

How the Species Began Again, I

by Savannah Schroll Guz

The sun came up red and angry. It glowered through the gauzy fog, washing with a frail pink light the collapsing bridges and broken, graying asphalt that lay in chunks where highways had once been. While two of the small travel party still slept, protected from immediate sight by an overpass, Tina was awake, and so was Bible. She watched him sitting on the ledge some twenty yards away, looking east and staring with calm concentration into the sun. His braids, grown fuzzy at the roots, filtered the light around his skull so that it looked like a nimbus. Tina shuddered and turned over on her side, looking away from Bible.

Tina had known Bible before the apocalypse. That's what they all called the invasion. It had come at the end of a very grim economic time. Even the Americans, who were fighting an endless war with sand colored tanks and ground harrowing missiles, were unable to muster the resources necessary to produce suitable weapons. But it did not matter. American science was not yet a match for the baffling nuclear arsenal the invaders had arrived with. Nearly everything around them had been either heavily irradiated or vaporized entirely. In fact, the two men lying near Tina snored quietly in front of human-shaped shadows burned into the concrete.

Tina again turned to look at Bible's thin back. The sun had shifted. The red halo had disappeared. She could see his vertebrae, his humanity. Her nausea passed, and she remembered the man she had known. His birth name had been Leonard, and once, she and his other girls called him 'Rayray '. As Rayray , he sat deep in his Cadillac Fleetwood, like it was a velveteen throne, and slowly wet his thumb and forefinger while he counted out twenties, fifties, hundreds. His girls took turns visiting him, went with their money to his car at different times. Tina remembered how she drank in the air

conditioning while she sat there and he counted, the motor rolling beneath them. Most of his girls hadn't survived the apocalypse.

When the invaders landed, incinerating most of the inhabitants of buildings that burned and fell, the population in the Metro area fell by three-quarters. The survivors, before dying of radiation sickness or other equally fatal wounds, moved like cockroaches in the darkness, finding shelter for the daytime. Now, most of the city lay in quiet ruins that gently phosphoresced by night.

Tina and Rayray survived only because they had been in his U Street apartment together—a basement apartment—consummating a relationship that had grown increasingly territorial: Tina had become Rayray's province, and he sent her out less and less. And precisely because of this, Tina suddenly found herself pregnant. At first, she thought she had the same sickness that made others vomit and break out in running sores or even lose long pieces of skin. Eventually, when her stomach began to harden and swell, she realized. And she despaired.

After the apocalypse, Rayray was mute for days. He merely nodded or shook his head in reply to most things Tina said. They lost count of the days. There was only the endless rising and setting of a sun they no longer really recognized. At first, they remained in his building, eating what little food he had, rationing the vodka, smoking the last of his rock stash. Then they broke into other apartments, stepped over bodies to get to the refrigerators, cabinets, and drawers of his neighbors. But eventually, with nothing left to smoke, they were forced into withdrawal. Sometimes, Tina could not stand the touch of anything against her skin, not even the floor. She lay mostly in the fetal position, intermittently sleeping and shivering, complaining about a chill in the air that got no better when she covered herself with blankets. Rayray, on the other hand, sat like a slender Buddha, silent, regal, a gleam of cold perspiration covering his face. They were this way for nearly four days.

Eventually, like other survivors, they moved from building to building to escape the watchful eyes of the Leviathans that roamed the city by day and cast long shadows over the urban neighborhoods

in ways that seemed like shifting weather patterns. A single human sighted in an area might cause the decimation of several city blocks, the weapons used to kill them were that wide-angled in their destruction.

One morning, Tina woke up and Rayray was on his knees near her. His eyes were bright, round, glistening. He placed his open palm on her swelling stomach and in a quiet whisper said, "With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.'"

Tina sat up, pushed his hand away. "What did you take?"

He shook his head, and creasing his forehead said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."

"Stop that shit! Whatever is wrong with you, stop it right now!"

This was how it began, his transformation. But he was not Bible until the others joined them.

