shoulder with Jonah. Jonah is still watching the Colonel disappear into the woods.

He's going to need help.

The Zeta puts his hand momentarily on Jonah's shoulder, then heads off after Colonel Cage.

Colonel Cage is walking along the outskirts of what used to be a mid-sized city. He is traveling at night, for safety, his body standing out briefly in profile against a flaming pile of trash that someone has pulled together and lit. Broken boards stick up now and then, hazards, and tumbled down cement blocks litter the streets as he picks his way through the rubble. There are shouts in the distance, and what sound like hysterical laughter now and then.

Past the city now, and traveling by day, Colonel Cage is standing at the edge of a rip in the earth. Foot hills leading down into a river valley have been torn apart, bare earth exposed in stark contrast to the trees or fields on either side. He stands gazing over the scene, a slight frown on this face, and then reaches into his back pocket for a map, which he flips through, looking increasingly puzzled. He finally shakes his head and mutters under his breath.

If that's the river, then I made 150 miles in one day!

He returns the map to his back pocket, leans down for his satchel, and strides off down along the edge of the rip toward the river.

It is night time, the rain pouring steadily, drenching everything. It is so dark, with only an occasional dim edge outlined in the dark, that it takes a minute for us to see Colonel Cage's features as he stands in the rain. Peering through the dark, Colonel Cage must squint for several minutes to see an occasional outline in the dark. Progress has been slow, along the last leg of his journey, but he is recognizing landmarks, so very near home at last. He is still, staring into the broken windows of what used to be his house. Nothing moves, and there are no lights or sounds. He hears a young boy's voice behind him.

Dad?

Colonel Cage turns so rapidly he is almost a blur, as he sweeps the boy into his arms. After a long silent bear hug, during which the two of them seem unable to let go of each other, the Colonel sets the boy down, his voice husky.

Where's your mother and John?

The boy says,

They're all right, come on.

Excitement and eagerness are in his voice as he takes his dad by the hand. They stumble off into the dark, Colonel Cage stumbling after his young son, both walking too fast for the circumstances, but too eager to get where they're going to care.

Next day the four-some are walking cautiously along a tree bank. All are dressed in dull clothing that blends in with the soggy dark green and mustard yellow of the vegetation, and when out in the open crouch down and scuttle across the open space, so as not to attract attention from anyone who might be looking. Colonel Cage is visibly nervous, but is not sharing with his family the reasons for his fear. They hear voices, and he signals all to drop to the ground and not make a sound. The Colonel's face is pale and he is trembling, showing his extreme fear that his family will be tortured and killed, as he has seen done to others. He has his youngest, John, beside him, and has his hand over his mouth, is signaling his wife and oldest son with his eyes as to the seriousness of the situation.

A group of men is passing, talking and arguing among themselves. A voice rings out almost on top of where the family is crouched, joining in the conversation without missing a beat. The terrified family hears a zipper

unzip, then someone pissing, then hear the sound of a fly being re-zipped. The one who just relieved himself walks right past the youngest boy as though not seeing him, rejoining the others. The other looks his way also, and seems not to see the family, plastered against the ground right between them, holding their breath.

As they walk on they are watched by a tall Zeta standing next to a tree, his arms folded across his chest. The family remains still until no voices can be heard. Colonel Cage lifts his head slightly and casts his eyes all around, and seeing nothing, warns in a whisper.

Follow me, but as quiet as you can.

He moves slowly so as not to snap a twig, picking up speed only when they get to a grassy area along a creek where the sound of running water covers the swishing of their legs against the grass.

When Colonel Cage can look in all directions and see the coast is clear, he breaths a sigh of relieve.

I don't know why they didn't see us. They were right on top of us, the oddest thing.

He's shaking his head, a slight frown on his head, but a realization dawns on him as he puts together the fast trip he's had and this incident. He mutters to himself.

It's them.

His oldest son is looking at him with a puzzled look, but gets no explanation.



A patch of cat tails is in a marshy area abutting a stream. There are woods in the backdrop. The cat tails are several feet thick, growing where the water is only a foot or less deep, their brown seed pods not yet mature so the seeds

have not yet been released. One of the pod stalks starts wiggling back and forth, and then drops straight down.

A frog is sitting on a rock amidst the cattail patch. A sharpened stick comes zinging out from the cattail patch, toward the side of the frog. The frog croaks.

