

A Story

Day 1192. The zombie apocalypse has come and passed (along with the end of the so-called world) and I'm still out here in the woods doing just fine. Food was scarce for a while until I hiked over the mountain and found a derailed train that to my great surprise (and relief) was loaded with several box cars of assorted food items that (I'm guessing) were heading south after the first Great Pandemic. Mostly it's non-nutritional junk food loaded with preservatives, MSGs and the dreaded gluten but hey it'll definitely fill my belly. I've been hauling it over the mountain one wagon load at a time for the last two hundred and sixty five days and it's starting to wear me out but damn my leg muscles are getting strong from it. It's been quiet around here and I'm enjoying the solitude but I ran out of coffee five hundred and twelve days ago (not that I'm counting) and once I got over the headaches caused by abruptly stopping my caffeine consumption things weren't that bad. I sure do miss it though. Anyway I don't want to whine too much because at least I'm 'alive and kicking' and things could always be worse than they are. Thanks for reading my post from the future.

Day 1212. It has now been five hundred and thirty-two days without coffee (not that I'm counting) and I just have to say that I really do miss it. I miss it so much in fact that as I was surveying a landfill and trying to figure out how to setup a mining operation (because there just has to be some useful stuff in that well compacted refuse) and perhaps do some large scale methane harvesting along the way when my eyes fell upon an unopened single serve instant coffee packet. I was absolutely in awe of it glittering there in the sun with all it's label faded away except for the word 'coffee'. I think since this entire journey of mine began I haven't had such a reverent nor awe inspiring moment as the moment my eyes singled out of all the trash and debris that single word. It was a powerful moment for me as I delicately lifted that faded single serve packet up to the light of the sun for closer inspection and saw although faded that the packaging was actually intact. I cried just a little in that moment and resisted a very strong impulse to tear into the packet and pour it's contents down my throat. Instead I pulled a piece of string from my pocket and gently tied it to the packet and hung it around my neck. I even took care to make sure the word 'coffee' faced forward so that I can glance down and see that I do in fact have a little bit of coffee. I think I'll hold onto it for a while just to see how long I can go without actually consuming it. Anyway things are rather quiet with all the humans gone and even the dreaded zombie stench has begun to fade. Every once in a while I still get a whiff of it when the wind blows hard out of the north but other than that there's still the heavy scent of things burnt or burning. That particular scent might take a bit longer to fade but I'm sure it will eventually. I've still been hauling food over the mountain from that derailed train and I've also spent a good bit of time repurposing one of the derailed cars into a storage unit for food from the other cars. I had noticed the animals getting into the food so I decided to take some steps to secure as much of it as possible and since hauling it over the mountain one wagon load at a time could realistically take years I settled on a simpler solution 'on site storage'. It has also become my satellite camp. Well anyway I'm still hanging in there and both me and the dogs are doing well. I'm glad you read my future post.

Day 1349. My satellite camp at the derailed train is coming along rather nicely. I found a bulldozer near it a few miles away left beside a highway where some construction was being done before the 'world' collapsed. It amazingly had some good fuel in it so I drove it beside the tracks to where the derailed train is and used it to push twelve of the box cars into a somewhat circular formation with all their doors facing inward. While I was doing it I kept chuckling to myself that I was making a wagon circle. A few of the box cars didn't deal with such rough treatment that well and their doors no longer slide open and closed that great but I think that I can fix them if I level the box cars with a jack and apply a liberal

amount of grease to the door tracks. I had just enough fuel in the dozer to get the last one in place before it coughed and sputtered out a huge column of black smoke from the exhaust which I thankfully held my breath during and didn't breathe that crap in. As for the dozer I'm going to just leave it where it sits and use it to climb over so that I can actually get into the 'wagon circle' that I created with it. Anyway it has now been six hundred and sixty nine days without coffee (not that I'm counting) and although I have yet to drink the single serve instant coffee that I found at the landfill I'm definitely tempted to do so almost every morning. Somehow though I've resisted the urge to consume it thus far. Aside from the coffee the biggest thing that I miss is the robot voice that tells the weather on my little weather radio. I've tried everything I know to predict the weather but alas I'm no great 'cloud watcher' and a few times now I've been caught out in some rather foul weather. One of my dogs is pretty good at sensing when a really bad storm is approaching though so I just keep a close eye on her behavior and take some precautions when she starts acting oddly. She can usually sense them about three days out which gives me plenty of time to get ready. I'm still enjoying the end of the 'world' and the quiet that has ensued. It's really nice just hearing the sounds of nature and that quiet being only occasionally broken by me working on my various projects. I've still yet to see any other humans (which is fine by me) but I have been seeing and hearing some really large dog packs roaming around. I've had a few close calls with them while out scouting and scavenging but I built a little device that emits a high pitched noise that anytime I see them I whip it out of my backpack and turn it on. It is a rather comical looking device that I call my 'ray gun' but it sure is quite effective at keeping them at bay. I also always carry a large can of bear mace but thankfully the wild dogs (or bears) haven't gotten close enough to me that I felt the need to use it...yet. Anyway thanks for reading my future post.

Day 1402. I must say that all things considered it has been a rather mellow apocalypse. Really the biggest hardship has been going without coffee. It has now been seven hundred and twenty two days (not that I'm counting) since I've tasted the delicious flavor of my most beloved beverage. I've been considering hauling the wagon into the closest town just to try to scavenge up some coffee. I'm estimating that it will take three days total to get there, have a look around and then make it back to the homestead. I'm hoping that the town doesn't smell horrendous but that's probably just wishful thinking on my part. Either way I'm going prepared with a respirator and some essential oil to squirt in the respirator's cartridges just in case I find the odor in the town to be overpowering. Let's face it though towns tended to smell bad long before the 'world' ended and the probability that they will smell worse now is rather high so I'm thinking it will be prudent to go prepared. Anyway I've been doing my best to chronicle the days and what I do with my time. I don't have much hope that anyone will ever read them but you never know because in the long history of the planet human civilization has rebounded from some pretty large setbacks and there's no real way for me to know what (if anything) is happening in other parts of the planet but my instincts tell me there's not much left of the 'world' as it was before things fell apart. At least I've survived somehow which was probably just dumb luck on my part and not from any special skills or effort on my part so perhaps there is a chance that others did as well. On a different note I've been seeing a lot of birds of various types lately all flying north. I don't know quite what it means but after climbing a nearby mountain that has a fire tower on it and climbing up the tower itself I could see a thick haze of smoke covering all the southern horizon so perhaps the birds are just fleeing the fires or perhaps it is something more ominous and I just can't figure out what it is. The times being as strange as they are it is difficult to make heads or tails of what is going on but no matter what I hope that I can continue to persevere and live a long, happy and comfortable life in the woods. Thanks for reading my 'future post'.

Day 1410. Well the journey to the nearby town went rather well. It wound up only

taking me two and a half days to get there and back again which could be partially because I was right about the stench of the place and I didn't stay a moment longer than necessary and partially because well the place really creeped me out. There was the usual signs of panic and 'end of the world' mumbo jumbo painted on pretty much every available surface but there was also an incredibly eerie sense that I was being watched the entire time I was there. Fires had burned through much of the downtown sector so I avoided it altogether because the last thing I wanted was to die (or worse be wounded) from some burned out shell of a building collapsing on me. So I stuck to the outskirts and was stoked to find a little cafe whose storeroom was absolutely full of not just coffee but fucking espresso beans! So I loaded down the wagon and stuffed what I could in my backpack and promptly headed back the way I'd came. When I was about halfway back and resting in a small park that had a rather quaint little picnic table and pavilion I found out why I had felt like I was being watched in the town. A rather hungry looking and what appeared to be half starved hyena appeared from the way I had just come and was obviously following me. I'm assuming that when the 'world fell apart' some compassionate soul released it from a nearby zoo. Other than that I can't figure out how the hell a hyena came to be in these mountains. It was a pitiful looking thing and I left it some canned meat that I'd brought along for a snack. I'm thinking it was born and raised in captivity and only knows that humans give it food which is probably why it was following me. I made good time heading away from the little park but not long afterwards it showed up behind me again and not wanting to lead it back to my homestead where my dogs might not be all that friendly towards it I pulled out my high pitch 'ray gun' and scared it off. I'm not sure that it won't one day show up around the homestead but I didn't see it again the rest of my trip home. Anyway I'm glad that I now not only have coffee but a huge supply of it. The first thing I did when I got home though was yank the little packet of instant coffee from around my neck, boil some water and after emptying the contents of it into a cup, adding water and stirring it thoroughly I drank it down in one huge gulp. Thanks for reading my future post.

Day 1437. All things considered not a whole lot has changed for me since the quote unquote world ended. I still wake up every day, let the dogs out, have a morning smoke and (now that I have coffee again) have some coffee as my half awake brain takes in the world around me and contemplates whatever remnants of dreams are lingering in my mind. It is a fine way to start the day and as stated quite unperturbed or disrupted by the so called 'end of the world' which is fine by me because in those fleeting moments between awake and asleep I often find solutions to problems, new perspectives, neat inventions and some rather potent moments of self realization. Which all adds up to lending me a little inspiration to start my day off in a productive fashion. Anyway things have been rather quiet around here lately. The smoke from the fires down south have been making their way into this little cove more and more each day but at least the fires appear to be burning towards the east (and coastal areas) so hopefully they continue moving in that direction. I've been climbing that nearby fire tower every three days just to keep an eye on them and while the view is spectacular the hike up there has been wearing me out so much that I've been contemplating establishing another satellite camp at the base of the tower. The only drawback to having a camp there is hauling everything I need up to the place itself. I like my little wagon and all but dragging it up a nearly forty five degree gravel road for three hours loaded with gear doesn't seem all that appealing but I'm tempted to do it anyway just so that I can wake up and fall asleep to the amazing view from atop the mountain the fire tower stands on. On a different note I've spotted that hyena a few more times. Always at a distance but it has been lingering around the outskirts of the homestead and just out of range of my dogs. Which is good. It being around has actually decreased the wild dog activity around here so that's a pleasant bonus. Yesterday I decided to try to track down exactly where that hyena was staying at night and found (after hours of searching and following it's many foot prints) I found an old barn where it had made itself a pretty cozy den amidst a huge pile of

hay. Just outside the barn I left it a big pile of canned meat and inside the barn in it's hay bed I left it an old tattered blanket that smelled like me, the dogs and too much sweat. While I was there I also drug a huge cattle trough into the barn and filled it with buckets of water from a nearby creek. If hyenas drink about the same amount of water as dogs then it should have enough water in that trough for several months. So as you can see I've grown a soft spot for the animal that (if it had a different disposition) could have eaten me alive back in that little town where I first encountered it but it didn't. Anyway the homestead is coming along nicely, the dogs are happy and thanks for reading my future post.

