

The Widening Gyre

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Tuesday morning was almost lovely enough to drive the memory of nightmare, the dream-images of friends and neighbors melting into a faceless mob, out of Ellen's mind. The full moon hung low in the western sky. The east was streaked with pale gold clouds. Ellen would have lingered to savor it, to reassure herself, if it hadn't been her day to open the library at nine a.m. As it was, she looked appreciatively at the sky between feeding the hens and milking the goats. Inside she switched the radio on while the milk trickled through the filter. The TV had been broken for six years and she didn't feel like taking the time to fix it, or to watch it either, but she needed to know what was going on in the rest of the world, though she couldn't quite think why. She listened glumly to the international news--another Middle Eastern suicide bombing, wild stock market fluctuations, conflicting reports from two civil wars, an invention enabling remote jungle dwellers to have constant wireless Internet access--and the domestic news--another shooting, more acrimonious budget arguments, and Presidential election coverage.

The anchor played clips from the two leading candidates' speeches. Thwaite denounced Socialism, the insufficiently patrolled southern border which was a standing invitation to terrorists, and the liberals who denied the terrorist threat, especially the outgoing President and his party's candidate, Howland. Howland decried corporate abuses, xenophobia, and conservatives who wanted to cut social programs while padding security forces. He especially blamed the Speaker of the House and Thwaite. Occasionally both men made positive noises about job creation and growth. Neither explained how you could keep growing everything except the planet, or whether the jobs people had were worth doing. Nevertheless Ellen listened, and voted, just as she flossed her teeth, over and over, irritably, because if she didn't things might get worse.

Another reporter interviewed a Thwaite backer.

"Senator Doorn, you've been outspoken in your opposition to the tax increases proposed by the President. Do you believe that it's possible to reduce the budget deficit to a manageable level without any changes on the revenue side?"

"That's right, Steve. We have reports from reliable sources that the Mexican terrorists are gathering troops and weapons at the border. Fifth-column groups in the northern states have been observed stockpiling weapons, preparing to rise up in support of the terrorist assault. The President has completely ignored these reports."

"What terrorist...What are these sources, Senator?"

"Because the President, like his yes-man Howland, is too busy trying to enforce central control over his own citizenry, with his so-called gun control measures and his proposals to claim more of their hard-earned money for the government."

"Senator, can you hear me?"

"Thank you. It's always a pleasure to talk with you."

A brief silence. Another interview.

"Rep. Blasiak, I understand that you agree with Mr. Howland when he says that concerns about security at the southern border are a distraction from..."

"We have just discovered that the Speaker's so-called security funding, which has diverted billions of taxpayer dollars from vital social programs, causing the death of several low-income patients on life support, has gone to finance a vast compound on land owned by the Speaker."

The interviewer tried to ask something else, but Rep. Blasiak didn't stop. "Spy drones have been observed leaving this compound and flying over Washington. At least we hope they're only spies. Right-wing militia groups are preparing for action." She stopped. After a moment the interviewer asked, "Who observed this?"

"That's right. This isn't the America we want for our children."

"Can you hear me?"

Silence.

That was crazier than usual. If either of the crises were real, that was bad, but how could they be? Why would terrorists be stupid enough to bring an army against the US instead of just blowing things up? Why would the Speaker be stupid enough to try a military coup when he seemed to be getting everything he wanted by legal means? Had the interviewees been able to hear their sources any better than they could hear the interviewers? Why couldn't they hear?

Ellen turned the radio off, wondering if she was still dreaming. Though her nightmare had just been about the people she knew being...crazy? possessed?... not the whole country going insane. She pinched herself hard. She didn't wake up. She opened the window and looked out. The clothesline stood in its usual place. The air smelled of wet grass and lilacs and goat manure. Catbirds sang in the willow scrub by the stream.

Before leaving for the library Ellen called to remind her friend John Gaylord to stop by her house after the library closed and pick up a flat of tomato seedlings. "Give me a little extra time after closing. I'll bike home."

"You might want to take the car," he advised.

"It's not supposed to rain."

"No."

"So I'll bike."

"I forgot you don't have a television."

"What does that have to do with anything? Can you hear me?"

"Sure I can. Things are unsettled. Not just on the southern border. Tell you what, I'll come and pick you up."

"John. For crying out loud." She bit her tongue. It would be counter-productive to point out that John was seventy-two, a bit old for rescuing damsels in distress, and Ellen was thirty-seven, a bit old for being that kind of damsel. Or that terrorists weren't likely to waste their time on a two-thousand-person town like Chad's Fork. "I'll bicycle. I will be just fine." She paused, thinking. "I'm sure Madlyn will be fine too." Because that must be what John was really worried about: his daughter Madlyn, three years younger than Ellen, living alone in the city. John had insisted that Madlyn accompany him to self-defense classes and target practice sessions. Ellen smiled, remembering Madlyn calling her afterward: *I just hope some thug will jump him someday when I'm around, so I can rescue him and make him feel as stupid as he made me feel this morning! Ellen, you won't tell him I said that, will you?* Ellen hadn't. "Have you heard from her?"