The pot has a lid on it and is jiggling as the water inside is boiling furiously. A frog leg can be seen sticking out of the pot, the foot and part of the leg visible. A cattail leaf is also sticking out, plastered against the side of the small pot.

I know it's tough. Eat as much of it as you can.

The family is squatting around the boiling pot, the youngest son looking unconvinced. They are very dirty from days on the road without baths or clean clothes. Colonel Cage's wife's hair is tangled with small sticks caught in the tangle here and there. She is smiling at her husband with unabashed admiration.

We're going to be taking the leftovers with us, so don't expect anything better for awhile. This will keep you going.

The youngest son, looking a bit despondent, puts a cattail seed pod to his mouth, like a corn dog, and takes a munch. Finding the taste tolerable, his face relaxes and he starts eating with gusto.

Colonel Cage and his wife and sons are walking in through the entry of the dome city, wet and looking tired but obviously deeply happy. Danny, having a morning cup of coffee with Red, splashes hot coffee on himself by jerking his cup at seeing the family, trying to raise his hand up to point while still holding the cup. He's choking on his coffee as he talks through coughs.

Its them! They made it! Damn if they didn't make it.

Red's craggy face is wrinkled with happiness, but he just sits and takes it all in, not moving or saying anything.

Big Tom's voice booms out combined with Billy's chirping voice, as they greet the new family.

You found them! Damn! Here, have a seat, have my seat.

Billy is giving Colonel Cage's two boys a tour of the dome city, while also still exploring it himself. Both Colonel Cage's boys have now had a bath and are wearing fresh clothes. Billy is using the tour as an excuse to poke around in places he has not yet explored, using his tour guide voice as an entry pass, or so he hopes.

. . And here on the lower level, ah . .

Billy opens a door on the level that is below the living quarter. This level does not have a patio, just doors that lead out onto the grassy center. There is a pathway around this level, a concrete walkway close to the outer walls of this level, but nothing that would hint at what lies behind the doors.

Billy charges in through the door, hoping his bravado and tour guide voice buys him an excuse at whatever he finds behind the door. He comes face to face with a nanny goat, standing on a milking station.

Baaaa

Billy stops shock still, the other two boys bumping into him, the lot ricocheting back a step or two.

Whoa!

The woman milking the goat casts a sleepy glance at the boys, nonplussed, and continues with her morning task. The room is filled with several goats, a couple kids, and a billy goat tied up temporarily over at the side. The billy goat lowers its head slightly while looking at the brash newcomers, contemplating the threat. At the side of the room there is a feeding trough, filled with what looks like slimy greenery. Finding his voice, Billy continues.

. . goat's milk. And we feed them, ahm . .

The sleepy woman, seeing what is going on, smiles to herself and turns her head.

We feed them algae. Grows quickly in bright light and effluent. We recycle everything here, including our waste.

Billy is momentarily set back, his face a blank, not knowing her terms, but then gets a hint of what she is talking about.

Yeah, we grow stuff in the toilet water.

Casting a glance at the billy goat, which is now starting to huff, Billy backs into Colonel Cage's two sons and turns to push past them out the door.

Common.

The next room is a brilliantly lit room with a hydroponic gardening setup. Billy's face pops into view, with Colonel Cage's two sons just behind him,

peering and bobbing on either side for a view. They all push into the room. Long trays on either side of the room are cascading down the wall, stacked such that the upper tray is close to the wall, the next tray offset from the wall slightly, and so on so that the vegetation in each tray can grow without hindrance as to height. One side has something that looks like lettuce or spinach. The other side is growing strawberries, which are filled with red berries.



The runners, producing new plants, are hanging down from each tray. A man is walking along the strawberry trays, inspecting the runners and snipping off new plants along the runners that look mature enough to stand on their own. These young plants have roots, but the roots are not in the hydroponic trays, just hanging in the air. The man turns his head and smiles at the boys.

Hello boys.

Seeing potential helpmates, the man puts his collection basket down and walks to the back of the room where there is what looks like a compost pile in a bin. He picks up a pitchfork, plastic with dull prongs, and begins to toss the compost. The compost is filled with red wiggler earthworms, which turn and try to burrow back into the compost when they are exposed to the light. He takes a spray nozzle from a wall clip and sprays the compost, kicking a collection tray under the compost drain as he does so. Brown water is collecting in the tray.