Day 1452. Well I got really lucky and stumbled across a mule that was all hung up in a briar patch and after a lot of soothing and slowly cutting away at the thorny branches entangling the poor beast I got it set free of the mess to which it's response was to loudly bray with pleasure and prance around. I've seen a lot of things but something about that braying and prancing mule caused me to erupt in fits of laughter and alternatively wheezing to catch my breath between fits of laughter. All of this the mule took as whole hearted encouragement and began to leap into the air and kick with it's hind legs when it wasn't braying and prancing. I hadn't laughed that hard since well before the 'world' ended but I found myself laying there amongst all the briars I had just cleared away from the mule holding my sides and tears running down my face for what seemed like hours but was probably just minutes. When I finally gained some control over myself and not only got off the ground but also pulled the clinging briars off of my clothes I felt incredibly light hearted and for lack of a more fitting word...I felt mirthful. The day this happened was a day that I was bringing some supplies up to the fire tower because in the end I decided that any arduous journey of hauling stuff up to it would be well worth the view and it is strategically an awesome spot for a satellite camp. Well the little mule was insistent upon following me so I used my backpack, a blanket and some straps I had (to secure stuff in the wagon with) and fastened a small load of stuff onto the animals back. During the entire rigging process the mule stood very still and seemed to understand what was going on and even had an air of 'eagerness' about it as if to say 'Hurry up daylight is wasting!' Anyway the mule is now part of my little post apocalyptic family and as long as I can keep the hyena living on the outskirts away from it we will all hopefully have a long life together hauling stuff hither and yon, checking out the scenery and scavenging from what is left of the 'world' that used to be. Lately I've been out hunting for batteries and solar panels along the highways and although it is slow going (even with the mule) because batteries are heavy, solar panels are a bit fragile and then there is the weight of the various tools that I have to lug around so I can take things apart, which all adds up to a rather heavy load. So I take it slow and gather what I can but so far I have enough batteries to store roughly six months worth of my power needs which is pretty awesome as long as the solar can keep the batteries topped off but there have been some rather dark days and often the sky just somehow doesn't look 'right' to me. In the back of my mind I worry that it is the beginning of an ice age or something similar where the sun is partially or mostly blocked from reaching the surface of the planet. With this in mind I've also been trying to work out a 'plan b' for my electrical needs and also if the planet is about to gradually get really damn cold I need to find somewhere deep down in the ground where it will stay consistently warm and get it setup to hunker the fuck down. Well I've rambled on here a good bit. I hope you have a great day and thanks for reading my 'future' post.

Day 1471. Recently I've spent a few days and nights up at the fire tower. Mostly I've been watching the smoke filled horizon with a sort of hollow dread by day and by night scanning the countryside to see if I could spot any nearby fires or moving lights that might indicate whether there were other people in my general vicinity. I'm not quite sure just how many miles I can see from atop the tower but it is pretty damn far. I wasn't just up there on some weird fluke or strange paranoid

idea that there might be other people around...I was up there because there were definitely people (or at least a person) in the area. I knew this because recently when I went to the camp at the derailed train I found that someone(s) had been there and although they took great pains to cover their presence, they could not hide the fact that an entire box of canned mixed vegetables was missing. After going over my inventory list twice and recounting everything in the box cars twice I decided it was definitely more than my imagination and that something was actually missing. Right then and there in that moment of realization that there had been someone else there I wished that I had brought at least one of the dogs along with me. Before the 'world' ended finding that someone had been snooping around (and stealing) wouldn't have been all that shocking to me. Especially since before the 'world' ended it seemed like more people than not were enduring hard times, trying to 'stay afloat' and were by and large strung out on something whether it was drugs, drinking, bad ideas, low grade entertainment, or a combination of the four. So back then it wouldn't have surprised me at all but now after nearly three years of not seeing 'hide nor hair' of other people...It gave me not just goosebumps but gooseflesh all over my upper body. What really frightened me was that I had not bothered to cover my trail between the derailed train camp and the homestead. I had in fact created quite a clear and direct path leading straight from one place to the other with all my hauling of food in the wagon. I don't have much in the way of defenses around the homestead other than some brush walls that I'd constructed rapidly in the early days when the zombies were around. I actually abandoned the entire 'defenses' project when I figured out that the zombies were incredibly slow moving, prone to stay where they had once been human and ultimately died off rather quickly. Who'd have thunk that zombies would half such a short 'life' span and be complete homebodies. Even during the thick of things I don't think that one came within more than a mile of the homestead. So finding my defenses woefully lacking I decided it'd probably be best to not change my routines because the one advantage that I might have is that the person(s) have no clue that I knew of their existence. So the rest of that day and night I stayed on rather high alert but did all the stuff I usually do and kept secretly hoping that somehow my inventory at the derailed train camp was wrong and that I'd let my imagination get the best of me. I found this to be a very comforting thought and it actually helped me fall asleep that first night. The next morning I went out to the spring to fill my kettle with water. This has become my morning habit of late mainly because I enjoy standing in the dewy grass while I'm half awake watching the water swirl into the kettle as the song birds sing their morning song. Anyway upon reaching the spring I find a torn piece of brown paper bag sitting atop the spring's enclosure with a fair size piece of quartz resting upon it. Upon first seeing it I froze and after slowly looking around for anyone watching I cautiously walk the last few steps to the spring and looking down upon the note (for surely I was meant to find it here) I see that there are two words written upon it with red crayon in bold all capitals...'GOT COFFEE?' Upon reading those words something sort of snapped inside me and I broke into hysterical laughter for several minutes. The laughter actually came and went in fits for the rest of the day and all the strange things that had occurred were nowhere near as peculiar as finding that note that morning. That night I left a large can of pre-ground coffee at the spring along with a note of my own (oddly also written in red crayon) which said...'Meet me at the fire tower five days from now at dawn.' I debated a lot over whether to make my note a statement or a question but in the end I figured a statement would be best. The next morning both the note and the coffee were gone and left in their place was a very small piece of paper from what I suspect to be the same brown bag that the first note was written upon and it bore a single word in that same bold all capital red crayon script..'YES'. So here it is just before dawn on the fifth day and I'm at the top of the tower with a thermos of hot coffee, an immense amount of curiosity and a little voice in the back of my mind telling me that everything is going to be okay.

Day 1472. There was a hardness to her eyes as she regarded me over the steaming cup

of coffee that she was raising to her lips to take a sip from. She arched a single eyebrow at me, cocked her head slightly and after several moments of our eyes being locked she shrugged and sipped at her coffee. When she was finished sipping she gently set her cup down on the table between us and looked away out over the landscape stretching off for miles around us from the top of the fire tower. We had been talking for most of the morning and well aside from being around another human being again (how many years had it really been) and the comfort in that...things had been 'tense'. Apparently (according to her) there were other people in the world, not a lot of them and nowhere near as many as there was before the 'world' ended but there were absolutely a good many of them and they were rebuilding. Apparently my new 'friend' was on what she called a 'scouting mission' meaning that she was out looking for not just other people but people that (in her words) 'knew stuff' and 'knows how stuff works and how to make stuff work' which had lead her to keenly observing me and my little homestead for nearly an entire month. Learning this I had blurted 'So you stole from me and you stalked me...great start that is' I had meant it as humor but I guess in the last few years humor had been ground out of the person before me. She had given me a one pound bag of tobacco as payment for the canned goods she had pilfered from the box car at the derailed train camp. She also said she had been following the train tracks and found my 'wagon circle' of box cars, and ultimately assumed it was abandoned. She had found it at night and didn't find the trail leading from it to my homestead until the following morning. At first she had been extremely cautious but after watching me with the dogs and with rescuing the mule she had decided I was probably okay to approach. She said that after watching me rescue the mule she had smiled and something about the way she said it leads me to think that not many things have made her smile in quite a long time maybe even before the 'world' went to shit. Looking back at me over the table she asked me if I had already been living as I do now since before everything changed. So I told her some of my story and how I'd come to be where I was and doing what I was long before 'everything changed'. To which she had nodded again and again to herself as if my admission of things were merely confirming what she had already deduced. When I was finished she gave me a level and nearly unnerving look and asked if I would consider coming east with her and teach the things that I know at an academy that had been recently founded and comically named 'Reboot The World' or as she said 'RTW' for short. At this I laughed heartily and nearly spilled both of our coffee cups as I bumped the little table with my knee while slapping my thigh. The look on her face could have chilled an iceberg and it stifled my laugh so abruptly that it died in a minor coughing fit that subsided into me emphatically shaking my head no. The silence between us stretched until she pulled out her tobacco and papers and began rolling a smoke and following her example I did the same. We sat in further silence just smoking and staring at each other then finally in a rather level tone she said 'Well if you won't leave how about accepting an apprentice or apprentices that will take what they learn back to RTW?' This twist of things caught me by surprise and I found myself saying 'I'll consider it' before realizing that I was going to say anything at all. We spent the rest of the day swapping stories (mostly from the world before things changed) and decided to camp together for the night. Now that the sun is setting we have built a fire on the ground near the tower and are cooking a modest dinner, drinking some vodka she had stashed away on her person and simply enjoying each others companionship. A single thought keeps repeating itself in my mind...'The world might have broke but not everyone broke with it.' I tell her this and all her stoney exterior melts away and she laughs and I laugh with her.