"Of course. I checked with her this morning."

"Well then. We're all safe. See you at four-thirty." She hung up and went out to load books into her bike carrier.

Ellen figured she'd have time to stop and talk with Amy Bremmerman, who was usually out in her herb garden. Amy's rants about neoconservatives got tiring, but who could blame her? Her father, Professor Bremmerman, proud Republican and champion of family values, had left town five years earlier with a girl five years older than Amy. Mrs. Bremmerman died two years later when her car hit a tree on a curve she'd gone round safely for years. Nobody said suicide, and nobody said DWI, but people thought about both. Apart from the ranting Amy was an excellent neighbor. She was the only person other than Ellen who'd reached out to the Vick children and tolerated their parents, and that took patience and tact that no one would have suspected Amy of possessing.

Amy wasn't out in the yard. Nobody seemed to be outside anywhere on Ellen's route. Once Ellen turned onto Main Street the traffic picked up. The library parking lot was empty. Ellen let herself in, checked her own books back in and emptied the box under the book drop, ignoring a budding tension headache.

Trevor Lomax came in ten minutes before opening time. Ellen smiled at him. Trevor was a nice boy, or young man, or whatever twenty-year-olds were. He was polite as he knew how to be, and smart in some ways, no doubt of that, considering the things he could build and fix. But you never knew what would send him into a panic, and when he panicked he ran, often for a long way, and sometimes without looking before he crossed streets. Today his hands twitched and he stared at Ellen's gray sweater. Not at her bosom--there wasn't much there to stare at.

"Did I spill oatmeal on myself?"

"You're not in a uniform either," Trevor said.

"I never heard of library uniforms."

"No, not a library uniform. Everyone else I've seen today has one except me and you. I don't know if that makes us safer or more endangered. Or more dangerous."

"Trevor, what are you talking about?"

"Red and blue. For the candidates."

Well, of course Thwaite and Howland had their colors on their signs, but Ellen hadn't noticed any but the most overzealous of their supporters dressing to match. She looked from Trevor's black jeans and animal-track sweatshirt to his worried eyes.

"I don't feel all that dangerous today. How about you?"

He half-smiled and loped off into the stacks.

Cynthia Laidlaw was there right on the dot of nine, neat in her red suit and low heels. Amy Bremmerman strode in behind her in blue jeans and blue sweatshirt. They nodded to Ellen, ignored each other as they headed into the stacks.

Trevor dropped his books onto the checkout counter. A small engine repair guide, a book on attracting hummingbirds, a memoir from the local history section, and *The Complete Survivalist's Handbook*. He held onto that for a moment before passing it across for stamping.

"You should've had more than one copy. But you can tell me if you need to look at this while I have it checked out."

"Thanks, but I seem to have survived so far without it. I expect I'll last two more weeks."

"But it's different now. You be careful."

"Trevor, it's all right." Ellen felt the pulse beating hard in her neck. Damn the politicians, all of them; didn't they ever think how seriously they might terrify people who were a little too suggestible? If she could feel her nightmare creeping up around her, what must Trevor be feeling? "Can you come out to my place this evening?" she asked. "Have some dinner, and give me a hand with replacing the pane in the cold frame? I want to set my eggplants out soon."

"Okay. I'll be there."

Amy and Cynthia exited the stacks at the same time, almost bumping into each other.

"Good morning," Cynthia said stiffly.

"Fine, thanks. You?" Amy replied. She turned away without waiting for a response, waved to Trevor and plunked herself down at a computer while Cynthia brought her books up front. One *Left Behind* novel. One copy of *Surviving the Apocalypse*.

"Come now, it's not that bad, is it?" Ellen said, smiling.

Cynthia didn't answer. Amy waited until Cynthia had gone before she approached the counter.

"Some people," Amy muttered. "I guess she took the *Survivalist's Handbook*? It was there when I checked online right before I left home."

"She didn't."

"I saw her get something from that shelf."

"Here, let's see what you've got." It was no good arguing with Amy in one of her moods.

"*Robinson Crusoe... Malafrena...*"

"What did she check out? Ellen, can you hear me?"

"I heard you the first time. Would you like her asking me about what you checked out? Why didn't you ask her? And you have *Essentials of Self-Defense*... Amy, you're as bad as Cynthia."

Amy glared at her. "Do you really think you're safe just because you won't show which side you're on?"

Ellen bit her lip. Amy lowered her head.