While he's waiting for the water to drain, he picks out brown chunks, the worm casts, and puts them in another collection basket at the side. He also grabs mature worms, placing them in yet another collection basket fixed at the side. He works quickly, not being exacting so much as doing the obvious - worm egg casts here, mature worms there.



The boys have just been watching him as he goes through these moves, taking it all in. They're edging forward to stand by his side. He says,

We make our own nutrient solution from these worm beds. Best fertilizer in the world! We harvest the worms for protein too. They're 82% protein, did you know? We put these egg casts into new compost piles. They're full of baby worms.

And glancing over his shoulder at the boys, seeing that he has raised their interest.

Want to help?

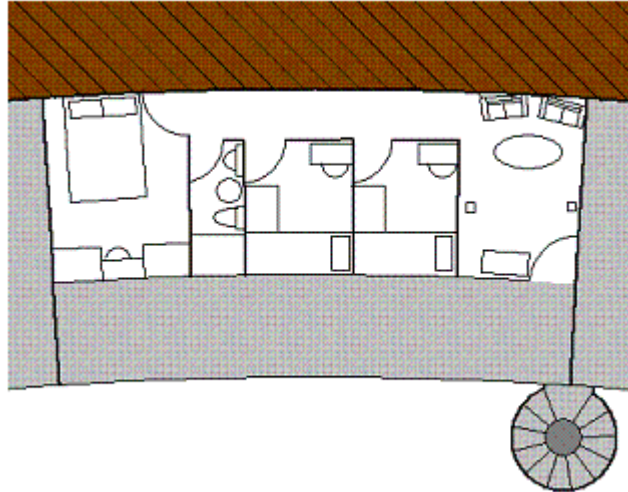
The boys all say, in unison,

Sure!

Inside the dome city, at night, the iridescent glow of the dome ceiling has been dimmed to simulate night. All is quiet except for the occasional splashing of the fountain. A chipmunk is nibbling a piece of cracker on one of the pathways in the center of the dome. Some ducks next to the fountain in the center of the dome are tucking their heads under their wings. A small monkey drops out of the trees and lopes across the grass. There is wildlife pets here in the biodome, living naturally in the open space. The ceiling is lit from lights along the edge of the dome top pram layer, setting off a nighttime glow in the soft material sprayed on the ceiling. The wildlife, as do the human residents, accepts this night and day as their world, without distress, so natural as to slip from notice after a day or two.

Suddenly a Zeta materializes in the center of the grassy area, startling the chipmunk who scampers away. He is joined by two others, and the three stride toward the ramp/stairway. They simply levitate up to the top tier of residences, rather than take the stairs. This levitation is done mid-stride,

without missing a beat, as though a natural occurrence and something all three understood they would do, simultaneously, without a word spoken. They land on the continuous patio area that circles in front of all the residences on a level, shared by all on the level.



The three Zetas stride along the patio that runs continuously in front of all the residences running around the circumference of the dome and facing inward toward the dome center. The three Zetas stride for a few steps, then stop in front of a closed door. Though they haven't knocked or made noise, the door opens, a sleepy Jonah emerging in his pajama bottoms. They all seem to just stare at each other for a moment. Jonah asks,

How close are they?

One of the Zetas moves his hand slightly, and then Jonah panics, with some alarm in his voice.

*Then we've got to do something! They'll blow us away!
I know how these guys operate, they kill anything they
can't rule!*

A Zeta puts his hand up slightly, palm down in a dampening gesture.

I can't calm down, all these people ..

But the Zeta changes his gesture to run his fingers in a half circle in front of him.

*Oh, oh, OK, I know I've asked you to help, and if you
say that'll work, OK, OK, but, ahm, but, Christ, if it
doesn't, we're dead ..*

Jonah is clearly nervous about whatever has been discussed.

Outside the dome city, the dull gray dome can barely be seen in the moonlight. Insects are thrumming in the humid summer night, which is enshrouded in mist. General Flood and his sidekick, the diminutive and ever compliant Sergeant Hammond, are emerging from the woods. They are surveying the scene silently, and then the General quietly brags.

We can put a hole in it easy, and then its ours.

Daybreak outside the dome city is brilliant, caused by the thick volcanic dust reflecting sunlight. A bird clinging to a reed along the river is welcoming the dawn with his song. There are sucking and splashing sounds as a boot pulls out of and lands again in the mud. A column of soldiers is moving toward the dome city.