Day 1484. As odd as it is I've been contemplating having some extra helping hands around here ever since being asked to consider it by the scout from the Reboot The World academy. Although I have quite enjoyed my many years of relative solitude, the time that I spent at the fire tower with Cara (that is the only name she gave) reminded me just how pleasant and downright comforting that interacting with other people can be. Of course there was the curious awkwardness 'girl and guy at the end of the world thing' but I think that we both dealt with that well enough and spent

much of our time discussing how to not just rebuild the 'world' but also help build it in such a way that things like equality, sustainability, compassion and consideration for other people (and the planet) are at the forefront of things. Such easy things to pontificate about while sitting around the fire passing Cara's vodka around and much more of a difficult thing to actually implement those ideas. All in all it was nice to meet someone else that still harbors some hope for not just the planet's but humanity's future. I had long ago buried such notions but never let them actually die and I was pleasantly surprised that they were coaxed to the surface again and albeit had some new life breathed into them. So now I find myself not completely disappointed that there are actually other humans in the world and the notion that those left are actually working together harmoniously towards creating a better future absolutely astounds me. In all my considerations of how people would behave in a post apocalyptic world I had never considered that they would actually work together for not just the common good but also to leave a better future for those that come after. Sure in my heart of hearts I had secretly hoped for such but I never ever considered it an actual possibility and now here it is not just a possibility but an actuality and I'm sort of stunned by it. Anyway things around the homestead are coming along nicely and I've been scouting for a place to build a bunk house (and eventual homestead) for my potential visitors from RTW. There's a nice spot in an adjacent cove that might work really well for a second homestead and it would guarantee that I still have my solitude. I think that my best approach to teaching folks is going to be immersion. So having them setup their own place, gather their own materials and do everything it takes to simply 'live' would (in my perspective) be a great way for folks to begin learning. Thanks for reading my 'future post'.

A Story Part Two

Day 1527. Well it has been an odd string of events recently and I'll try to recap a few of them before the details begin to blur and while the memories are fresh. Five of the RTW folks came out roughly two weeks ago and two of them have stayed on as 'apprentices'. Which is sort of where this portion of the tale begins. Clair and Rusty Brunz (those are the two folks that stayed) said they had met and married 'after the apocalypse' (as they put it) and that they really just want to 'get back to the land' and 'be one with nature' to which I merely chuckled and told them squarely that I probably couldn't help them with those two things but I would show them how to properly bury their shit and how to purify water for drinking if they were inclined to learning such pragmatic things like the afore mentioned and plenty of others. Even though I was sort of teasing them they seemed to relax a bit and both chuckled when I said 'Look I don't want to call you my apprentices because I think the word (along with the people that tend to misuse it) is both tasteless and rather tacky. All of which lead the three of us trying to come up with a better word to use but nothing seemed to fit. So after a bit more discussion we realized we needed a good thesaurus to consult (my own thesaurus being a pocket thesaurus and rather useless) we surmised to venture into the nearest town and find the local library. Needless to say that first night we all hit it off rather well and before long we were cracking jokes around the fire and telling stories as if we had all known each other forever. Although I definitely enjoy my solitude the joys of good company are not lost upon me and I must say I thoroughly enjoy their company. So anyway we trek into town with the wagon, two hand carts that we fashioned from old bicycle parts and us three singing quirky old pop songs together. Eventually we found the library (it wasn't very far from that cafe I found on my previous visit) and in that library is where things got weird. First off when we entered the library around noon the front reception area was immaculately clean. There was not a speck of dust, dirt, cobwebs nor any other sign that the apocalypse had occurred just beyond it's flawlessly clean double glass doors. Which was spooky in and of itself but there was a very slight man just beyond the reception area in what I guess would be called the 'library proper'. He was dressed in the age old attire of a janitor's grey jumpsuit and leaning on a large push broom completely at his ease

and obviously in his element. I'm still not sure if the name he gave was Earl, Hurl or Daryl because he spoke rather quickly and with the accent of someone with deep roots in these old mountains. Anyway he was a nice enough fellow and knew exactly where the thesauruses were kept and although he said it wasn't available for checkout because it was in the 'Reference' section we were more than welcome to sit at a table with it and take as much time as we wanted to because in his words 'This here library is always open now ya see? Didn't used to be that way but it is the way it is now. A lot of things are different now but I think that this here library always being open is the most important thing that is different. Uh uh I do indeed think that it is indeed.' After making this statement he bowed to us then muttered something about 'the dust is collecting' and ambled away pushing his broom ahead of him. We found several words in the thesaurus but the one that had the best ring to it for all our ears was 'helper'. Before leaving the library we attempted to locate our host to no avail so I left him a note on the checkout desk saying thanks for his hospitality and that we would hopefully meet again. We did a bit more scavenging around town before heading back and other than finding three rather decent deep cycle batteries we cleared out the entire cache of coffee from the cafe. Just as the cafe began to dwindle from sight behind us and I was really starting to feel the weight of the wagon I was pulling behind me, all the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Everything happened quickly after that as movement to my left catches my eye and several dark masses appeared from the thick brush beside the road. My mind was frantically trying to put a word to what I was seeing and opening my mouth to yell all that comes out was 'Big fucking cats!' The absurdity of my statement gets me and I bark a laugh just as a fourth shape emerges from the brush. This one is easily twice the size of the other animals and it is one I actually recognize. The hyena! My brain shouted and I barked yet another laugh which even to my ears sounded a bit crazed. As if the laugh were a cue the hyena pounced in amongst the cats and even though the cats had the numbers they quickly fled as the hyena let out a litany of some of the strangest and perhaps most frightening sounds that I've ever heard from any animal. It did not even pursue them it merely looked from me to them with those bizarre and intelligent eyes as they fled further and further away. Then the hyena gave itself a good shake, looked at me one last time, seemed to shrug then slowly turned and walked back into the brush where it rapidly disappeared from both sight and sound. A bit stunned by the entire affair my compadres were standing there slack jawed and Clair eventually cleared her throat and said in a somewhat quivering voice 'Was that a friend of yours?' After considering this for a moment I said 'Yeah I think it is.'

Day 1563. The Brunzes have settled in well and have proven to be both remarkably apt at learning new things, skills and ideas as well as being extremely thorough in following instructions and 'sticking to the plan.' The last of which I probably cherish the most because any plan worth developing is generally worth following through on and folks deviating from the plan tends to perturb me to no end. We have mostly been working on building theirs (and any future helpers) homestead in that area I previously mentioned. They both really liked the spot but nonetheless they wanted to scout for another site so we spent a few days hiking around with me pointing out the pros and cons of each area that we looked at and ultimately they saw the logic that I had applied to weed out all the other sites and settle on the one that I did. Initially I was a little irritated over their insistence to at least look at all the options until I realized that this was a great opportunity to begin teaching about all the things that go into selecting a viable site for long-term habitation and cultivation. I must say that I've stepped into my role as an instructional teacher quite well and have actually taken great pleasure in meticulously explaining the details that I know, being straight forward about what I don't know, and above all learning each day and not being some arrogant 'know it all'. Anyway aside from the new folks around and all the progress that them being here has facilitated (because I actually have help with larger projects) things have gone on much as they were before which is to say not too shabby for the 'end of the world'.

Day 1586. I finally got the time a few days ago to give my new neighbors the 'grand tour'. First we hiked up to the derailed train camp where they heartily laughed as I mimed out driving the bulldozer and using it to push the boxcars into their current 'wagon circle' formation. I think mostly they were laughing at the bulldozer noises that I was making which to my own ears sounds like a good mimic of a diesel engine but I'm biased so who knows what it really sounded like to them. We didn't spend much time there but I did take the time to show them what goods were stored there, how to access them and where the inventory manuscript is that needs to be updated if anything is added or removed from the inventory. They seemed slightly surprised by this last bit and all I can think is that I guess they just hadn't considered that I'd perhaps made it this far by being at least somewhat organized. All that aside they both agreed that climbing over the bulldozer to get inside the 'wagon circle' is a brilliant temporary solution but not one that seems very practical for the long-term. They also pointed out that given a little fuel we could put the bulldozer to good work doing what it was built for as opposed to operating as a set of stairs. I readily agreed with them on both accounts and made a mental note to myself to spend some time in the next few days to think over some solutions and plan a trip into town with the mule, the wagon and some fuel cans and see what I could do in the way of finding some diesel fuel. From the 'Train Depot' (as I sometimes think of the place) we set out for the fire tower and after reaching there we camped out at it for a few days. My new compatriots spent a great deal of our time there cloistered away in the room at the top of the tower. At first I thought they were up there doing some romantic frolicking but I was soon disillusioned of that when Rusty presented me with the map they had sketched out from the view at the top of the fire tower. I say 'sketched out' but that really does not do either of their talents any real justice. It was absolutely a work of art and although I could clearly tell that two different hands had been to work on the same page, their styles complimented each other well and the intricate details of their workmanship was truly astounding. The more I told them how amazing it looked the more they both shook their heads and assured me that this 'preliminary work' (their words not mine) was nothing compared to how the finished product would be. They then explained to me that they had brought both canvas and paints along with them for the sole purpose of map making. From what I can gather Rusty had made quite a few maps since the 'world ended' and that while working on one such map was how he and Clair had first met not long after the initial upheaval and madness that accompanies any apocalyptic event. Well anyway I've rambled on here a bit but suffice it to say that everything is moving along so well that it makes me a bit nervous that something pretty whacky could happen at any minute and although my mind tells me that 'everything is going great' my instincts are telling me that I need to stay alert, be ready and to start making some contingency plans for scenarios that could unfold because hell it is after all the 'end of the world' and if one thing is for sure....shit is going to happen.