The first one who crossed their path and stayed was an older man, a man Tina estimated to be in his mid-fifties. He looked vaguely familiar to her, and she wondered if he had been a john—perhaps not hers, but one of the other girls'. Yet, he seemed not to recognize her. He was gray haired, dressed in a fuzzy gray-green cardigan sweater and dirty tan trousers, ripped at the knee. In his bifocals, there was star-shaped fracture that extended into the half-circle of reading glass. The thickness of the lenses kept them from falling part entirely. He walked with a slouch, his shoulders sloping, his forehead knitted with grief. Tina looked for wounds, but he had none except what looked like a small cut to his knee.

At the time the man approached them, Tina had begun to feel Rayray pulling away from her, at least in emotional terms. It was not disinterest that fueled this migration, but rather a deepening objectivity that seemed to have washed over him. He remained reserved, aloof, and largely silent, characteristics that stood in stark contrast to the man she knew before the apocalypse. Rayray had been prone to swagger and swearing. His anger was sudden and

sometimes came without apparent cause. The bright, hot bursts of rage left bruises on her arms and thighs. Once, and only once, he had given her a black eye when she held out a little cash for herself. He did not, as a rule, hit his girls' faces because make-up covered those bruises poorly and temporarily lowered the girls' street value. Instead, he hit them where it was less likely to show in the dim light of a car interior. Yet, by the time the aging stranger stood before them, blood from his knee soaking into the fabric of his trousers, his eyes wet with repressed emotion, Rayray was calm. He addressed him in what had become his only method of expression, what Tina believed were Bible verses.

"Dear friend," Rayray said to Walter, stepping towards him, "you are being faithful to God when you care for the traveling teachers who pass through, even though they are strangers to you."

The man said nothing, seemed momentarily stupefied by Rayray's words. Still, Tina saw a tear escape from beneath the frame of the man's broken glasses. It followed the contour of his cheek until it quivered along his jaw line. Tina broke the silence, "You got anything to eat?" She then nodded towards Rayray, "He ain't been right lately, but what he's askin' you is whether you got somethin' to share." Inside her coat pocket, Tina ran her thumb along the half-melted handle of a box cutter she found outside a loading dock they'd passed by a day or so before. Repressed malice lit up her insides.

The man shook his head slowly and sniffed, running the corner of his sleeve under his nose.

"Pull out them pockets," Tina said then, furtively pushing the box cutter blade out several notches. "I wanna see that you ain't got nothin'."

The man seemed to understand the imperative and pulled out the white fabric of his pockets so that they showed. He voluntarily turned his sweater pockets inside out as well.

"I have news. That's all," he said, finally.

"What kinda news?" Tina asked, suspiciously.

"That there is a safe area for humans."

“What do you mean?” Tina narrowed her eyes. “Who told you this?” She walked closer to the man. She brought the box cutter out of her coat pocket so he could see she had it.

“I don't care. You can cut me,” he lowered his head in agonized resignation. “Just make it quick, is all I ask.”

Rayray spoke up, “Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The man, who, in the previous moment, had fallen on his knees in front of Tina, looked over at Rayray. He then looked up into Tina's face. For the first time, at that angle, he noticed her swollen stomach. “You're pregnant.”

Tina ignored this. “You got a name?”

“Walter. Walter Graham. I...,” he faltered for a moment, as if the admission pained him in some way, “I used to teach at George Washington before all this.”

“You said there's a place for humans, a safe place,” Tina said. She still held the box cutter, but it was now at her side. She'd slid the blade back in.

“Yes. Outside the city.”

“How do you know about this?” asked Tina. “We ain't seen anyone who knows a damn thing.”

Rayray spoke up, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Tina turned around and looked at him. An expression of annoyance passed briefly over her face, something she would never have dared show the Rayray of pre-apocalypse times. A look like that would have earned her a punch, maybe even a full out beating if he had been in the right mood. She turned back to Walter. “You know how to get there?”