The entry way of the dome city is opened but no one is coming or going. This is a maneuver, inviting the attack. A helicopter comes into view, and a booming voice is heard, through a bullhorn.

This is your military speaking. Allow our inspection teams to enter or suffer the consequences. Send your leaders out with a white flag to indicate that you understand these orders.

The helicopter goes into a slow circle, well outside the perimeter of the dome. There is no response from inside the dome city at first, but then Jonah emerges, along with Colonel Cage, Big Tom, and the two soldiers who went AWOL with the Colonel. They are subtly antagonizing the General by showing themselves, as he brooks no insubordination.

Inside the helicopter, General Flood is red faced with rage. He growls to himself and the pilot.

He's going to die and die slowly.

Then speaking through the intercom, he barks to his men on the ground.

Move the missile into place, let them see it.

A slender wheeled missile emerges from the woods, pushed by half a dozen soldiers. Several other soldiers emerge from the trees too, lining up along the edge of the woods. They are not dressed in uniform. Some have bandannas tied around their heads, some have long hair tied behind their heads in a pony tail, some have painted their faces, some carry long machete knives, but all wear fatigue pants and army boots. This is clearly no longer a formal military troop.

Something invisible is moving through the grass, as though a sliding wall were being moved into place. The grass flattens and separates, weeds push aside and then are kept aside as though an invisible wall had been put into place. This line moves swiftly, with the sound of chopper blades throbbing overhead.

*Cage, I'll have your liver for supper for this, and
pickle your eyes!*

Inside the Helicopter, General Flood barks orders through the intercom.

Bring out the hostage now, and shoot him.

Len is pushed forward, hands bound in front of him and one eye swollen shut, poked out during a fit of General Flood's rage during an interrogation session. He is stumbling with exhaustion and staggering, but is pushed forward until midway between the dome city representatives and the military troop.

Inside the dome city entry, Clara is standing just inside the shelter of the entry way, viewing the scene. Her eyes fill with tears and her hand flutters to her mouth, but she says nothing, holding her breath and knowing she can't influence the outcome. Netty puts her arm around Clara's shoulder, gripping it. Red is standing behind the pair. Accustomed to taking action during any emergency, but unable to do so in this case, he has a consternated look on his face.

We hear a shot ring out, and see Clara drop in a faint, as several other arms move forward to grip her, trying to break her fall. Clara falls back on top of Red and they both sink to the floor in a heap.

Oh my, oh my.

Inside the helicopter, General Flood bellows arrogantly into the bullhorn.

*The rest of you have five seconds to raise your hands
and let my inspection team come forward, or we'll blow
your little nest and all the little birdies inside sky
high! Five seconds! Five, four, three, two, one.*

General Flood pauses, his face muscles working in rage, his face florid with rage at having been defied.

.. All right men, let 'em have it!

The group standing in front of the dome city remains unmoved, unflinching. They had expected that both the men held by General Flood had been killed, so this is no surprise, and they are aware of the shield and whether they trust it to hold or not, they have no alternative in their minds. Death, for them and their families, is better than being overtaken by this group. This is why the entry door has been left open, so that if the shield fails, all will die

suddenly, as a group. Big Tom, speaking softly to his comrades, shows their resolve.

Better this way than living under tyranny, eh, boys?

The missile makes a humming sound, and then with a flash at the jet end, moves forward so suddenly that the eye cannot follow it. Just as suddenly it hits an invisible shield and the explosion sprays backward over the men and the trees, a fireball fanning out, frying all within range. There is a shriek or two, but death is quick. As the flames quickly die down over the metal shards from the shattered missile, the chopper blades can still be heard overhead.

The muscles on General Flood's face are working. The General snaps at the pilot.

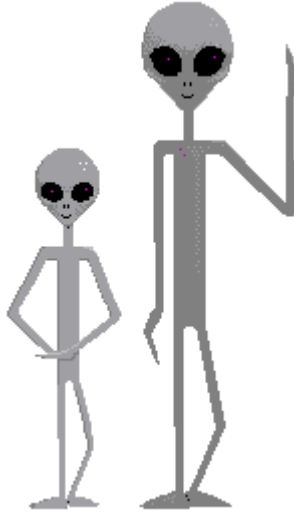
Take it down and land on top of them!