Day 1597. I've had the place to myself the last few days. The Brunzes (as I often affectionately think of them) are off filling in some details on the map they started at the fire tower. There are several coves (hollers in mountain-speak) where the topography is hidden by the lay of the land. So they cheerfully told me that they were going on a walkabout and would return with a 'very complete' map of the surrounding area. In truth they had worked out several maps between them, some detailing waterways and watersheds, others detailing farmlands and pastures, others detailing trees and timber types and yet even others detailing wildlife. When Rusty began showing me all the maps I made a joke asking if somewhere among all those beautifully detailed maps if he had a map of all the maps. He told me that was a brilliant idea, looked around with that dazed look that I have often before seen on the face of an artist caught firmly in the grip of their passion and he then physically shook himself, looked at me, looked at the maps in his hands then hurriedly put them back in the leather satchel he always kept them in and ran off through the woods calling for Clair and laughing. He kept saying 'A map of the

maps' in between fits of laughter and as I watched him fade down the trail he began skipping along and laughing louder. The next day they approached me about the walkabout and we settled on a maximum of five days before I'd come looking for them if they hadn't returned which we all also agreed would probably be unnecessary and that if they really set a good hiking pace then they could be back in roughly three and a half days. I told them what I knew of the areas which really wasn't much since I had mostly stayed in my own little holler and when venturing out I generally stay to the river and main roads. Anyway since they've been gone I've been building them a little one room shack near their homestead area. They have been staying in a tent this whole time and although it's a pretty nice tent it's still just a tent. So I used the mule (which I gave the name Curly sometime back but never mentioned it) to drag over some black locusts posts and poplar rafters on a sled I built recently just for that purpose and set to work putting them a simple shelter together. The little shack came out pretty good for what it is made with (other than the locust and poplar) which is just a bunch of old plywood that I had, some tar paper and lots of old roofing metal which once painted will look just fine. I left the doorway open and figured that when the time comes for a door I'll teach them how to build one and they can only blame themselves if it doesn't function as intended or is just a pain in the ass to use. For now I hung a piece of heavily sealed canvas over the doorway and called it good enough. It was really an enjoyable project and will hopefully inspire them to start working on building their own place. Honestly though I just couldn't stand to see them staying in the tent anymore and decided to do something about it. I thought about waiting but doing it myself took a third of the time it would have taken to do it and teach them along the way so maybe I shirked my duties (as a teacher) but damn will they be happy to come back to having a roof over their heads especially since it's been looking like a storm is brewing.

Day 1599. It is looking like that storm is finally about to let lose it's fury upon the mountains which is good because we need the rain after the rather dry winter and spring we just had but I also find it worrisome since my helpers have yet to return from their walkabout. The last three days I've spent mostly just cleaning, inspecting, sharpening and generally maintenancing my tools. Often during that time of dutifully 'tending my tools' (as I like to think of it) I kept staring at the horizon and the seething mass of clouds building there and as the clouds grew fatter, heavier, darker and more numerous a niggling sense that my helpers weren't going to be back in the timeframe we had allotted began to grow inside of me. Call it intuition or just a 'feeling' it steadily grew stronger until the sun rose on the fifth day (today) and it became a 'near certainty' that I would be heading out into the approaching storm front to try and locate them or at least figure out what had delayed them. Before they left we had worked out a rather rough route that they were going to take so that if I did have to come looking for them then I wouldn't be left to blindly sweeping the countryside and could (hopefully) find the trail markers they were going to make along the way. The markings were to be drawn (with a red construction crayon) at the base of the tallest tree on the tallest hill in every holler (cove) that they visited. They would mark a line upon the tree when first entering an area and then draw a circle below it when leaving an area. We had worked this system out between us and decided that if there was no such tree then they would mark the tallest object they could find and if they were outside of a holler (cove) then they would leave markings at roughly one mile intervals. It may sound sort of paranoid to have them leave such a 'breadcrumb' trail but the other purpose for doing it is that we want to potentially create a trail system that connects all the various hollers (coves) together and the markings (and exploration) are the first steps to doing that. Apparently Rusty had spent a few years doing property surveys before the 'world ended' and he was adamant about finding the shortest and safest routes through the countryside and connecting them together. All of which he enthusiastically explained to me with this sort of sparkle in his eyes and a sort of 'merry excitement' that I've come to enjoy about him. Anyway I'm procrastinating and the storm is steadily building and now that

I've 'buttoned up' the homestead, left enough food out for the dogs, got my hiking gear packed and written this entry...I'm going to head out and attempt to find my wayward friends.

Day 1603. The rain finally let up yesterday and I was able to get back on the trail of Rusty and Clair. Thankfully they were rather easy to find and what had happened to delay them was quite obvious. They had crossed the river at some point and before they could recross it, somewhere upstream something broke (I'm guessing a dam or even a series of similar water controlling devices) and the river had not just flooded beyond it's banks but was full of fast moving debris. Just in the few hours that I've been here beside it (with Clair and Rusty stuck on the other side of it) I've seen dozens of trees, lawn furniture, toys and several cars swept along by the murky torrent of water before me. Since my arrival here at midday we have tried several times to shout back and forth to each other over the sounds of the churning water but other than a few garbled words like 'you' and 'flood' none of us have been successful at shouting (and being heard) over the din. I want to tell them that there is/was a bridge several miles upstream and perhaps they could safely cross there. So I did my best to pantomime that we would all stay where we are for now and in the morning we would begin hiking upriver. From the way they bobbed their heads and waved their arms I'm feeling confident that they understood at least some of my pantomimed intent. For now though I'm going to make myself comfortable and take a long nap and see what tomorrow brings.

Day 1604. I was awoken some time just before dawn by something licking my hand and a girl's voice saying 'Please wake up Mister'. At first I thought I was dreaming but after blinking my eyes several times in the weak morning light and yawning deeply I realized I wasn't dreaming at all. I sat up and came face to face with the hyena that had been licking my hand and it immediately sat down on it's haunches and gave me what looked like a toothy grin. Just behind it stood a girl that looked to be soaking wet, shivering and biting her lip as if in concentration. Before I could say anything she pointed across the river and following her gesture with my eyes I could see a large fire burning on the other bank and in it's glow I could see Rusty, Clair and a third figure that looked very similar to the girl standing near me still pointing across the river. I just sat there a moment wondering if I was dreaming after all but the wet shivering girl before me snapped me out of it and I draped my blanket around her and busied myself making a fire to get her warmed up. As the fire slowly began to illuminate the gloom around us I looked around for the hyena and of course it had already faded away but from what I initially saw it was looking rather healthy which was nice to see considering how scrawny it had once been. I also got a good look at the girl's face. She has I guess what people call 'delicate' features with an exotic shape to her eyes and the eyes themselves (one blue and one grey in color) held what I can only describe as a striking mixture of depth, humor and shrewd intellect. I brewed coffee and asked her what her name was and she said 'Eva' which came out as 'Evaaaaa' from between her chattering teeth. I decided to wait on asking her anymore questions and handed her a cup of hot coffee which she took with a smile, wrapped both hands around the ceramic mug and after taking a few small sips she turned the mug up and downed the entire contents, belched loudly and still gripping the mug with both hands held it out for more. It was quite the sight to see and after barking a quick laugh I gladly filled her cup again and was unsurprised to see that her shivering was beginning to subside. I have a feeling we are going to get along just fine. One thing is for sure shit just keeps getting weirder and weirder.

Day 1605. So much happens in a day that it is always a challenge to pick and choose what makes it into these entries and also not get lost in the details along the way. From Eva I learned that the hyena lead her downstream (after pulling her from the water) directly to where I slept and in her words 'Sat there licking ya hand like it was honey'. She explained that her and her sister got washed out of a bus when a bridge further upriver buckled beneath them as they were attempting to cross

over it. The bus was being driven by a lady she calls Gram and she feels certain that Gram is alive. She also illuminated me to there being two hyneas. As she put it 'The big one got me and the little one grabbed Evy by the hair but the currents took them and that evil dark water sucked them away'. Kind of grim for a twelve year old but hell almost half her life had been lived after the 'world' ended and there was no telling what kind of stories she could tell. Anyway after some shouting and arm waving to the Brunzes and Evy waving to her sister and blowing her a kiss we put out our respective fires and hiked upstream the few miles to the bridge. There was just enough of it left to walk across and the other three joined us on our side rather quickly. There was sadly no sign of the bus but this did not seem to distress the two sisters who both seemed in very high spirits to be reunited. When I asked if they wanted to look for the bus they shrugged in unison and said in unison 'Gram is fine. She's driving the bus.' I gotta say something about it chilled me or maybe 'spooked' me is a better way to say it because goose bumps rose all over me as I looked at the twins before me seemingly identical in every way except where one's eye was blue the other's was grey (and vise versa) which at least will save me the embarrassment of not being able to tell them apart. Clair had told Evy about RTW and was surprised she already knew about it and that they were actually heading there before getting 'sidetracked'. Neither of them would elaborate further about the nature of the 'sidetracking' so I let it go. Rusty seemed unfazed about anything and enthusiastically showed me the maps he and Clair had drawn on their 'walkabout'. He kept saying the word over and over and I wondered if he'd been saying it over and over since the last time I saw them. Knowing him probably and knowing Clair she'd just laugh and good naturedly egg him on to by all means have his 'walkabout'! So now we are camped not all that far from the homestead and should finish the rest of the hike home by late evening which will be great because the Brunzes won't see the new abode I built them until they actually arrive at their place. I'm looking forward to their surprise. The twins have proven to be avid hikers and pretty good on the trail. They can also talk for hours about science, technology, the best things to salvage, electric generation, and a variety of other related subjects. The RTW folks are going to love having these two sisters on board. Hell I've even learned a few things just idly listening as we hiked along one paved road after another. Well I'm going to turn in for the night. I'm looking forward to getting back to the homestead, the dogs, the mule and my rocking chair on the front porch.