Walter pushed his fingers against his eyes to rub them. “It's in Virginia, northern Virginia. And as far as I know, it's a sort of halfway point to a kind of human reservation, where they're putting us now. I met people headed that way on Capitol Hill. That's how I know.”

“What are you doing over here then? You're going the opposite direction.”

Walter's shoulders slumped again. He looked at the shoe he could see in his crouching position. Its sole was pulling away from the upper. “That's right. I am.”

“Well, what for? Why aren't you headed that way?”

“I have no reason to.”

“You want these things to kill you?” Tina asked.

Walter paused, then said, “I thought you would. I spotted you first, and I came this way for a reason. I saw people kill each other over a half-empty bottle of Grey Goose on 11st Street not so long ago. I just assumed...” he trailed off. Another fat tear caught the light as it rolled down the side of his gaunt face.

Rayray walked up to Walter, put his right hand on the man's head, and said, “He who trusts in the LORD, loving kindness shall surround him. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand.”

A strange red light seemed to rise over the rubble, and at first, the trio thought the Leviathans had found them. They all ran for cover, even Walter, who had previously wanted to die. Inside the spider-webbed glass front of a boutique, they stumbled over toppled shoe boxes and scattered boots and heels. They did not sit on the cushioned bench once intended for customers, but hunkered down on either side of the entrance, in case they had to move again. Once they caught their breath, Walter said, “I haven't seen a living soul for the last four days. I was afraid I was the last one.” He paused when his voice cracked. “I tried to ...you know...kill myself, but I...I just didn't have the guts.” He pulled back his sweater sleeve to show four or five light parallel cuts he'd made across his pale wrist.

Tina, crouched beside Rayray in a way that indicated she still looked to him for physical protection, said nothing. She glanced at the wrist and then shifted her eyes to the black and white floor tiles, where the sun's light waned. The group could hear thunder, distant at first and then suddenly louder, until it seemed as if it were right overhead. Tina began to shake. Rayray looked through the

windows, calmly, as if he already knew what was coming. The old Rayray would have gotten up, kicked the boxes around, raged against whatever was overhead, vainly challenging it. Now, however, he was composed. As the building shook with the percussive impact of the thunder, Rayray said, loud enough for them to still hear, "Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them."

Within moments, a heavy burst of yellow-colored rain fell from the sky, striking the ground with the force of tiny hammers. Walter kept his place in the doorway, holding the lapels of his cardigan closed. He rolled his eyes around and wrinkled his nose, exposing his teeth, while he tried to see the sky beyond the boundaries of the doorway. The smell of sulfur suddenly rose from the pavement, along with a thick steam.

Without warning, something hit the unbroken glass pane they were crouching near—it was a hand, and then a body, fully clothed, soon followed. The figure pulled itself into the narrow space between the sidewalk and doorway. They all saw it was a man, although his back was to them. He was soaked through, his clothes stained yellow, and he pressed himself against the windows while he felt along the glass with his right hand to see if the door itself was open. In a second, he was inside and was shocked to see people crouched there.

They all could see he was shaking, but he pulled a gun out from under his clothes, and fanned the space in front of them. Except for Rayray, they all flinched backward, until Tina saw the gun had no clip.

"You ain't got a clip in that thing. Put that shit away."

The man saw his miscalculation and began rummaging in his pocket while he still held the gun up. "Listen, *listen*," he said, still rummaging. His hand came out of his pocket holding a wad of fives and tens. "I have money. You want money?"

"What the hell?" said Tina, standing up. "That ain't worth a damn thing!"

Rayray spoke up, "Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you."

The man dropped his arm. He stuffed the wad of bills back into his pocket. "Oh for Christ's sake, don't tell me I got in here with a bunch of Bible-bangers."

"I ain't no Bible-banger!" Tina shouted.

"Well your friend there is quoting Bible passages. I was a good little Methodist boy. I know Bible verses when I hear them. He a preacher? He sure doesn't look like any preacher I've ever seen."

"No, he was my pimp."