"Sorry, Ellen. I didn't mean... I'm worried, that's all. Not just about me, either. About you, and the Vicks..."

"I know, Amy. But do you really believe everything they say on the news?"

"Not on that wretched station John listens to, and not on your Public Radio either, trying to make everything nice and balanced..."

"I don't believe everything I hear there, either. Today none of it makes sense, and they can't hear each other. And if any of it is true, what do you think we can do about it?" Ellen hoped that the answer wouldn't be "go join the resistance." You never knew with Amy.

"Find a safe place for people to hide. Get ready to protect them."

"Amy..."

The door banged. Amy slewed her head around, registered the new arrival's red shirt and sneakers, shoved her books deep into her bag and walked away.

The rest of the morning was like that. By noon Ellen's neighbors had checked out all the library's nonfiction books about firearms, explosives, tracking, wilderness survival and martial arts, and most of the novels about conspiracies, espionage, revolutions, wilderness living and the Last Days. Lines of people waited for the three Internet-capable computers.

"I thought you had Internet access at your house," Ellen said to Ernie Goyne, who was standing at the end of one line and picking at the neck of his blue button-down shirt.

"They can track the IP address, can't they?"

"Who are *they*, and why would they care?" Ellen asked. He blinked at her sweater.

"Lovely weather, isn't it?" he said.

At one o'clock Ernie, who had gotten to the front of the line, touched the arm of the blue-clad woman behind him and pointed to something on the screen. She pressed her lips together and bent over his shoulder, whispering. He nodded, whispered back, started typing rapidly. The red-wearing computer user in the middle of the next line over--Jean George, who must be playing hooky from high school--opened her cell phone, pointed it at their faces and then at the screen. Taking pictures, Ellen figured.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, passing information on us?" Ernie demanded.

Jean said to the red-wearer behind her, "It's happening here, too. We've got to get ready. Look at them!"

Ellen didn't like the thinness of their voices, didn't like the way people left their lines and bunched up behind Jean or Ernie depending on their colors. She walked out around the desk.

"I don't know what any of you think you're doing. Jean, you can't take pictures or video of other people here without their consent." Jean generally cared about following rules. "Anyway, what do you think Ernie's doing? Don't you remember the time he fixed your flat tire? The time he found your dog?"

Jean blinked. Ellen rounded on Ernie.

"Ernie, you must have something better to do than picking a fight with a sixteen-year-old. Who's she going to pass information to? She babysat your kids, for heaven's sake, and she's probably taken pictures of all of you before."

Ernie looked at the carpet. The people behind Ernie and Jean stayed huddled in their groups, muttering. Ellen glared at them.

"If you don't want the computers and don't want books you can go talk somewhere else."

Ernie and the other blue-wearers left the library together. Five minutes later Jean and the other red-wearers left, also in a group. Ellen walked to the door behind them. The sidewalks were empty except for the red-shirts heading from the library up toward Maple Street. Ellen hoped that her last order hadn't sounded like an invitation to take a fight outside. She hadn't looked to see which way Ernie and his friends went. She walked back to the circulation desk and brooded for the next half-hour while nobody came. Then she sat down at one of the computers to check the browser history, which Twyla Perkins (the Monday librarian) had fixed up so it couldn't be erased.

There were several hits on a news story about how the President's previously scheduled address to the nation had begun to be given by the Speaker of the House (who said that the President and Vice-President were in a secure location) but had been interrupted by a member of the President's party shouting "What have you done with them?" after which the session closed in disorder. Also stories about the southern invasion (now regarded as happening, rather than pending), stories about the coup d'etat by the Speaker of the House (backed by defense contractors who had been holed up in his compound), stories about sympathetic military uprisings in other parts of the country, calls to arms and atrocity stories from both sides.

Ellen shut the computers down, unplugged them, told herself she was barring the door after the thieves had gone, resumed brooding, and started when the phone rang. It was Amy.

"Sorry I was cross. I guess you have to let people take out whatever they bring you."

"I do. Though I've just disconnected the computers, and I wish I'd done it sooner."

"Denial doesn't help. Let's face it, this is no longer a democracy. As of twelve-forty-five."

"How do you know that?"

"It's on the radio. And online. It's everywhere."

"Except where the stories about the invasion..."

"Smoke screens."

"Let's not have this morning's fight again. But I wouldn't be too sure about the news. Might as well do what you have to do at home."

Amy exhaled slowly. "Ellen, I don't want to argue with you. But--but just get out of the library, okay? Get somewhere safe. And don't try to bike home on your own. Come on over to Ernie's house. We printed everything we needed off a computer someplace else, so they won't come to his place first. Look, Ellen, we know you're one of us, whether or not..."

"Thanks. But I've got visitors coming tonight. And I'm supposed to be here till three-thirty."