A Story Part Three

Day 1607. So we got rained on pretty hard yesterday which made the last leg of the journey home a relatively soggy climb up many miles of steadily rising terrain as we wove our way out of the foot hills and into the mountains. That part of any journey leading here is a laborious affair. Which has probably helped keep most folks (and albeit predators) at bay because there is more water and easier hunting down in the low country. As far as folks go I figure they'd think to themselves something like 'Well up in the mountains where the terrain is rugged and the game scarce there just ain't no telling what is up there and furthermore whatever is up there can see me coming from far away...I'll just stick to the easy way.' At least that line of reasoning worked well until Cara came along. Everything had changed with her comradere and me agreeing to consider taking on helpers 'apprentices' from the Academy (as I often think of RTW) and then the Brunzes had come and we met the Librarian (as I think of him and although we have visited the library twice more I still can't make out his name through his accent). Then now there are the twins (whom the Brunzes gave the use of their new cabin to and yes they loved it but that's a different story) the twins are odd to say the least, then there is also their Gram somewhere in the region driving (what I learned from them) is a wood gas powered, all wheel drive, treaded (with those amazing triangle shaped independent treads), dual winches front and back, and to top it off a snow plow on the front and both a scissor lift and crane on the roof. My jaw dropped as they fantastically described this vehicle in great detail and how it all works to pretty much 'go

anywhere and do anything' as Evy put it. Apparently they had actually built most of it themselves with their parents before they passed away and Gram came which to them was a windfall because Gram was tall enough to 'really drive the bus' (their words) and although they had worked out driving it together they couldn't drive and also feed the firebox...so Gram changed everything for them and they 'hit the road' (my words) which from their best estimate was about thirteen months ago. Their father was a retired aircraft and automotive racing mechanic and their mother was an electrical engineer that designed hardware and software for deep space exploration probes and apparently the twins had learned their parents crafts inside and out along with dozens of other skills they had taught themselves over the last many years since 'the world ended'. Anyway I've praddled on here but it is good to be back home and see that all is well after my brief stint away. I've been considering planting some hay this year and although I was thinking about plowing by hand or by mule after talking with the twins I think I might use the mule to drag an old tractor up here and have them set to work on converting it to run on wood gas. I figure it won't hurt to ask even though they are raring to head off to the Academy after a visit to the fire tower and the 'train depot'. I'm not sure how it came up but they learned there was a cellular tower near it and whooa did they get excited over that little tidbit. They got rather animated in explaining their idea to make cellphones potentially work again (at least those near a functioning tower) they got pretty technical in their description (and although I can usually keep up they completely lost me) but basically the way phone service providers used to work was all 'carrier dependent' (meaning no service providers equals no service) except for 911 calls which worked anywhere from any phone that could connect to the tower regardless of whether there was a 'phone service provider' so knowing this plus their mother's help (with dismantling a cellular tower near where they lived) the twins had worked out how to hack the system and potentially make any and all phones to work through applying it. They said the biggest hurdle would be that everyone would have only that one phone number to call and that all phones would ring at once when it is called but that they could eventually figure out how to assign individual numbers. Like I said I could only follow so much of their 'geek speak' but it seems like an idea worth investigating further so we are going to head up to the tower some time later this week after the rain clears up and things dry out a bit.

Day 1616. [REDACTED] Time Corps. Year Of The Earth 2052 Agent Lopez Quantum Signature 'Infinite Love' DNA Type: Human. Designation 'Realtime'. Express Permit Status: Allowed!

Day 1632. Well things aren't going all that bad other than some critter getting into my waxworm colony and eating almost all my 'worms'. I never got out of the habit of calling them that even after knowing for all these years that they are actually caterpillars. Fortunately there's a bunch of unhatched ones in the colony and now that I've built a real lid (that actually not only latches but is on hinges) and not just relying on the makeshift cover I had made for it with an old screen door back when the 'world' was first falling apart and I was thinking about having a long-term food supply on hand for ducks and perhaps chickens. Little did I know that the wild dog packs would wipe out my ducks (oh how I miss their eggs) and that the 'worms' would keep me and the dogs from starving those first few years. I'd originally learned of them from something someone had 'posted' (when there was an internet) and from that I learned about waxworms in general and how they eat plastic. I'll admit at first I was only really interested in using them to help get rid of my plastic garbage but the more I thought about it the more I realized that there was plastic litter everywhere (that was back then and now the litter is literally everywhere) and that how easy it would be to keep the waxworms fed year round and furthermore plastic has an extremely long shelf life so storing their food would be no problem. As flawed as my thinking was it had it's merits because I started my first colony not long after that. I won't bore you with the details of

my early learning curve with them but suffice it to say they need a little bit more than just plastic in their diet but albeit not much. My own personal observation is that they are absolutely delicious when fried with wild onions and raspberries. The dogs like them in any form but I mainly just dehydrate the worms in the summer and store them in used dog food bags (along with a few other ingredients) that I keep in a pantry. I'm not even sure the dogs noticed the transition in diet. Well I've rambled on about the worms but suffice it to say the critters won't be getting into the colony again and I'm going to take the time over the next few weeks to build two backup colonies. The Brunzes actually have their own colony going now and they even have a little dog they found (or it found them) while they were out hiking. It is a little purple tongued chow mix that doesn't remove itself from always being Clair's shadow which she (it's a girl dog) absolutely adores. Anyway the twins on the other hand have taken over the Train Depot and although they have yet to master getting any cellphones to work they have converted the bulldozer to run on wood gas and used it to not only 'right' the derailed train engine but also place it back on the railroad tracks. The last I saw them I asked if they had the train running and they just rolled their eyes at each other and shook their heads in disgust. I think I told them 'You will' or something similarly encouraging which was met with more eye rolling and some skeptical head shaking. The Train Depot itself has taken on a life of it's own being almost completely transformed by the girls presence and hard work there. All I can say is that it is damn impressive what they can do left to their own devices. I'm glad they decided to delay heading off to the Academy for a few months and stuck around. Although I still feel like there is something odd about them I've firmly decided that I like and enjoy that oddness whatever the heck it is. They also got a small tractor converted to wood gas for me (it took them three days!) and for the first time in a very longtime I find myself wanting to 'drive' as many places as I can and just enjoy not having to walk everywhere I want to go. I did get that field ploughed along with a bunch of other tasks that just wouldn't have been easily possible without machinery but I'll spare you the details and just say things aren't going all that bad at all.

Day 1639. I was sitting on the porch the other day watching the sky as strange colored clouds kept forming a pastel scene fit to catch the breath and appeal to the eye of anyone with even a slight appreciation of natural beauty. Having never seen anything like it before I had serious doubts about how 'natural' those 'colored' clouds were but it was nevertheless a beautiful display to see. The best that I can hope for is that nature will eventually balance itself out again and although it probably won't be in my lifetime (or for a very long time after) I do believe that it will occur eventually because nature tends to always find a way in it's resilience to always embrace change. I'm fortunate to be doing so well where I'm at and (according to the journal of Longhand John) twice as fortunate that where I am has been affected so little by the 'collapse of the world'. Sometimes I wake in a cold sweat thinking of all the nuclear facilities gone critical because no one was there to keep them operating and the same for thousands (or more) of other facilities whose poisonous/toxic/hazardous nature has for years now assuredly permeated the ground, air, water and ecosystems around them. I mean hell even when those facilities were 'operational' they were contamination nightmares. Why humanity relentlessly pursued such an awful course (even knowing the dangers and that there were better ways) I can only surmise that at the end of the day profit and greed ultimately meant more than having a habitable planet for future generations whose water, food, air and medicine weren't somehow polluted or downright poisonous. I do my best not to dwell on it (which is probably why it surfaces so much in my dreams) but the thought nags at me that maybe everything that happened (is happening) has been for the best and in the long run life will continue and in isolated enclaves where there is good water, clean air, etcetera, that life can have a meaningful quality of existence. From what I can tell from (Longhand John, The Brunzes, The Twins and even from Cara) any 'enclaves' of that sort would be incredibly few and far between so I'm feeling rather fortunate that by sheer dumb luck I landed where I am before what I've been recently thinking of

as 'The End Of The Age Of Arrogance' and that when I really consider all the recent changes (the new people entering my life) I can only marvel at how deep my appreciation for making it this far is. I'm literally getting to witness the beginning of a new age of not Humanity but of Life and as scary and as humbling as it is, it is also exquisitely breathtaking to bear witness to. Well I've meandered on here but for the sake of 'history' I'd like to say that there was a span of years where the tide of 'things to come' could have been shifted away from where they eventually lead and all I can think is that although many people 'fought the good fight' to make that shift, they were vastly outnumbered by the cowardly, the selfish, the small minded, the indifferent and ultimately the lazy that were completely content with denying the long road to destruction that was right before their eyes. Well that is enough of that and I feel better having gotten it out of my system. On a brighter note Eva and Evy visited me yesterday and brought me a portable HAM/VHF radio which I now keep on (or near) my person at all times because they each have their own radio as well as giving one each to the Brunzes. After a few tests around our adjacent homesteads we concluded that the portable units were indeed handy in some areas but what we should do for maximum coverage is setup a few base stations. I suggested that last bit to Eva but she just shook her head, spat on the ground and looking me square in the eyes said 'Nope. We will get the cellphones working soon' there was a challenge in the way she said it and I just nodded and said with all seriousness 'Of course you will'. I think at first she thought I was teasing her because she gave me a hard searching look before sighing deeply and saying 'Thanks. I wish I had the same confidence but we will figure it out and hopefully soon'. I didn't ask about the train but they did show up in a little four wheel drive diesel (freshly painted purple) truck that I was at first nervous about (upon seeing it cresting the ridge) but after seeing the two of them grinning and bouncing along in the cab through my binoculars I let out a laugh and thought a thought that has occurred repeatedly the more time I've spent around them...'Those Girls!' Apparently according to Evy they had started work on making a diesel type fuel almost immediately upon their arrival at the Train Depot and although they weren't into what she termed 'mass production' quite yet, they were getting closer to refining the process and could perhaps soon be making a few hundred gallons a month of the stuff. I have to admit their resourcefulness is astounding and is only surpassed by their intelligence and ingenuity. Well their personalities surpass all that but I fear that would take a lot more words than I really have to give them any sort of justice with a detailed explanation. Let's just say they are delightful company and the Brunzes wholeheartedly share the same opinion. I've been proud how none of us 'adults' have tried to be 'parents' to Eva and Evy and instead have treated them with the equality and independence they deserve. Besides all that, those two had 'grown up' long before any of us met them. One thing that I have noticed is how peculiar animals act around them. Not just my dogs, or the mule, or Shadow (that's what Clair named that chow mix), or pretty much every creature I've seen around them including insects and birds. I don't really know how to put it other than there seems to be an 'awareness' that the animals, birds, hell even people have of them and them of the living 'things' around them. It is incredibly surreal to see it first hand and the 'surrealness' is driven home by no one remarking upon it or calling attention to it as it's going on or even afterwards. Like I said I don't know how to put it in such a way that it makes sense but it is absolutely fucking magical and I'll leave it at that. Well I've really rambled on here and I promised the Brunzes today that I'd bring my dogs over (to help train their dog) and help them start capturing one of the few small springs up above their homestead in the woods. It'll be a great day with lots of hiking and plenty of playing in the cold spring water and mucky mud but at the end of it they will have a really nice drinking water supply that they don't have to lug over a few jugs at a time from my homestead to theirs. So I'm going to get to it now that I've scratched my itch to write and I'm going to do it with a smile upon my face and hope for the future blossoming inside me.