The man let out a guffaw, "Oh that is too rich!" He looked then at Walter, "Don't tell me you were a pimp, too? Or were you one of his 'girls'?" He laughed again, doubling over and smacking his knee.

"Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man," said Rayray .

"All right, Bible," said the man in a mocking voice. "Whatever you say, Bible. Did you happen to notice that the world has ended? Mankind is pretty much dead. Any thoughts on that, wise one?"

"In flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus," answered Bible.

"From the mouth of a pimp!" the man shouted, raising his arms and looking at the water-blistered tiles above their heads.

"Shut your mouth," said Tina. "Shut it, or swear to God, I will cut you right here." She had the box cutter out, the blade extended.

The man stopped smiling. He slowly put up his hands, "Fine, fine. All right. I'll sit. Don't get your panties all in knot about it." He sat down on the floor next to Walter.

"You better get yourself some better attitude. Or we're gonna throw your yuppie ass back outside and you can find another hole to hide in. You got me?"

The man nodded, quiet then. His skin, they all saw, had a yellow tinge to it. He smelled especially strongly of sulfur, but the odor had also seeped into the building from outside. It was everywhere now, the smell. It seemed inescapable.

“Now,” said Tina, “we’re going to a safe zone outside the city. Where you headed?”

He shrugged, “Anywhere there’s food and water.”

“Once this storm passes,” said Walter. “We’ll start moving towards Arlington. There’s a temporary reservation for humans further west, but at Arlington National, I heard there’s a halfway place. We’ll have to use 66 and get across the Potomac. There’s safety in numbers. Certainly, there will be more eyes. Will you travel with us?”

The man nodded, somewhat reluctantly.

“We’ll have to know each others’ names. I’m Walter. I used to teach anthropology over at George Washington, so I know that area and can get us over the bridge to Virginia pretty easily.”

“I’m Gary,” said the man in a low voice, mechanically putting out a hand to Walter. They shook. Walter could feel the rain residue on his own palm after they unclasped hands. “I used to be what they called a Beltway Bandit.”

“Wait, that means you were outside? *Outside* the city?” asked Tina, loudly. “So you came into the city after this all happened? You an even bigger fool than I thought you was.”

“I figured there would be food and other things worth having inside the city limits. You know, bars, restaurants, hospitals. And I did find things.” He turned to Walter, “I saw a George Bellows painting lying on the Mall a few days ago. Just lying there, singed on one corner, but otherwise perfect. I only know who painted the picture because the brass plate was still on the frame... ‘George Bellows, 1909’. I’m guessing it came out of the National Gallery. The whole one side was blown open. It looked like my sister’s dollhouse from when we were kids, you know?”

“Which Bellows painting was it?” Walter asked, raising his eyebrows.

“I don’t know the title, but it was two guys in a ring, boxing.”

“Yes,” Walter looked out toward the street, where the rain was tapering off. “I always liked that one. The eternal struggle between men. With other undertones, of course.”

"I left it lying there in the gravel. I could have cut it out of the frame, rolled it up, and took it with me. But...what's the use? What's that worth now?"

Walter nodded, considering this idea. "Well, they help you remember...I used to sit in the gallery that painting was in during my free afternoons as a graduate student, when I still had....aspirations. Yes, that's probably the best word. But memories are a liability now." He absently wiped his nose.

"So," interrupted Tina, "it's pretty much destroyed outside the city limits, too?"

"It is in Silver Spring anyway," Gary answered.

She shook her head, thinking about how far the destruction extended. She had softened slightly, had put away the box cutter. "Well, yeah. I'm Tina, and this here brother who can't talk nothin' but religion since this shit went down. He's—"

Gary cut her off, "He's Bible."

Tina didn't correct him. And so everyone began calling him Bible, since neither Walter nor Gary knew his real name before the apocalypse. Even Tina found herself using it, and meaning it. "I don't know where he got to know all them verses. He certainly didn't use the Bible before," she told them. "I would have bet my life he wouldn't have been able to tell you about anything in that book before this all happened."