The pilot glances nervously at the General's face, and seeing that no argument will do, moves the joy stick to aim the chopper down. The chopper descends, hits the invisible barrier, and explodes into a flaming wreck.

The group standing in front of the dome city allows themselves to breath again. The citizens of the dome city are coming forward, tentatively at first. They look to the right and left, agape at the wreckage. Martha is rushing forward to embrace her husband, followed by the oldest son of Colonel Cage, who throws his arms around his dad from the back, essentially hugging his butt. Ian has a look of relief on his face. He quickly turns to the side and vomits, allowing himself to feel his fear now that the danger is past.

-New Neighbors-

Danny, Netty, Billy and the hybrid boy are standing in a circle in the center of a circular room without windows, the main room of a Zeta craft. There are also a couple large Zetas and some small beige colored Zetas, that are about as large as a child. The large Zetas are grouped with the adults, chatting and gesturing. The children are grouped and chatting with the smaller Zetas.



The small beige colored Zetas are tittering like birds among themselves now and then as they chat among themselves. Billy is face to face with the hybrid boy, having an animated conversation. Billy says,

Heck! I seed them squirm all around so's you didn't know where they were headed, but I weren't scared!

The hybrid boy puts his hands on his hips and leans back a bit.

They weren't squirming, silly! They were walking! Don't you know anything?

It is evening in the dome city, and the lights coming from the edge of the dome are being dimmed slowly to simulate evening. The residents are moving slowing as they take their evening strolls around the pram area on the roof of the top level. Children are being called in from play in the center grassy area near the fountain, complaining slightly as children will about having to give it all up and go to bed. Danny and Netty are walking slowly along the pram, hand in hand.

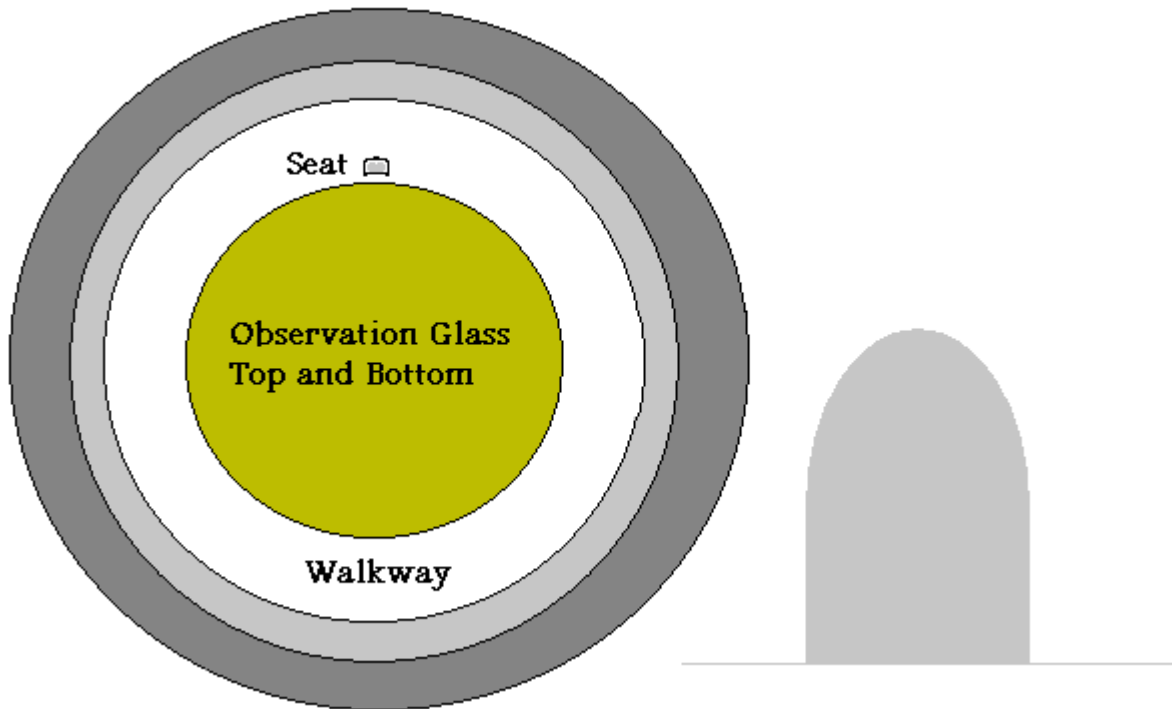
Netty glances up at Danny's face.