Day 1646. A lot has happened the last few days and I'm still sort of 'rocking on my

heels' from it all and although things could be worse I've decided to seek solace in wording some of it out. So 'keep your knickers on' this might take a bit. A few days back Eva (accompanied by Evy) came knocking on my door just before the sun was about to crest the mountains in the early morning. The dogs didn't even bark and I was initially so startled awake that I jumped out of bed and accidentally kicked over my piss jug whose lid caught the floor just right and spun off. Thankfully it was only one night's worth but still it made quite the mess that I began to attempt to immediately tend to but the knocking at the door seemed like maybe the more pressing matter to attend to so after righting the jug and retrieving the lid from the puddle of piss and screwing it on tight as I shuddered at getting piss all over my hand, I made my way to the door already figuring who I would see because there are only two people the dogs don't bark at and it ain't the Brunzes..Anyway Eva took one look at me and pointed at the rain barrel outside. The one she had once seen me plunge my head into first thing in the morning to 'wake' myself up. So with my hair sticking up wildly, sleep coating my eyes and piss on my hand I walked the few paces to the barrel barefoot, across the wet grass and gave myself a thorough dunking. I didn't just dunk my head though, I crawled all the way into the barrel and gave myself a good quick rinse. Whatever the day had in store for me I wanted to be fresh for it and also I'd gotten pretty heavily into the moonshine the day/night before and not only the odor but the affects were still lingering. The water was cold and sobering and I'll leave it at that. Afterwards Eva told me (as I dried off with an oversized orange towel) that we all needed to go and look to the northwest of here for Gram and we needed to take all the dogs, people and even the mule with us when we did it and we needed to do it 'now'. Let me say here that when either of the twins have something to say I am all ears, listen attentively and absolutely trust everything they say. So given all that I simply nodded, looked the pair of them up and down in the weak morning light and said 'I'll start the coffee and call the Brunzes on the radio' to which they both visibly relaxed before Evy launched into an explanation of her plan to get an old horse trailer from down the road with the truck and was off to do just that without a word of goodbye. Eva wound up making the coffee as I hailed the Brunzes on the radio and started gathering supplies for the trip and setting them near the front door. On the third time I got a sleepy Clair who assured me they could meet us for coffee (and the trip) before the sun finished rising. As Eva poured herself and me some coffee she explained we would need to bring with us plenty of ropes, chains, tow straps and any tack I might have for the mule. Not to get too lost in all the details here suffice it to say Evy came back shortly with the trailer, the Brunzes arrived in remarkable time, and every one was loaded up in short order along with an entire truck bed of gear. Before being loaded Curly was making excited noises and nudging Rusty to get the trailer doors open faster and when he did get them open Curly almost knocked him over in the mule's excitement to climb inside where it began prancing around and shaking it's head as if to say 'Let's Go!' Not long after we did 'go' and although we drove for much of the day over winding back roads we also got out onto the old 'interstate' a few times where even though Evy could have driven fast she thankfully didn't and just kept the same brisk but steady pace she'd used upon going to get the trailer just before dawn. In other words it was a rather relaxing and enjoyable ride as we ambled along, looking at the crumbling buildings, the trees growing from roads and roofs alike, the abandoned vehicles (some crashed, some burned, some looking brand new) and the litter that blanketed the countryside like weirdly colored and oddly shaped snow. It was a pleasant ride and even over the chug of the diesel engine me and the Brunzes with the dogs in the bed of the truck could easily carry on a conversation with the girls in the front through the small window in the rear of the cab. Mostly we talked about the things we saw along the way that might come in handy around our respective homesteads and how to haul it all back (at a later point) up into the mountains. It was just an above ground swimming pool here, a rain barrel there, some fencing over there and so on and although nothing all that significant in and of itself, the total of it would be quite a load of stuff to haul. Every time we saw something Rusty would open a battered map and make a small notation of it's approximate location, what it

was and a guess as to the size of the object. All of which would assuredly come in handy later and since we were in no hurry, the process of doing it didn't really slow us down. We refueled around noon under the shade of what was once a convenience store's fueling station roof. All the pumps had been ripped from their moorings and the stench of old fuel was strong but it gave us a good place to stretch our collective legs and let the dogs go to the bathroom. We also enjoyed a short lunch together comprised of fried waxworms and rice (it was actually the Brunzes dinner leftovers from the night before) and it sure was delicious. Afterwards, for the first time that day I began to feel a little tired and took a nap shortly after getting back on the road with Eva now doing the driving. I remember thinking that she was just as good a driver as Evy and I should tell them both so...then I let my head drop onto my chest and was fast asleep. I had some bizarre dream that Gram was some android or robot from a story I'd heard as a child and she kept saying 'Ask me no questions and I will tell you no lies' as she stood in my tiny cabin's kitchen kneading bread and smiling knowingly at me and occasionally giving me a glassy eyed wink that reminded me of one of those old mechanical fortune tellers that were once commonly found in every two bit theme park from coast to coast. I didn't wake up until the truck had stopped very late in the day at what took me a few minutes to figure out was an old hydro electric power plant sitting on a river with a massive dam stretching from it's various buildings to the far off opposite side of the river. I had no idea where we were geographically but almost a third of the way down the dam the front half of what I rightly guessed was the 'bus' the twins had built. I was still barely awake as it all registered and the girls and the Brunzes were already making their way onto the dam and heading towards the bus as I untangled myself from my sleeping dogs and climbed out of the truck to start unloading the gear. They all returned after just a few minutes and although there was no sign of Gram, the twins concurred that the bus itself looked salvageable and we set to work on a plan to at least get it up and onto the shore where it could be given a closer inspection. It took several hours and with the fading light of the day we finally got that beast of a machine pulled all the way into what was once presumably the employee parking lot of the power plant where for all I know it is still sitting but I don't want to get ahead of myself here. We made camp there that night near the river and the Brunzes and I marveled at the 'bus' the girls had built and how useful a machine like that could be and what we could do with it around our homesteads. All of which delighted them and by the time I dozed off by the fire they were both beaming with pride and talking about improvements they could make to the original design and so forth. They were particularly discussing the pros and cons of being able to lift the treads (like airplane landing gear) and lowering tires to drive on the road, or maybe it was lift the tires, I dunno. I was wiped out and fell fast asleep. We were all awoken in the middle of the night by what sounded like a massive barrage of old world cannon fire and it took us all a second to realize that the 'booms' we were hearing were actually happening in the sky and with every 'boom' another fiery object lit up the sky and began visibly hurtling towards the ground. There were thousands of objects raining down in all directions and it was Rusty that snapped us all out of it by yelling 'This Way!' over his shoulder as he ran towards what I first thought was the river but turned out to be the dam. There was an access door to enter the interior of the dam that he later told us he had at first noticed because he thought maybe he and Clair could 'slip away' to it later if they got 'the hankering to'. Eva asked him 'The hankering to what?' but thankfully Rusty merely shrugged and Clair changed the subject by asking the more pressing question of 'What the hell is going on out there?' to which we could only surmise that for some unknown reason an incredible amount of space junk was losing orbit almost simultaneously and returning back into the atmosphere and subsequently raining from the sky. The interior of the dam itself seemed rather safe with all it's steel reinforced concrete and it was more than enough room for all of us including the dogs and the mule but we all hunkered close together in a knot about thirty steps in from the wooden access door. The 'barrage' didn't last long and eventually as the ground stopped trembling from what I presume to be impacts from the falling

objects, we slowly ventured out into a bizarre scene of massive fires burning all around, smoke making it hard to breath or see and the sun just beginning to rise off to the east. Animals were running everywhere presumably

from the fires but probably many of them just as spooked by the sonic booms made by the space junk. It was a chaotic scene as we got the mule and all the dogs shoved into the fully enclosed horse trailer and the four of us crammed together into the cab. We all barely fit but with Clair in Rusty's lap and Eva sitting in Evy's lap and me driving we all fit...barely. The girls actually insisted that I drive and no one balked over me (for lack of better words) hauling ass towards home before we could be cut off from it by the rapidly uspreading fires. The drive towards home is a haze of alternate routes, doubling back, dodging burning falling trees, and my nerves being strung tighter than they had been for years but eventually we made it and let me tell you it was a heartbreaking mess to come home to. Of all the places on Earth for an entire space station to come crashing down why the hell did it have to crash into not just mine but (we later discovered) also the Brunzes place. There are dozens of craters there now and the debris are absolutely everywhere including where my cabin and shed once stood. I'm not sure of what we are going to do yet but for now we have all taken up residence at the Train Depot (which somehow came out of it all remarkably unscathed) and are healing up from entirely too much smoke inhalation and the shock of our homesteads being (by and large) destroyed. Tonight we all sat around the fire pit in the middle of the Train Depot and although the mood was morose and even somber we still found things to laugh about and we all agreed that at least no lives were lost and at the end of the day we had each other. At one point tonight I broke down in tears and when Evy asked me what was wrong I mumbled 'my waxworms' and began sobbing. Once the sobs passed I realized she was holding out her hand to me to help me stand and after taking her hand and rising she led me to the open door of one of the box cars and flipping on her flashlight and aiming it inside she illuminated the interior and revealed dozens of boxes of waxworm colonies. I hugged her so deeply she squeaked and letting her go I laughed the deepest most heartfelt laugh to squeeze out of my nicotine coated lungs in years and just kept thinking 'Everything is going to be alright' and I actually think it will be.