* * *

They wandered west, towards the Potomac, saw a Leviathan sweeping the area and hid in the vestibule of an office building long enough for it to pass to another point. The creature was built like a human, but was several stories high, armor-covered, and emitted a low, rapid chirping noise that Walter believed was a kind of radar. They could not see its face, or at least any significant evidence of its natural features. What was clear was that its head was long from top to bottom.

As the Leviathan moved, sweeping the area, it was soon close enough that all four of them could see the hieroglyphs on the armored plate encircling its shins and calves. Its back bore a beetle

with outspread wings, and, when the figure turned, its breastplate was embossed with a large, radiant Ankh. The figure soon passed on, moving steadily between the shattered glass-facades of buildings that once belonged to K Street lobbyists.

The group stayed there for awhile, to be sure the creature would not turn back for another sweep. Walter was sweating. He passed a hand across his forehead and looked at his palm contemplatively, as if he thought he would find an answer to a question there, rather than perspiration. "Do you all know what this invasion is about?"

"Yeah," said Tina, "we an endangered species."

"That's true. But what I mean is, do you know the reason for it?"

"They want something we got. They takin' it, and they don't want no leftover people to stand in the way."

"You've heard of Nefertiti, the Egyptian Queen?"

"Yeah, I guess." Tina looked at him sideways, wondering where this was going.

"It was widely rumored that Nefertiti was not from this world."

"Oh shut up," said Gary. "That's bullshit."

"We thought aliens were a lot of bullshit once upon a time. And here we are, running from them." He turned again to Tina, "Nefertiti came out of nowhere. Scholars cannot find record of her birth or her death. She simply appears and disappears from the annals. And while some scholars say she was a commoner, brought up from one of the lower castes, others say she was of alien origin. And certainly, if you look at her bust, the famous bust, she *looks* human, but her headdress covers the most significant evidence of her otherworldly origins."

"What's that?" Tina asked.

"Her skull. Beneath her headdress, the vault of her cranium was much higher and wider than a normal human's, just like these Leviathans."

"Where do you get this stuff?" Gary turned to look at Walter.

"Where *the hell* do you get this stuff?"

"It is documented fact. There are other sculptures besides the bust that reveal her without her headgear. Her skull alone extended

back quite far, and so did those of her children. This genetic trait continued on, all the way into the reign of Ramses II.”

Gary let out a derisive exhale. Tina shifted weight to her other knee and peeked out of the wall cracks once more. Walter continued, unmoved by Gary's display. “Nefertiti encouraged her husband to become a heretic. While Egypt had traditionally been a polytheistic society, she persuaded him to worship the sun disc, Aten, and so he did.”

Bible interjected: “None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt.”

Walter turned his eyes to Bible. “That's right. The sun disc was still an idol. So, while they became monotheistic, as we are now, the sun disc was not the right...how shall I say it...worship focus.”

“Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt,” continued Bible.

“Right,” Walter replied. “Akhenaten's reign was the beginning of the end for the Pharaohs of the New Kingdom. Of course, they continued to rule for many generations, but this was the first evidence of significant decline. And then Moses came to lead the Egyptians' slaves, the Israelites, back to freedom in Canaan. We all know the rest.”

Tina shifted her weight again. “Yeah, but what does this have to do with us now?”

“We've long thought that religion and astrophysical matters, even what's been considered the occult are separate issues. But they're not. They are all related. These alien beings, who identify with the Egyptians—or whose ancestors bred with the Egyptians—are likely razing the cities and some of the outlying areas because this is where they felt there would be the most unrest, where the people could not as easily be controlled. You saw that flying beetle on the figure's back and what looked like a cross with a loop on the front?”

Tina nodded.

“The beetle, or scarab, is the Egyptian symbol of rebirth. The looped cross, or Ankh, is the symbol of eternal life. They will attempt

to rebuild their kingdom here on Earth, just like they seeded Egypt.”