Don't you want to go see it? Not everyone gets an invitation.

Danny replies, softly, almost under his breath as though talking to himself.
Hell yeah!

Later that evening, after night has fallen both inside and outside the dome city, Danny emerges from the entrance of the dome city. He is walking alone toward an observation ship that is hovering just above the ground a few feet from the entry of the city. He is striding purposefully. As he nears the ship, Netty and Billy emerge in their pajamas and nightgown, jogging after Danny. They close the gap, so that as they arrive at the ship they are all together.

A walk-up ramp drops from the side of the ship, the light from the center of the ship flooding the area. The three walk quickly up the ramp, unafraid. There is a faint light coming from the top center of the ship, as one-half of the top area is a brown glass that allows viewing in and out.



Inside the ship, Danny and Netty emerge from a corridor that wraps around the central room of the ship, through a doorway arch that goes directly into the circular room in the center of the ship. Individual rooms are along the very outer edge of the ship. Danny and Netty are hand in hand, with Billy walking eagerly just ahead of them. They all take seats side by side around the observation circle, Netty still holding Danny's hand, as she senses he is nervous. Billy is pointing toward the floor and then the ceiling, talking

excitedly as the ship turns on its side, showing a horizon view through both the ceiling and floor observation glass.

It's so cool!

Danny looks up and just stares upward, silently, not moving for a moment. Then he asks, wonderment in his voice.

How do they do that?

Netty turns to face him.

The ship is turned sideways.

Billy is chirping, in his child's high voice, excited as always by these trips but contained. He senses that, in spite of his age, he is the leader here, and that this couple needs him to stay steady for them.

We can even go upside down! It's so cool!

Billy is pointing at the ceiling as he says this, then points to the floor.

Watch, watch! We're taking off!

The ship is turning sideways in the air, moving slowly at first and then rapidly picking up speed so that it zooms off into space at an angle to the Earth. The fact that the ship has a clear brown glass floor and ceiling can be faintly seen due to light coming through the ship.

Fog is swirling around a rocky ledge. Danny, Netty, and Billy are standing in a huddle, though are relaxed and looking around.

It could be anything. It could be an octopus. It could be .. yup! Its an octopus!

A large orange colored octopus, raised one-half way up on its many tentacles, is approaching. It has no eye, and is dry and smooth looking, the under sides of the tentacles a creamy white. Billy puts his hands on his knees and goes face-to-face, so to speak, with the octopus.

Are you the same guy I talked to last time?

The octopus extends what looks like a pink worm from its underside, and Billy unhesitatingly puts his hand out and lets the talking tentacle wrap around his hand.

Shake.

Danny and Netty have stood shock still during this enthusiastic interchange between Billy and the amphibious octopus. Finally Danny finds his voice.

What's he saying?

Danny steps forward, tentatively at first, then with more confidence.

How do you hear what he's saying?

Billy steps back, having let go of the tentacle.

You hear him better when you shake.

Danny hesitates for a minute.

Oh.

Danny spontaneously reaches out a hand to get wrapped in the pink worm. After a moment he is having a conversation.

Yeah, we're all from the same place, just visiting.

You live on the rocks here?



Water can be heard lapping quietly nearby.

Billy comes into view, climbing over some rocks in a dry, rocky place. He is talking to Netty who is following closely.

*And you never know! One time I thought it was a rock,
and darned if it didn't move! ..*

Netty is right behind him, with Danny lagging back so that his head finally pops into view, looking around before he ventures forth. Seeing nothing alarming, Danny closes the gap between them as they move on down the rock tumble. Suddenly Billy stops short, Netty almost bumping into him, as they both look forward without saying a word. Danny comes up behind them, slowly, looking in the same direction. All are silent for a moment. Finally, Billy breaks the silence.

These guys are new.

Two short hominoids with thorny plates like a turtle's back covering their bodies are standing before them, several arm's lengths away. They wear little brown colored coats, are brown colored themselves, and are barefoot. One of the pair is smaller than the others, shoulder height.

Suddenly a large Zeta materializes between the pair and the three visiting, motioning to the pair to come forward, which they do. Netty seems to come

alive, suddenly understanding what one of the pair, the female, is saying, the Zeta translating telepathically for them. Netty is leaning toward her.