"Nobody's plans--"

"Thanks, Amy. But no." Ellen hung up the phone. Picked it up again. Dialed her sister Sarah's number. The phone rang eight times, nine. Ellen moved to cradle it, froze as Sarah's irritated voice came across the line.

"Siobhan, how many times do I have to tell you..."

"It's Ellen. How are you? How's Ma?"

"Ellen. Sorry. Siobhan kept calling. Ma says we're fine. I don't know. Have you been listening...?"

"Everyone at the library has. They believe it."

"You're still there? Everyone's staying home here. I think...Just a minute, I'll get Ma."

The line went dead. Ellen bit her lip. Hung up. Picked the phone up. No dial tone. So there wasn't a problem at Sarah's end. Ellen didn't have to worry, though Sarah might worry about her. Their mother usually knew when to worry and when not to. It would be all right. Perfectly all right.

Ellen went to the children's section and started reading shelves. Several of the little darlings were old enough to reshelve their own books and not old enough to do it properly. The work didn't occupy nearly enough of her mind. She sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", softly at first, then loudly.

"Ellen!" someone called behind her.

She shut her mouth, opened it to mumble "Sorry," and looked up. "John?"

John Gaylord's pronounced nose and hunched shoulders gave him the air of a hawk in a rainstorm. His red sweater was sprouting a hole in the left elbow. His eyes were worried.

"Come on, kid. You need to get out of here."

"I'm fine."

"Sure. You always sing hymns in the library at the top of your lungs. You always unplug the public computers. You always leave a pile of returned books sitting in the box while you read shelves."

"Well, there hadn't been anyone in for the last hour, and the computers weren't doing anybody any good, and the books--it was just crazy this morning, and--"

"Right. So call it a day. You've done enough."

"People are supposed to be able to use the library until three-thirty. That's forty-five more minutes. And I haven't checked the returned books in."

"Nobody's coming. Our folks are all up at the green. I don't know where the others are, but they aren't on the roads or the sidewalks."

They weren't fighting, then. John wouldn't lie.

"All right. Just let me see to the returned books, and I'll bike home."

"Come on over to the green with me. It's safer. I'm not being anti-feminist or anything. Even a guy shouldn't be wandering around alone when..."

"I'm fine. Anyway, I invited Trevor Lomax over for supper."

By the time they had finished arguing, and Ellen had checked in the returned books, it was three-fifteen. Ellen looked up and down the street. It was empty except for John's pickup. She slung her bike into the truck bed.

"Your house, then." John said.

"You don't have to do this," she said. "And if you're thinking about hitting me upside the head and taking me to some Secure Location, don't." She smiled to show it was a joke, glared to let him know she meant it.

"Okay." Still, he turned onto Maple Street instead of Polk. "Just to let them know where I am."

Ellen nodded, her eyes fixed on the crowded green.

Someone had hooked up large-screen televisions in a semicircle. The space in front of the screens was full of people--two hundred? Two hundred fifty? Ellen couldn't see their faces, just a mass of red clothing. She couldn't make out the picture on the screens at all.

"What do we want?" a televised woman's voice shouted.

"Freedom and Security!" The roar came from the screens and also from the people on the green.

"I can't hear you!"

The televised crowd, and the crowd on the green, murmured in alarm.

"Say it louder!" the speaker corrected.

"FREEDOM AND SECURITY!"

"I hear you now!"

The noise, the red blur of the crowd, frightened Ellen. This was what happened sometimes at the end of the dream, when the wizard had possessed the people she knew but hadn't gotten her yet. The people merged together like that, their faces melting, their voices changing, jeering, shouting, surrounding her... The dream played insistently behind her eyes. Her hands were knotted in her lap, her breaths tight and small. John pulled up to the curb and got out to speak to someone, leaving the engine running.

He was talking to Cynthia. Her face was doughy with fear, but clearly hers. Ellen looked past Cynthia. There was Jean at the edge of the crowd, poking at her cell phone, and Nick Harris making notes on a legal pad, and Jens Sturman scratching his head... Not a mob, then, just her neighbors, frightened and wearing red. Ellen unclenched her hands, switched the truck radio on.

No wonder they were frightened. Patriotic citizens were being urged to protect vulnerable elders, women and children from invaders, Socialists and sympathizers; Texas was at war, everyone knew that, and other uprisings were breaking out across the North... John should be too smart to listen to a station like that. Ellen turned the knob, got Amy's favorite station, which urged concerned listeners to protect vulnerable elders, women and children from vigilante groups and defense contractors in the pay of, or under the influence of, Thwaite and the Speaker--they weren't just around the Speaker's compound, they were everywhere.