Gary sat shaking his head, “Bullshit. Absolute bullshit. You said you were a professor? I thought professors were supposed to teach facts, not spew junk like this.”

“Believe what you like,” Walter replied. “You’ll find this theory has significant merit. You saw the markings on the armor yourself. There was clearly hieroglyphic writing on its shin and calf guards.”

“He shall pass through the sea of troubles,” said Bible, “and strike down the waves of the sea, and all the depths of the Nile shall be dried up. The pride of Assyria shall be laid low, and the scepter of Egypt shall depart.”

“That’s from Zechariah,” said Walter, looking at Bible. He turned to Tina, “You said he started speaking this way after the invasion?”

“Yeah, after we got knocked out. I just thought he was hit on the head real hard. But he didn’t say nothin’ for a long time. Then one morning, he started this biblical stuff, and it’s been this way ever since.”

“I want you to know, brothers and sisters,” interjected Bible who turned his face first to Walter and then to Tina, “that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Walter sat silent for a moment, his eyes wide and blinking. Gary stared into the dark corner near him. Tina said nothing, but looked to Walter for explanation. “He’s quoting Galatians now. This is Paul’s account of his conversion. Paul persecuted the Christians, but had a vision that blinded him. When he regained his sight, he became a most profound supporter of the Christians.”

Bible nodded. “When God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being.”

Walter sat forward slightly, “Can you tell me, what will happen to us? I mean to us as a *species*?”

Gary said with a sarcastic snarl, "Isn't there something in the actual bible that tells people to steer clear of false prophets? Come on. This man used to be a pimp.'

Walter put up a hand, "Paul stoned Christians before his conversion."

Bible looked at Gary, "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit."

He then looked towards the crack in the walls. Slivers of light from the evening sun had begun to penetrate the space they still cowered in, creating patterns of bright lines across all of their faces. Bible's eyes looked, in this strange light, somewhat lighter than their usual red-brown. Now, they had the cloudy yellow-umber of Frankincense. "He shall come and strike the land of Egypt, giving over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword. I shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt, and he shall burn them and carry them away captive. And he shall clean the land of Egypt as a shepherd cleans his cloak of vermin, and he shall go away from there in peace."

Walter nodded, although he did not understand the whole of what Bible said. Not one of them could relate the biblical events to what was happening to them now. "What do you want us to do?"

Bible smacked his chest with his fist, "Thus says the Lord God: 'Wail, 'Alas for the day!' For the day is near, the day of the Lord is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations. A sword shall come upon Egypt."

They moved further west, towards the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkways as the sun disappeared before them, still red and unrecognizable. Everyone burned more easily now. Walter and Gary both developed a scarlet complexion from their late afternoon exposure as the group scuttled away from K Street. Now, however, night was falling. Tina grew fatigued and lagged behind. Bible silently went to help her, and when she touched his arm, her pace quickened almost as if he had reanimated her.

When they reached Route 66, they paused under the 25th Street overpass. Tina fell back against the bridge supports, not noticing the shapes of human figures that had blackened the concrete. Above the broken overpass, from which chunks of concrete had fallen and partially melted rebar protruded, the sky was deep indigo and speckled with stars, which flickered or occasionally shot across the sky in the form of tiny light trails. On the horizon, where they imagined the river was—since they could not truly see it from where they were and no light glinted off the flowing caps as it moved downstream—they could make out the pink of light pollution, and assumed this was the Arlington safe zone.

Walter said, "I imagine they'll try to re-educate us there. We'll have to learn to conform to a new way of thinking."

"If we survive," said Gary.

Bible sat apart from all of them and gazed at the sky. Tina cradled her stomach. "This thing is getting heavier and heavier," she said, looking down at the swollen protrusion beneath her filthy T-shirt.

"You better hope all that radiation hasn't pickled it," said Gary, one corner of his mouth pulled up in a leer. "Think of the monsters this world can produce now."

Bible's amber-colored eyes rested on Tina and he said, "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.'"