Only at night? How sad for your children! Do they ..

Netty falls silent as the female horned toad hominoid is grunting quietly. Netty says,

Oh .. well .. that's true .. we treat fire that way ..

Inside the ship, a large living ball is almost filling the interior of the ship. It has veins over its surface, but between the veins one can see liquid in the center. It looks like a living water balloon. Inside can be seen what look like jellyfish, very fine and fluttery, not the solid kind with a bell on top that populate Earth's oceans, but more like a mass of spaghetti. Billy steps forward and touches the side of the living water balloon, which presses inward at his touch as our skin does.

Billy utters, almost beneath his breath.

Neat!

The jellyfish moves toward Billy's finger, and he gets an ecstatic look on his face, in communication with the water creature. He looks over his shoulder and says to Danny and Netty,

He wants me to come swimming with him.

Suddenly Billy disappears, his clothes falling to the floor in a heap. Netty gasps and points at the living water balloon, seeing Billy nude inside the living water balloon, peering out at Netty. His lungs are obviously working in the water, breathing water. Netty faints to the floor as a dismayed Danny lunges forward to catch her, breaking her fall.

The observation ship is designed to have the occupants crowded around the glass floor and ceiling, but has private rooms as well. These circle the ship on the perimeter, each with an archway without a door. The central observation

room is bounded by a wall in front of the private rooms, so that no direct view into any of the private rooms is possible from the observation room.

Danny has taken Netty to one of these rooms, so sparsely furnished that only a table with a center post to support it stands in the room. Netty is stretched out on this table, coming around. Billy has his pajamas back on, is toweling his hair dry and running his fingers through his hair to put it into place, like a comb. Billy looks up at Danny.

She's doing better than my mom. They had to send my mom back.

Netty focuses on Billy, a confused look on her face.

I thought you were drowning .. I thought .. I ..

Without hesitating, Billy replies.

Nah! You can breath that stuff, but it ain't easy! You gotta get tough, Netty! My mom made nothing of it.

Walking out of the room where Netty was recovering, the three encounter a buffet of odd shaped cooked vegetable shapes that has been placed at the side of the corridor, finger food for those interested. Billy doesn't hesitate, walking right up and popping something in his mouth before the others have even noticed. He turns and looks at the other two over his shoulder, his cheeks puffed out with food while he chomps away. Netty says,

Oh, that's nice! Looks a bit like asparagus, but ahm, brown.

Netty nibbles a bit, and Danny puts this and that in his mouth, rolling his eyes up toward the ceiling as he tastes, trying to concentrate on the taste. His pace picks up as he realizes that he isn't being poisoned or affronted, and he starts popping items into his mouth one after the other. They're all famished. Netty is licking her fingers as she turns to scan the interior of the ship. Her eyes take in the sights she is seeing, both from the ceiling and floor clear brownish glass panels. She comments, with awe.

Oooh, its like cotton candy!

Danny and Billy follow her gaze and see clouds and puffs in light blue and rose and light yellow floating past the ship, as though the ship were standing still and fog or clouds were passing by. Suddenly what looks like a white MANTA RAY without a stinger comes floating by, but pulses his wings so as to stay in place in front of the ceiling panel, looking in at the three passengers in the ship. The ship is hovering on its side, above the surface of a planet, for the convenience of the manta ray's ability to view the passengers. Rather than seeing the bottom or top of the rays, we see them

facing into the top and bottom glass. But for the passengers the center of gravity feels like the floor of the ship. They are all in awe, but finally Billy relays a telepathic message.

*He wants to come in, but he can't! He'd die in here,
and we'd die out there. Bummer.*

The ship suddenly takes off so that the horizon of the cotton candy planet comes rapidly into view. Then the planet shrinks rapidly to where it looks as small as a golf ball, a bit of light colored fluff out in the distance, dark on one other side but light on the other. Just as suddenly the ship zooms back, but this time returning to the dark side of the planet. Triangulation is the fastest way from here to there, in a space ship not limited to propulsion. Danny is also in awe.

My gosh, a perfect boomerang! What a way to travel!