Day 1647. We were awoken last night late into the evening by a strange animal noise outside the 'wagon circle' of the Train Depot. I call it strange but we all knew it for what it was...the hyena. It took us all a moment to get woken up fully and climb the stairs the twins had built up onto the top of the box cars where we walked around from box car to box car shining our flashlights into the smokey gloom looking for the hyena. Clair spotted it and once we all aimed our lights in the direction her's was aimed, we collectively let out an 'awww' sound at the sight of not just one hyena but two and the slightly larger one had two pups hanging by the scruff of their necks from it's mouth. After much debate we decided to put some food and water inside one of the various unused box cars laying just shortly uphill of the Train Depot. We had setup one earlier in a similar fashion for the mule to stay in temporarily and we still had the hay, the tools and water buckets in the back of the truck. Eva and Evy volunteered to do it and although no one remarked upon it we all considered them the most fit because of their 'oddness' with animals. I'm a pretty ballsy person at times but making the wrong move near a pair of two hundred pound hyenas with pups...having most likely been driven from their den by fire...naw I figured I'd pass on that and make some coffee for when they returned. The girls did fast work and were back sitting by the fire by the time the coffee was just getting finished brewing. We all sat around with our mismatched mugs in our hands not wanting to talk about the other thing we saw while up on the box cars looking for the hyena. Everywhere fires were burning and the only mountaintop or ridge line that wasn't lit up by one roaring inferno or another was up above us where the fire tower stands. After some discussion we decided that in a few hours when the sun comes up we will be heading up that way in the truck pulling the trailer and carrying with us as many supplies as possible. We all agreed that the Train Depot would probably be fine considering the lack of woods around it's

location but the smoke may well do us all in if we don't get out of it. As I was sitting here typing this all out there began a banging on the other side of the box car that had the 'main entry' stairs at them. The dogs let out quite a ruckus at the first bang and I eventually calmed them enough to be able to hear a human voice between the individual bangs. Distinguishing that human voice I sprung into action and was up and over the stairs and box car roof and down the outside stairs before I realized what had so moved me. The voice (although I couldn't distinguish words) sounded as if it were not only in pain but beginning to grow weaker. I came off the bottom step to see a man leaning (sagging) against the box car. He raised his right arm as if to pound again then lowering it as he saw me. He laughed and mumbled something perhaps in Russian before falling forward into my arms and losing consciousness. He was a big fellow and his weight off balanced me and we both took a tumble with him ultimately landing atop me. Seconds later Rusty and Clair were gently hauling him off of me as I heard Eva say 'Get the stretcher!' to which Eva disappeared back up the stairs and in short order returned with what I now know to be a military field stretcher. Working together we got him on the stretcher but dang was he heavy, especially since he appeared to be wearing (of all things) a space suit. Once we got him by the fire we got a good look at him and he definitely had some pronounced Slavic features, but there was no way of really telling just where he was from. None of us recognized any of the multitude of insignia adorning the white material of his suit and the suit itself looked a lot more 'fancy' than anything I'd ever seen or read about before the 'world ended' and it definitely caught the girls' attention because they kept whispering to each other as they pointed at various parts of the suit. He awoke only once and that was when we tried to remove the suit because he seemed to be burning up with fever and we were seeking to alleviate it if possible. He nearly went into an all out fit mumbling and swatting our hands away and didn't settle down until we all backed away and left him alone. Upon doing which he smiled deeply before falling fast asleep and snoring so loudly that it startled one of my dogs into barking at him which oddly made the sleeping fellow snore even louder. We kept vigil over him the remainder of the night and quietly talked among ourselves which continually lead to us speculating upon who he was and where he was from but never really finding any 'answers' that seemed satisfactory. He awoke just as dawn was beginning to tease the eastern sky with it's presence. He sat up and looked at us, then at the fire then at the dogs laying nearby, then he lifted his hands to his face and just sat there staring at them as he moved them one way then another as if he had never seen them before or was perhaps seeing them for the first time. Dropping his hands to his lap he began to laugh, then cough, then laugh and we just sat there watching as he abruptly stood (startling the dogs) turned on his heel and headed for the stairs leading out of the 'wagon circle'. I began to say something but Eva grabbed one of my arms just as Eva grabbed the other one and they both 'shushed' me before my mouth could open. I thought it odd but as I've said before I trust them so I kept quiet and they released my arms and busied themselves with brewing a fresh pot of coffee. Well I figured that fellow seemed to be walking just fine and after a deep sleep like that he was bound to have to empty his bladder so I just called the dogs to me and let him do whatever he was doing. Later I thought about how he could probably just piss in the space suit and it would probably recycle the water somehow but at that moment I was suddenly struck by the most peculiar feeling that I somehow knew him...It was something in the manner in which he walked...something undefinable but it nagged at me none the less and to some degree it still does. Long story short we never saw him again after he topped the stairs with the first rays of the morning sun shining like a nimbus around him, before he descended the outside stairs and was simply gone. When he didn't return immediately we looked and there wasn't even a single track showing that he'd ever even been there. Rusty made a joke that he must have been a mass hallucination on our part and joking or not that fellow in the fancy space suit may as well have been just that...a hallucination. Anyway I've rambled on here as I bounce around in the back of the truck as we traverse one old logging road after another on our way to the fire tower. All I can say is that this old world is by no means done, over, or at an

'end' because as bizarre and peculiar as my life has become it damn sure isn't filled with loneliness, boredom or strife and if it is anything then it is downright exhilaratingly marvelous and I sincerely believe that the real adventure is just beginning.

Day 1660. It has now been nearly two weeks since we made the initial trek up here to the fire tower and although many of the fires have begun to die out there are still twice as many that are burning fiercely. I'm sure that all the high winds we have been having are not helping with diminishing the fires but at least they have helped disperse some of the smoke that keeps settling into the valleys below us. The supplies that we initially brought with us (and the supplies I previously stored here) are beginning to dwindle and fortunately there is a hand pump well to draw water from or else we would be in serious trouble because the way we took to get here has been burning for the last seven days. There is however a second (longer) route that we could attempt to traverse on foot but if that side of the mountain also catches fire while we are hiking down it, we may well get cut off from being able to retreat back here to the safety of the fire tower. The dogs have been making short work of catching the game that is fleeing the fires and pretty much been living solely off what they catch which is mostly small game but about ten days ago they also caught a medium sized deer. Turns out that one of Clair's hidden talents is skinning and butchering animals. After watching her take the deer carcass from the dogs, string it up by it's hind legs from the south facing struts of the fire tower, give it a few passes with a Geiger counter that Rusty handed her, produce a pair of knives from somewhere on her person, and set to work on that deer with those knives...well lets just say I'll never quite look at her quite the same again. Unfortunately between the four of us and the dogs the deer meat didn't last all that long but it sure was delicious while it did and it helped us to stretch our other supplies just a little bit further. Something is going to have to be done soon though because we only have a few days of food left and although we could all probably make it several days without eating none of us really want to endure that sort of hunger if it is at all possible to avoid it. Getting wild game is always dicey especially since there are so many wild dog packs and a slew of exotic predators that could easily make us into the prey. As far as hunting in general goes since the 'end of the world' it is far more likely for the hunter to become the hunted than actually successfully getting game and getting it back 'home' for butchering and storage. I didn't need the journal of Longhand John to know that humans were no longer at the top of the food chain. I'd seen enough of the signs to know things had radically changed once the big cats started breeding, the dog packs swelled in size, and it wasn't all that uncommon to hear large coyote and wolf packs howling at each other over long distances. There were plenty of reasons why I had been living off waxworms, wild mushrooms and food from the derailed train...it was safest. I've rambled on here but suffice it to say we need to get some food supplies soon and somehow do it with minimal risk and maximum reward. Anyway the girls have been tinkering away almost exclusively on figuring out how to 'make the cellular network operational' (their words) and that given another week or so they would be ready to give it a test run. Each night around the fire we sit and talk for hours sipping coffee, laughing and really getting to know each other better. If there is one good thing out of all the recent upheaval it is that we are all much 'closer' now and our bond grows a little stronger every day. It isn't like we all felt like strangers before (even though we were) it is that now we are actually a group (or unit) that works together every day to not just 'survive' or 'exist' but achieve a decent quality of living, being happy, pursuing our passions and sharing our skills. Maybe I'm putting too many words to it all to do it any real justice but damn life isn't all that bad even given our current circumstances and that is mainly because we all have a sense of humor and none of us are assholes. So go figure.

Day 1662. I don't know why all the really whacky stuff keeps happening in the middle of the night and always while we are asleep but it nonetheless just keeps

happening that way. We were all sleeping around the fire (even the Brunzes who usually opted for climbing to the top of the fire tower each night) when the dogs went absolutely crazy with alternately barking then growling out at the gloom of the woods on the side of the mountain that isn't burning. We all leaped into action adding wood to the low burning fire that we had all just been pleasantly sleeping around after a long night of conversation about what exactly we were to do about our dwindling supply situation. The flames from the fire dispelled some of the gloom just in time for us to see that many 'somethings' were running directly at us and if the dogs had not been making all the noise they were making we would have also heard the approaching sound of many hooves almost rhythmically beating the ground. Let's just say there was a lot more of them than of us and without discussing it we herded up the dogs and high tailed it to the relative safety of the fire tower where we huddled between the lower struts as a massive horde of stampeding cattle, large birds (Emus?) and what I (or anyone else) can only surmise to be either antelope or gazelles stormed through our encampment, some running straight through our fire spreading burning embers all over our sleeping blankets, and were gone over the ridge nearly as quickly as they had arrived. Something felt incredibly 'off' about it all to me and then I realized that all those animals had just ran into a burning forest and the only reason they would do that was if something was chasing them...and with that realization all the hair on the back of my neck stood on end and stayed on end as I turned to the others saying: 'Take the dogs and get to the top of the tower. I'm going to back the trailer up to the entrance and block it.' I was also trying to protect Curly (who we 'stabled' during the night in the trailer) but I felt that time was already slipping away and that I needed to get moving towards the truck as fast as possible so I didn't bother explaining my reasons. One thing about our little group was that no one was ever 'in charge' except for when we faced a crisis and then leadership inadvertently somehow fell to me and as the crisis faded so did the leadership. Which is fine by me. Anyway I got the trailer backed up to the base of the fire tower and was climbing towards the top of the tower when I caught the whiff of a smell I knew all too well and that somehow (even with the wreaking stench of stuff burning all around) my nose could pick it out...big cat...and from the strength of the stench there was a lot of them. The wind shifted and I lost the scent but it had been there and I began climbing as fast as I possibly could. We were all sweating and panting in the top room of the tower with the hatch shut and the windows open to let in the breeze when we heard a loud roaring from below, an angry sounding braying from Curly and then from all around the tower similar roars to the initial one but none quite as loud as it. From those sounds I guessed at the time that there were maybe sixty big cats out there or maybe a few more than that but absolutely no more than eighty of the buggers. I was more than a little surprised when the sun came up and I (with help from the others) counted approximately one hundred and thirty six of them lurking around the base of the tower and it's expanse of grassy 'yard' that covers nearly the entire peak of the mountain. Dozens of them had already unsuccessfully tried to get to Curly in the trailer and I quietly congratulate myself on my own quick thinking every time they lose interest and wander off with Curly braying at them as they do. There isn't much (ok actually anything) that we can do other than hope that they eventually lose interest in us and go away but honestly it doesn't look that way at all as I watch them prowling around below, sunning themselves and doing all the things big cats do when taking their leisure.