He turned to Gary, "For the evildoer has no future hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out."

"I want to believe you, Bible," said Tina. "I just need to sleep a little, just a little sleep." She turned over on her side, one hand on her abdomen, and dozed almost instantly. The group could soon hear her quiet snoring.

Eventually they all fell asleep, without meaning to. And in the morning, when the red sun began to warm the wreckage around them, Tina woke to see Bible, staring East into the red globe of light, his skull seeming to radiate a holy glow. A wave of nausea overtook her and she turned on her side, covering her mouth. Each time she woke, she felt overwhelming disappointment, the regret that she

was still alive, and worse, that she was still pregnant. Remembering Gary's words, she wondered just what was developing inside her, whether it would be deformed, whether it would even look human. She worried about how she would have it alone, with nothing for the pain, with nothing to stop the bleeding if it started. She got on all fours and heaved once, but left nothing in the blistered weeds and gravel beneath her.

As she wiped her mouth, she looked again at Bible, whose head no longer emitted the red glow. She saw his thin back, the protrusion of each vertebra, and she felt heartened. She would not be alone in this. He was different now, more careful with her. She saw him turning slowly on the chunk of concrete he sat on. He was looking at her now, as she wiped her mouth again with the back of her hand. The eyes that rested on her were the bright, cloudy yellow she'd seen the afternoon before. She looked left, saw the other two men were still sleeping, and looked back at Bible. One hand was over his heart, while the other hand was extended towards her, asking her to come closer. She got up, shaking slightly, and moved towards him.

When she reached him, he took her hand and placed it over his heart. She could feel it beating in short rapid bursts, as if there were no rib cage or flesh between it and her fingers. When she flinched and pulled back, he held them tighter against his chest. His yellowish irises, she suddenly saw, were flecked with dark shapes, forms that looked like pictograms but not the hieroglyphs she'd seen before. He opened his eyes wider, so that she might see the whole iris better. But she pulled away from him, harder this time. "No, I...I don't understand," she shook her head and cried a little. "No! I don't..." she tried to pull her hand away, to get free of his grasp. "What do you want?"

He let her go. She stumbled backwards, clasping, with one hand, the wrist he had held. There was no malice in him now, only a determined persistence to get her to comprehend whatever it was he was trying to communicate. But the eyes frightened her. When she looked at them again, the shapes appeared not to be there.

Instead, Bible now pointed towards the river, and she looked, too. When she saw what he gestured towards, she held her stomach and scrambled to higher ground where she could confirm what she thought she had seen: the river was dry. The riverbed lay exposed, studded with giant stones glittering with mica and covered by sun-bleached river moss. Here and there were a few shredded tires, rusted chunks of metal, even a boat engine. Riverbed springs created broad patches of dark mud that could be seen from where they stood. "We can cross on foot!" Tina said, excited now, her hands pushing back the wooly hair that blew forward in a cooling breeze no one had felt for days. "We can walk right across!"

Bible stood up, threw up his arms, and shouted into the sky, "I shall sing praises to my God as long as I exist. May my speech be pleasing to Him; I shall rejoice with the Existent-One. Wrongdoers will be destroyed from the earth and the wicked will be no more; my soul, elevate the Existent-One. Halleluya!"

Walter woke and rubbed his eyes. "What's happening?" he asked. "Are we all right?"

"Better than all right," Tina said, coming down from the overpass. "We don't have to worry about getting to Memorial Bridge or them picking us off while we crossin' it. The river's dry. We just got to get down the bank."

Walter woke Gary and the four of them moved towards the river bank. Before they got down the steep banks, holding on to tree limbs and saplings, Bible went ahead of them and tested the riverbed by slowly putting his weight down on both feet to be sure it was not merely a dry crust over muddy quick sand, that would be unable to support human weight. Satisfied, he gestured for the others to follow him, saying "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

As they moved across the riverbed, they found the footprints of others. It appeared to be at least one couple, as one set of feet was larger than the other. Gary spotted something in the mud when they were a quarter of the way across. He stopped to pick it up,

crouching down. Walter glanced back, saw that he had paused and said, "Come on, Gary. Leave that. We've got to keep moving."