Ellen bit her lip and twisted the knob to NPR, which reported phone service down in many parts of the country, widespread rioting, conflicting rumors about who was attacking whom, three aircraft collisions due to loss of signal... Then the local newscast started. They couldn't reach their reporter in the state capital. At the time of his last report the legislative session had deteriorated into a shouting match. Tweets and Facebook posts reported legislators barricading themselves into separate buildings by party, groups fighting in the streets, the Governor

disappearing in an armored car (some said that he'd been abducted, others that he was joining the terrorists)...

"Wrong station, kid," John said. Ellen turned it off. They drove back to her house in silence.

There were no cars on Ellen's road. No one worked in the front yards or sat on the porches. A bicycle was propped against Ellen's porch railing. Not Trevor's.

"Stay in the truck", John said, bending to rummage under his seat.

Ellen slid out the passenger door. "Hello?" she called. "Put that down," she added over her shoulder to John.

"Ellen?" The door onto the porch opened a crack, then slammed shut. Ellen frowned. That had been a woman's voice. Whose?

"Get back in the truck." John's voice was sharp.

Ellen shook her head. "She's asking for me, not you. You get back in the truck. Just put the bicycle out. You brought me home, okay?"

Before John's protesting rumble could resolve itself into words, the door cracked open again.

The eye of a gun winked at them through the crack--no, not at them; at John.

"Let her go. She's harmless," John and the woman said in unison.

"Don't you dare call her that," the woman added.

"Not until you put yours down," John retorted.

Ellen tried to line herself up between John and the gun in the house. "Can't you hear each other, you two?" she asked loudly. "You just told each other to let me go. I'm fine. Nobody's threatening me."

"Are you sure?" the woman asked.

"Amy, is that you? Yes, I'm sure. Put that thing down. I'm here with John. Nobody is going to get shot. John, put yours down too. Amy, where on earth did you get a gun?"

Amy opened the door all the way. She was clutching a two-foot chunk of metal pipe.

"It was lying around in the tool shed. I didn't have time to look for something better."

John snorted. "What good would that have done?"

"It worked on you, didn't it?" Amy retorted, but her lips twitched. If she could still laugh a little at herself, she'd be all right. Ellen stepped back so Amy and John could see each other better.

"I'm glad you can hear each other now. John, you can tell your crowd at Maple Street that some of the blue lot are out looking to protect their neighbors too, okay? Thanks for the ride."

John's face reddened.

"Look, kid, I don't like leaving you alone here."

Ellen shrugged. "You're welcome to stay for dinner, both of you, if you won't pick at each other. I have enough lettuce in the fridge for salad. Amy, you could come get radishes. John, Trevor was going to help me with the cold frame, but he's not here yet, and I don't know if he'll come; maybe you could help."

When Ellen went out to milk John was fiddling with the sticky door between the milk-room and the kitchen, Amy was in the kitchen heating up soup, the pipe section was in the tool shed (put there by Amy), the radio was in the bottom of the bread box (put there by Ellen), John's gun was in the potato bin in the root cellar (put there by John), and the key to the root cellar was in Ellen's pocket (put there by Ellen, who had not told John she was locking the door). So far, so good, Ellen thought. Then she heard Amy snapping at someone. Not John--he was still on Ellen's side of the door. He whipped into the kitchen, Ellen close behind him with the milk pail. Amy's words were clearer now.

"Wipe your feet before you track mud all over Ellen's clean kitchen floor!"

Trevor stood in the doorway with dirt on his shoes and his laptop clutched tightly in both hands.

"It's getting worse," he said. "But now maybe they know why. I wanted to show Ellen."

Ellen saw the tension in Trevor's shoulders, the way his eyes flicked back and forth between Amy and John. *Don't let him start running now*, she thought.

"Trevor. I'm glad you came. John fixed the cold frame, but maybe you can give me a hand with the eggplants after supper."

"Okay. But Ellen, you need to read this." He unfolded the laptop.

"Don't. They all say different things, and I wouldn't believe any of them."

"But this time they're kind of saying the same thing, they just explain it differently." Trevor's fingers moved jerkily over the keys. "Look!"

Ellen didn't touch Trevor--he hated being touched--but she set her left hand on the table an inch or so from his right hand, palm up, loose, in their 'all's well' signal. Trevor's hands relaxed slightly. Amy and John leaned in to look.

Trevor had picked the Homesteader's Forum where Ellen had gone to get advice about problems with the garden and the goats. There were some sensible folks there, though it didn't follow that they were political experts. At the moment they seemed as panicked as anybody else.

The thread Trevor picked was headed *Is everyone okay?* He scrolled down through secondhand reports of terrors and rants that didn't seem to be responding to one another.

"About half of these comment boxes are full of gibberish," Amy said. "Not even words. Not English, anyway. What's that about?"

"I wonder," John said.

"They're all in English," Ellen said.

