

Afterglow

by Paul de Denus

My stomach still leaps thinking about it, when I first saw the shaky handheld footage by Edward Weller, taken out behind Weller's Amazing Attractions near Glens Ferry, a one-pump tourist trap featuring two-headed rattlesnakes and mummified aliens... how the grainy images looked like a phony Hollywood sci-fi flick - a light source shimmering in the dust next to dilapidated tin sheds... *a 'spike of light' is what Dad called it* — a laser-like beam spiraling needle-thin into blue Idaho sky.

On the third day after the appearance, Dad showed up at school in his cruiser; I crazily thought he was there to make a drug bust or something but instead he took me away - my 7th grade teacher, Mrs. Watt was confused and not too happy as we were in the middle of a science test - and he didn't say anything though he looked scared as we ran down the steps to our packed station wagon where Mom and Holly were already waiting.

We stayed in a roadside Motel 6 the first night and they wouldn't let us watch anymore TV, told us to go to sleep as they turned the set to a curtained window, turned the volume to a whisper and huddled around it, watched in silence, though I heard Mom say, *'what are we going to do?'* and since then we've camped off the road and they don't say much, just listen to NPR on the radio while Holly toys with her stupid doll, whines *'where we going mamma!'* every goddamn minute, and I'll catch Mom's worried smile cross her face — the one she's so good at lately — but all she says is, *'we'll be there soon, baby... soon.'*

The drone of radio seeps into the car's back seat... I hear only bits and pieces of information — that there's a military blockade and a no-fly area of ten miles around it, that it's a flaming tree that has the religious types crying out, that the *'spike of light'* is wider now and

spinning into a fiery tornado, that it strings out into space with no visible end, that the Virgin Mary has appeared inside of it, that the Vatican is silent, that violence has stopped in the entire Middle East as they watch, that soldiers near it hear music, that others hear garbled voices, that there have been shootings, that God is returning, that it's the devils work...

Hundreds of cars pass in the opposite direction, trucks and vans stacked with belongings on rooftops like cartoon caravans, people on foot with backpacks and suitcases, some carrying signs that say, '*get me to the rapture*' and '*the end is not near*', all going west toward the burning copper sunset and Mom whispers, "*they're wrong*" and I see Dad's gaze in the rearview mirror, fixed like a man who has been told something secret and profound but he stays quiet.

It's been a couple of hours since we made the southern curve around Tallahassee, heading for the Keys where Uncle Marcus is waiting with everything; I can smell the sickly tar-paper air, baked by the oven-hot heat of a tangerine sky and the wind leaking through the car burns like sandpaper on my skin, and while Mom and Holly doze, I ask Dad if we're going to be okay but he only repeats what he said an hour ago, his voice cracked and softer this time, that we need to get to the water fast — get *on* the water soon... get *on* the water soon.