Gary ignored him, rooted it out of the dried mud and put it into his pocket. Bible did not look back or scan the opposite bank. Instead, he moved ever forward, setting the pace, which was rapid. Tina did her best to keep up, seeing some hope in all this, seeing that they might get across to the safe zone. She tried not to think beyond that, instead clinging to sober optimism. The thought of what her baby might look like continued to gnaw at her mind. She feared the baby as much as she feared her own death, which somehow--even with the break of overland passage--still seemed imminent. She looked up and down the riverbed, expecting to see a Leviathan at either end leveling a nuclear-powered weapon at her...at all of them. But each time she looked, the way was clear. And by the time they reached the bank on what used to be the Virginia side, Tina was crying. She did not realize it until she felt the coolness of the tear trails drying on her cheeks. "We made it. We made it," she said, collapsing on the bank, wiping her face with the back of her hand.

Walter and Bible had to pull Tina all the way up, although she did a good job scrambling from the bottom. Gary kept to himself, remained quiet, climbed up the bank on his own. As soon as they got to the top, Walter noted that Gary's hand went to the pocket into which he'd put whatever treasure he'd found. He surveyed the landscape, which was somewhat greener on this side. "Where to now, oh fearless leader?" Gary asked, addressing Bible but not looking at him. "I say up river."

Bible looked into the small stand of trees that stood in front of them at the bank top. "Where no wise guidance is, the people fall," he said. "But in the multitude of counselors there is safety."

Walter looked into the stand of trees, saw that it was lighter than a wood might be, and said, "I really think that Arlington is closer than we think. The house itself could be straight through here. I mean, I've never come through this particular way, of course, but my internal compass seems to say that we should forge straight ahead."

Walter looked at Tina, who shrugged, "Hey, I'm with you. You think it's straight ahead, then let's go that way."

Bible continued to go forward, while Walter followed behind. The mere fact that trees and grass still existed on this side was hopeful, after all the destruction they'd seen within the city itself. Tina, filled her lungs with the air, which was less foul here.

Walter looked into the treetops, saw the milky-blue of the sky. "There must not have been the sulfur rain here that we had in the city. In this heat, it would all be dead by now."

They passed through the copse of trees and saw, spread out before them, little white grave markers in regular patterns that seemed to move before their eyes. And for the first time, they saw live people, perhaps a dozen or more. "So, where's this safe zone?" asked Gary.

"We're standing in it," answered Walter, "as far as I can tell."

On a hill, they could see Arlington House, with its massive cement pillars. Rising up beside it was something else, something enormous but yet unformed. Walter faltered a step, "They're building something new."

"I'll say," said Tina. "It looks like it's gonna be huge."

"Yes," said Walter. "The man who originally owned this—understand, before Lee—was George Washington Parke Custis. He had his plantation slaves build it from brick and cover it with cement, so it looked like a Greek temple."

No one said anything. Walter was not sure they understood the implications of what he was telling them. "Custis built it so that it could overlook Washington and be a constant reminder."

"Reminder of what?" asked Tina, unconsciously rubbing her stomach.

"Of George Washington's contribution to the nation. So, I would say the aliens have chosen this site for a reason. It's a psychological reminder of their dominion."

"Well, if they're building something," said Gary, catching on. "Who's actually doing the building?"

The sun shone brighter now. It was late morning, close to noon, based on the sun's position in the sky. It was never a white radiance anymore, but always red, no matter how brilliant and hot it shone. "Why," Tina asked, looking into the sun while shielding her eyes, "does the sun always look so different now?"

"We're in a new age," said Walter. "The invasion and the related radiation have changed the properties of our atmosphere, so the sun appears in its natural form, which is plasma. It's why we burn so easily now. Those sulfur rains we saw yesterday have to be part of the atmospheric change, too."(continued in a separate post)