As the ship moves into the dark side of the planet, it appears at first that all is pitch black. Then the three see blinking lights, of all colors, and one of the lights draws near the ceiling panel, taking the form of the creature that visited on the day side. It hovers, pulsing its skin wings and pulsing faintly in the light it emits, too, a creature without eyes or ears or appendages except for skin wings like a manta ray. Netty draws near Danny, who puts his arm around her while she lays her head on his shoulder.

Returning to the dome city, Danny, Netty and Billy walk in through the front entrance. It is very early morning, the city still sleeping and quiet. Billy walks off toward the family quarters, waving good-bye wordlessly, and Netty and Danny, too tired to do more than smile and give a half-hearted wave back, walk off to their room together.

Martha is bringing a plateful of what looks like scrambled eggs and fried potatoes back to one of the tables set up on the pram for breakfast. A chef in a big white hat and white coat is clanking pots and pans over a sizzling electric plate, arms constantly in motion as he works his magic. Now and then he snatches herbs from this jar or that sack. Big Tom is sipping coffee from a mug, and Tammy is giggling with her new girl friend as they try to get their dolls to sit up straight on the bench beside them.

Billy is half asleep, blinking sleepy eyes that don't want to stay open, not saying anything, unlike his typical chirpy self. Red and Clara scuff up in their housecoats, no longer hiding the fact that they are spending their

nights together. Martha glances at Billy with a puzzled look on her face, kidding Billy.

Billy? I think you need to go back to bed, son, you look like you need a good night's sleep.

Without hesitation, Billy replies.

Yeah, OK mom.

Billy drags off, leaving Martha with her mouth open.

I was only kidding!

Jonah walks up with Ian and his gray-haired assistant. All three are grim, as though concentrating on a serious but not alarming matter. Martha has a decanter of coffee from the communal coffee maker, along with extra mugs, and offers them some coffee. They accept with a nod of their heads. After a sip or two, Jonah, who has been solemnly mulling over his thoughts, confides.

We've heard from another city, like ours. They seem to be friendly, seem to be doing OK, but there's something odd ..

Martha jerks her head up suddenly, alarmed.

Odd?

Jonah debates with himself for a moment or two before continuing.

Well, I don't think they're entirely human.

Martha is clearly relieved that this is the only potentially bad news.

You mean like those super smart kids we've got here with us?

Jonah is warming up and eager to talk about a matter he knows they must share sooner or later.

Well .. let me just say this .. the transmission we got was carrying both audio and video, but they didn't speak. We got the signal by teletype. And in the video, they all just stood there, smiling and waving, but not speaking. Now why would that be .. unless they couldn't speak.

Martha frowns and looks down for a moment, processing possibilities.

Did they given any indications .. I mean .. did it look like maybe the mike was just broke or .. maybe, ah ..

Jonah is spilling it all freely now.

No, no, and that's not all. They had little mouths, and no hair. No hair at all! But other than that .. well, they had big brains, you could see that, big eyes too .. blue and brown and hazel .. beautiful eyes, I'll say that! But not a hair on their heads! And not a word!

Martha smiles, relieved and obviously expecting something far more bazaar.

So .. did you invite them for supper?

Everyone laughs. Jonah is smiling and likewise relieved at her reaction.

Well yeah! What else was I supposed to do! How weird can it get! I mean, beyond what we're already dealing with, what the heck!

Jonah smiles wryly at Big Tom.

Later that evening, when the lights reflecting from the dome city ceiling are dimming, the city has some visitors. Behind the guard rail along the top level, near the entry way, some tall dark gray Zetas are standing next to something that looks like a large green colored worm with two big muppet eyes at the face end, a tentacle waving. The broad back of what looks exactly like the creature from the black lagoon looms behind them, and then the round green hand of a little green man in a dark blue smock comes up over the railing, as he is pulling himself up for a view. He points toward the center of the dome, his round face reflecting a smile as broad and simple as a have-a-nice-day symbol.



There is hardly any motion in the dome city, just a person or two moving along one of the residence patio areas that look out on the gardens, moving off to a bedroom to settle down. A little boy, Billy, is bustling across the grassy areas past the fountain, trying to get home before he gets a reminding holler from his mother. He's the last person to leave the park. He passes the fountain and hears a faint splash. Billy throws a comment over his shoulder, not even looking in the direction of the fountain.

No swimming in the fountains, you guys.

A large orange octopus with no eyes pops up out of the fountain water and sits on the edge of the fountain, shaking water off a tentacle.