They were all able to read the comment that said *There's something bigger going on, but I don't know what. Not just political stuff. There's got to be some reason why people can't understand each other.* Trevor hovered the cursor over that one, looking at Ellen.

"That does sound like sense," Ellen said.

"Look at the replies", Trevor said.

Most of them started out with *Yes, there is*, but they continued differently. Amy pointed at one response.

"I can't see anything there," John said. Amy raised her eyebrows and read it aloud. It explained that the present failure of communication, the rising crime rate and other aberrations were the fulfillment of the Shapeshifter Prophecy, made long ago by some noble indigenous group which had foreseen the soullessness of life in the white male-dominated hypercapitalist neoconservative world. They had said that a void would come into being, a void that hungered for the substance of human souls, that sucked memory and meaning from the world, and that passed in mysterious ways from person to person... Ellen shuddered, remembering her dream.

"They're crazy," John said.

"It explains it all," Amy said, white to the lips.

"That looks better," John said, pointing below.

"What?" Amy squinted at the screen.

"Read it, John."

John read, slowly and dramatically, a post about the confusion of Babel returning, destroying meaning and stealing souls, functioning in fact as the Abomination that Causes Desolation, brought about by the soullessness of the liberal Socialist elite...

"Nuts," said Amy. John seemed to be grinding his teeth. Ellen saw that her hand on the table had clenched into a fist. She forced it to open again, lie loose.

"Okay, Trevor. We get the idea. But there's all kinds of stuff floating around on the Web. We just don't understand, and I don't think they do either. People don't understand each other, they panic, they fight, they blame it on each other like everything else. Maybe that's all that's wrong, people panicking and blaming each other and not listening. Or maybe something else gets let in when people do that..." Her nightmare eddied in her mind. No good going further in that direction.

"But we don't have to figure the whole thing out," she said, reassuring herself as much as him. "The four of us here can hear each other, and we don't have to panic, and we don't have to fight. And there must be people in other places who can hear and trust each other, too, we just can't talk to them now." She spoke softly, monotonously, as though soothing a nervy goat. It was remarkable that Trevor hadn't bolted. His face was pale and pinched. "Did you remember to have lunch today?" He shook his head. "Breakfast?"

"I can't remember."

"Have some supper now. We have salad and stuff to make sandwiches, and there's soup." Amy opened the bread box.

"So that's where you stuck the radio."

"Amy, we've had all the news we need for the day."

"No, we haven't."

Ellen looked at Trevor. Too late to stop the news from upsetting him.

"Ten minutes, then. Time for the top-of-the-hour news. Then we turn it off. I will not have that thing blathering at us while we eat. And I choose the station."

Public Radio reported massive breakdowns of communications technologies (possibly caused by hackers of unknown affiliation) as well as disruptions of face-to-face communication which might be caused by some kind of neurological epidemic being transmitted by means as yet unknown. The anchor said there was further news from their correspondent in Washington. An interval of static ensued, followed by the local news. Riots in the county seat and in the nearest city of any size. A brief sound of shouting, then static again. Amy shoved the tuning lever over. Shapeshifter story again. John picked up his station. The Tower of Babel...

The commentator went abruptly from Babel to indecent prom clothing, and then into what might have been a reading of Gertrude Stein, phrases that sounded vaguely ominous or significant stacked up against each other, adding up to nothing. John looked puzzled too, so it wasn't just Ellen losing her hearing. She prodded the lever back to NPR and frowned at the resulting sounds.

"That's not English."

"They've been taken over," John growled.

"It isn't Spanish either," Ellen said.

"Or Russian or Arabic," Amy added.

"I don't think it's anything," Trevor said.

Amy tried her station again. Static. Trevor shook the antenna. It didn't help. After that, static was all they could pick up anywhere on the dial. Trevor's hands still shook when he took them off the antenna. Ellen stared at his eyes until he returned her gaze.

"Stay here, Trevor. We need you." She jerked a thumb at the radio. "Amy, John, turn that thing off." Someone did. Trevor nodded, just perceptibly, and sat down. Ellen opened the window into the back yard. A hen carried on about an egg she had laid. A rose-breasted grosbeak sang.

And the town's fire siren blew. Something truly was wrong, then--something real, something here.

Or maybe it was just another gullible idiot sounding an alarm. They didn't have to figure it out. None of them were volunteer firemen.

Still, if there was a fire, who might be going unhelped? Why hadn't she thought of that earlier? Gone to get them?

"Mr. Brody..." she whispered. Mr. Brody was eighty-four, and he lived alone, and that house was a firetrap...

"Ernie went to get him at three," Amy said, a trifle smugly. "He'll be fine."

"Jim Bryce went to get him at two-thirty," John said, smugger. "He told me he'd gotten him when I went to tell him I was seeing to Ellen. He's fine." Ellen puzzled briefly over the several he's, then nodded.

"The Braceros?"

"You can't help wondering about their papers, but I really don't think they'd be setting fires.." John sounded uncomfortable. Amy exhaled sharply.

"Ellen means, did anyone burn them out. If anyone tried, they're not there. Angel and Ada and the kids are at Walter's house."

"The Vicks?"

Getting library cards for the Vick kids had been one of Ellen's triumphs. Twyla and some of the other librarians had thought they'd make a lot of noise and mess, and Mrs. Vick and her boyfriend didn't care about books, but Elmer and Julie had wanted library cards, and Ellen had sworn she'd pay for anything they lost or ruined, and so far they hadn't lost or ruined anything.

John and Amy looked down at the table. Trevor cleared his throat.

"I tried to visit after I got my books this morning. Someone put the Australian shepherd out and it chased me." He looked down. "It took me a while to stop running."

Well then, there was nothing to be done about that. Ellen nodded.

"I talked to my sister, and she and Ma were fine. Amy?"

"Gram was okay at one, but the line went dead. I haven't been able to get her since." That was her mother's mother, out in Colorado. Amy didn't mention her father, and Ellen didn't ask.

"I haven't reached Madlyn since this morning. I've tried."

"The phone blackouts," Ellen said. "John, Amy, I'm sorry. I think they're okay, though."

Trevor had never talked about his family. He still didn't talk about them. They sat together silently, listening to the town siren, to a moving fire siren, to another kind of siren...

"Police," John said.

Ellen shut her eyes, imagining what might be going on. Maybe it was just a fire. Maybe a riot. Somehow that was easier to imagine. She imagined, too, herself standing on the porch steps above a street full of struggling red-and blue-garbed figures, talking them down. She was calm, eloquent, brave. She looked them in the eyes, willing them to stop fighting, as she'd stopped Amy and John.

Only she couldn't look them in the eyes. They had no faces. The longer she looked, the less human their shapes became...

That wasn't courage, that was madness. And that was what she'd come to, like as not, if she tried to interfere in a crowd scene. She opened her eyes to see Trevor shaking again. She took a deep breath and spoke more levelly than she had thought she could.

"Not much we can do except pray, and take care of each other."

"That's fine for now, kid." John spoke gently. "But if they come here, there aren't enough of us together to stop them."

"No. I hear some of the right-wing militia groups are pretty good-sized," Amy said.

“If it’s an army--anybody’s army--there wouldn’t be enough people in town to stop them. Even if we all got together.” Trevor’s voice was thin.

Ellen made herself breathe deeply. “Maybe there are few enough of us here so they’ll know we’re people, not an army or a mob or anything else to threaten them. I guess if people come and want food we’ll feed them, whether they have guns or not. And if they want other things, and they have guns--well, I guess they’ll take them, whether we like that or not. I don’t have a lot here that’s worth stealing. I don’t see why they should want to hurt us. Anyway worrying won’t help.”

Amy raised her eyebrows, nodded. John grunted. He might be making plans of his own, but at least he wasn’t arguing.

Trevor’s stomach growled. Ellen smiled.

“Let’s eat.”

They didn’t say much over supper. There didn’t seem to be much left to say. But setting the table, eating together, doing the dishes, made a little warmth in the cold uncertainty of the evening. The sirens stopped. When the dishes were done they set the eggplants out, hearing nothing but each other’s voices and the crickets. They trooped back into the house, and Ellen hauled her guitar out from under the bed, and Trevor got his harmonica out of his pocket, and John played spoons on the faster numbers. Amy sang loudly and clearly. It was an odd mix of music, whatever anyone found comforting; ‘King of the Road’ and ‘Abide With Me’, ‘My Anchor Holds’ and ‘Let It Be’, ‘Standing in the Need of Prayer’ and ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’. Finally Amy was hoarse, and Trevor was breathless, and Ellen’s fingers hurt.

Ellen shrugged. “Not much to do but pray,” she said again. “Quietly”, she added, foreseeing Amy and John’s likely arguments over any spoken prayers. She wasn’t sure if Trevor prayed, but he nodded and closed his eyes. Amy folded herself into lotus position. John sat straight and still.

Ellen squirmed, tried to pray, couldn’t. She had been all right when she had Trevor to calm, or Amy and John to keep off each other. Now her fears stretched and warped like shadows thrown by the setting sun. She remembered the atrocity stories on the computer, and she wasn’t quite able to stop herself picturing those things happening to her mother, or to Sarah, or to Julie Vick.

The nightmare oozed around her mind too--the beginning, not the end. She was in a room full of her friends and neighbors, all eating and drinking and singing and laughing. Only she knew that one of them wasn’t really who he or she seemed to be. One of them was the wizard who had stolen the appearance of someone she loved. The wizard was plotting, casting a spell, while its stolen voice talked plausibly. If Ellen couldn’t figure out how the spell was cast and how to get free of it it would take her too--she’d still look like herself, but she’d be a wizard, empty, and worse, a wizard-maker.

She shuddered, moaned a little. She opened her eyes, hoping no one had noticed. Either they had, or they were caught in their own nightmares. Trevor looked at her with worried eyes, his hands knotted in his lap. Amy hugged herself as though she were cold. John’s knuckles were white.

“Be not afraid,” Ellen said aloud, startled by the bitter edge in her voice. “Easier said than done.” “Nothing’s easy,” John answered. Ellen nodded, leaned back against the wall, closed her eyes again. She would breathe deeply. She would be calm. Slowly the sounds of the others breathing, the voices of her own thoughts, shifted and fell away.

See, it was all right, they were all there, the Braceros, Mr. Brody, the Vicks, all together, with the light and the music...

Only there was a sound under the music, a keening almost too faint to hear, and Ellen knew something was wrong--knew that one of them was the wizard, cold dead eyes hidden behind the appearance of Amy's bright blue gaze or John's warm dark one. And see, over there in the corner there was a group beginning to blur together. Julie Vick, or the body that had been Julie's, turned from the edge of that group to look at Ellen with vacant eyes, to reach an arm toward her, laughing. Ellen shrank away. There was a crash. She was caught. She was...

She was awake again. Amy and John were flat on the floor, face down. Trevor was curled up under a chair. There were jagged flecks of cold light all around them, and the windows. . .

The windows gave onto a nightmare world, onto a Cubist painting, in which pieces of the living room, of her face, John's back, Trevor's side, all surrounded by crazed fragments of light, were interspersed with dark jagged pieces of night, night broken by flashing lights; a shatterglass world where nothing was whole, nothing was real. Someone was screaming out there, a wild wordless gibbering. No, they were screaming in here. No, it was her...

"Are you hurt?" John and Amy asked together.

Trevor's arm was warm and steady on her shoulders. "It's okay, Ellen," he said. "They just broke the windows. That's all."

"Who?" Talking stopped her screaming. Trevor shrugged. John was off the floor in a remarkably athletic lunge for someone his age, shaking the root cellar doorknob. Amy rose to her knees. So they were alive, all of them. Yes, the window was broken. There was broken glass on the floor, and also two rocks. And somebody really was screaming out there.

"Don't know who," Trevor said. "It's okay, Ellen." She recognized his tone as the one she had used to try to comfort him and stop him from running. She'd best pull herself together as she had wanted him to. She hadn't realized quite how hard it was. She had to get outside and see who was window-smashing. Lucky that she only had the two windows on the roadward side. The voices were moving round toward the front.

She opened the front door slowly, reached her empty hands out, then stepped out, Trevor close behind her.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

No one answered. Ellen saw a mob of people in black clothes, shimmering or shivering, with pale blobs of faces in which she couldn't make out clear features, with hands clenched around stones or something worse. She shuddered.

"It's okay, Ellen", Trevor said again. "Remember, you said if anyone came..."

She couldn't remember what she'd said. Her mind was vague with fear. But Trevor seemed to think there was something she had to do. First she'd have to see who had come. She made herself stare into one of the pale blobs.

She was looking into Elmer Vick's eyes. No surprise there, Twyla would say. But Twyla's grandson James was there too. And five other kids. Well, teenagers anyway.

"Elmer. James. Julie. Nick. Lucy. Wayne. Mike. What on earth are you doing breaking my windows?"

"Stopping the Evil Eye," James answered.

"What?"

"It was on YouTube," Elmer said. "You see your own reflection, and the Evil Eye looks out at you from it, and you're, like, totally gone."

"So we busted it," Julie explained. "Before we could see anything. And then we heard shrieking, you know, like demons or something."

Ellen considered. They might possibly believe that. Or they might just find it a good excuse to break something.

"That wasn't demons, that was me screaming, because I was having a bad dream and you woke me up breaking my windows and I was frightened," she said. "No evil eyes inside, I promise. Trevor will vouch for that." She heard steps behind her. "So will John and Amy. And if you go around breaking things, someone might think you're demons or terrorists or something, and they might even be dumb enough to shoot at you. So cut it out."

She looked at them again. They really were shivering, but there was nothing eerie about it. The wind was cold, and they were scared.

"Come on in where it's warm," she said. "Trevor will show you how to cover the broken panes to keep the warmth in, and I'll make hot chocolate."

The kids shifted, looked at each other. James stepped back a little into the shadows. Wayne and Lucy moved with him. Julie Vick looked from James to Ellen, biting her lips. Her brother grabbed her arm and took a step forward, toward the porch stairs and the light from the open door.

The Criterion