Day 1665. The big cats finally left yesterday at around noon. Which was a relief to all of us watching them from the top of the tower but we still spent the rest of the day and night there just to be sure they were really gone and not just off hunting. Curly wasn't in the best of shape after having gone a few days without food but at least his water trough still had a little water in it by the time I pulled the trailer away from the fire tower, swung the gate open and let him out to graze. He actually bit me on the leg in passing as if to show his displeasure at being cooped up with big cats occasionally 'rattling his cage' in hopes of making

him a meal. It wasn't a bad bite but it left quite a bruise and it seems like no matter what I do I keep bumping the damn thing and setting it to throbbing which is proving to be rather irritating and has me feeling on edge more than I was already. The girls and the Brunzes packed everything into the truck as I stood watch from about halfway up the fire tower. We decided to take no chances that the big cats might return and us not see them in time to flee so I was nominated to keep an eye out, which thankfully proved unnecessary. The big cats had gone back in the direction they had initially came from (the same way as that 'long route' we had been contemplating hiking) so I mainly watched that direction but also scanned the other directions as well just to be on the safe side. The stampeding animals had actually ran down the hill through the burning forest and apparently followed the same logging roads we had driven on just weeks ago to escape the smoke. It rained pretty hard this morning (albeit briefly) and between the rain and the trail left by the stampeding animals our initial explorations of the uppermost logging road showed that at least upon the road itself the fire was out. Which didn't exactly mean it would be the case on all the roads or that it wouldn't be dangerous because of burning (or burnt) trees falling or any number of other hazards but we really didn't have any other choice because our food was gone, our blankets and most of our cookware was destroyed, and the very idea of the big cats returning and catching us off guard sent chills down my spine. So we all loaded up and began the long crawl down the mountain well before noon and hopefully we won't be stuck in the woods at night and can get to where we are going before dark. For now we are taking a break on a little knoll after spending the better part of an hour clearing a jumble of burning tree branches out of the road. We had just came out of a series of switch backs and gotten onto this road when the entire top of a looming tree broke lose and crashed to the road in front of us showering the truck and trailer with sparks. Thankfully none of us were injured but it sure scared the heck out of us and set the dogs to barking wildly until I shushed them. It's been a nice break after such dirty work and as my four companions rinse off (in a rather sooty pathetic excuse of a stream) I'm sitting here with the dogs, having a smoke and wondering what we will find below once we are off this mountain. I keep wondering not just what we will (or won't) find once we get there but what we will do afterwards. The Train Depot is nice and relatively secure but it is in rugged hilly country that is rather unsuitable for homesteading. Also lacking a nearby water source all the water has to be hauled to it from somewhere else. The thought also keeps crossing my mind that perhaps we should head towards the Academy and see if it made it through the barrage of space junk and subsequent fires but we are already in rough shape and the idea of us making such a long journey across the burning landscape seems ludicrous. At this point I don't know what we are going to do but I'm sure we are going to figure something out one way or another. Well it looks like our short siesta is almost over and we are going to be heading off again down the mountain towards our uncertain future so I'm going to wrap this up by saying I couldn't ask for better companions than the ones I have...dogs, mule, hyenas and humans alike.

Day 1667. It was well past dark when we arrived at the Train Depot and although we all agreed that pushing forward the last several miles (after the sun had set) was probably foolish, the idea of sleeping in the burnt and burning forest was perhaps even more foolish. So we pressed onward and fortunately made the last leg of our journey off the mountain without incident. We were all extremely relieved to find the Train Depot intact and after securing Curly in his box car stable and getting our minimal gear unloaded we set about making preparations for a very large meal. Which meant building a fire, hauling out jugs of water and gathering the necessary supplies from our substantial larder. We snacked along the way on protein bars and animal crackers but we had spent long hours (during our drive down the mountain) talking about what we would cook upon our arrival and all of us savored the feast we envisioned. So we preserved our respective appetites and relished the meal to come. Which by the way was an exquisite meal of waxworms fried with canned ham made into a casserole of canned yams, canned spinach and some cheese flavored potato

chips that after crushing to powder and stirring in a little water made for quite the 'cheese spread' over the top of the casserole. We actually cooked three such casseroles that night and by breakfast the next morning there was not a single crumb of them left. After the second casserole was cooked Evy produced a small notepad and wrote out the recipe in what I can only say is probably the most precise and elegant handwriting I'd ever seen and after wading through the meandering scribble of Longhand John I have a newly found appreciation for clear and concise handwriting. Anyway Evy showed me (and everyone else actually) her notepad of recipes. Surprisingly none of us had noticed her making notes for all these weeks on everything we cooked or prepared from coffee making, to mullein tea, to fried waxworms, she had been recording it all and done a remarkable job of it indeed! Anyway we mostly slept yesterday away and today hasn't been much more productive but we are still recovering from stretching too few rations entirely too far between too many people and it's going to take some time to build our strength back up. For now I'm content to tend the fire, sit around smoking with my dogs sprawled out around me, as we all discuss in great detail our options from here forward and the merits and follies of those options. I guess it is good that we are an indecisive bunch because it keeps us cautious about what path ahead is not just 'the safest' but what path ahead is 'the best'. We discussed going back to the old hydro electric plant and either just retrieving the bus from there or just 'setting up shop' there and start the rebuilding of our homesteads. There was a lot of appeal to relocating there but we all agreed that we would be smack in the middle of a flood zone and rather far out of the relative solitude and 'safety' of the mountains. We spent long hours scouring over the Brunzes maps in an effort to find a suitable place to potentially relocate but ultimately the best places were where our respective homesteads now lay decimated amongst the wreckage and craters left by what was once a space station. We also discussed reclaiming the old homesteads but the idea of doing so was both heart wrenching and downright daunting considering the amount of not just 'cleaning up' required but also the rebuilding which would literally take years considering the level of destruction. So we keep talking and trying to figure things out as we idle the time away but as of yet everything is 'up in the air' as to what we are going to do. All things considered the last few weeks have pushed us all beyond our breaking points and although we have weathered the storm of recent events rather heroically we all absolutely need to just take a break, rest, recover and hope against hope that nothing else happens in the immediate future before we can all regain our collective 'balance'.

Day 1669. Yesterday turned out to be rather eventful but I don't want to get too lost in describing it so I will try to keep it short. It finally started to rain heavily the night before last and it didn't let up until this morning. The rain was definitely good because of all the fires but it also meant that we had to stay cooped up in one of the box cars together. I'm not sure if I've mentioned how the rain is these days (years) but suffice it to say that subjecting the human body (or even animals) to it is not just a bad idea but also one that would probably be lethal in the long run. The rain can 'pit' and malform even the most high quality of stainless steel and I know this because I've tested almost every metal I can with it and the prognosis is always bad. So we passed the time pouring over the Brunzes maps (and some old road maps) looking for as we jokingly call it 'the promised land' which always inadvertently lead us back to the same two valleys below us where our original homesteads were. All of which brought about an almost identical conversation of rebuilding versus traveling into the unknown to seek our 'promise land'. By now I think we have discussed it enough times to say that we have thoroughly exhausted our options especially if we want to stay relatively near the Train Depot where at this point all our food supply is stored along with the remaining gear we have. So round and round our conversations go like the proverbial snake destined to eat its own tale. Part of me thinks that we all enjoy over thinking things and that our conversations reflect that but hey nonetheless it is definitely a good way to pass the time. Anyway right after the rain stopped we heard a racket coming up the from what we first thought was the road to the old

homesteads but what actually turned out to be from the train tracks downhill of us. Eva and Evy got incredibly excited and between fits of laughter they informed us that what we were hearing was (to them) the unmistakable sound of their bus and still laughing they ran hand in hand off towards the stairs where they clambered up and over the box car and to the 'outside'. The Brunzes and I followed and we stood atop the box car as the bus crawled it's way towards us across the gravel which has adorned every set of railroad tracks from time immemorial. Honestly there was nothing all that pretty about the battleship grey 'hunk of metal' rolling towards us but damn was it an impressive piece of machinery to see in action. We didn't have to wait long before it came to a stop near the little purple truck which looked oddly toy-like beside the hulking behemoth of the bus. As the girls ran excitedly towards it the door hissed open and out stepped who (at the time) I correctly surmised to be Gram. As the Brunzes and I descended the ladder and joined the girls I got my first good look at her and I'll tell ya my first impression was that she is one tough lady. Her right arm was missing from the elbow down and she was also missing her leg from the knee down on her right leg and when I got close enough to introduce myself I also noticed that her right eye was made of glass. She has an actual wooden peg leg that I learned later she had fashioned herself after losing her prosthetic leg to a burning building as she put it 'in the early days of the world going to shit'. Her arm on the other hand had an actual prosthetic and for a hand she had a well worn and well oiled 'claw and hook'. Her good eye was a bright piercing green and it held more than a glint of a sort of 'hardened kindness'. All in all at roughly five feet tall with a mass of curly white hair that made her appear taller than she actually was..she was for lack of a better way to put it an imposing and intense figure. After introductions were made we lead her with us back into the 'wagon circle' and tried to answer her questions to the best of our abilities. She was interested in the train and whether it ran or not, and whether the girls had been eating and bathing enough and eyeing me and Rusty (what I thought was suspiciously) with her good eye as she asked if they were 'doing okay'. The girls for their part answered her questions diligently and surprisingly they both caught and balked over her 'suspicion' of us and stopping dead in their tracks, turned to fully face her. Eva crossed her arms over her chest and fixed Gram with a cold eyed stare as Evy said in a no nonsense voice as hard and flat as the look on her sister's face 'Just stop right there Gram. These are some damn good men and whether you want to believe it or not good men do exist so you just shut your fucking fly trap about it right now or me and Eva are either going to beat some sense into you or feed your tired old ass to the hyenas.' The Brunzes and I unconsciously took a step back from the fierceness in her voice and the cold look on both the twins faces. Gram just smiled and said 'Of course they are dears.' Which only caused Evy to also cross her arms and both of them to begin tapping their left foot on the hard packed ground and began staring even more sternly at Gram who for her part laughed and threw up her hands in surrender before muttering 'Maybe the world has changed'. The girls just stood there eyeing her for several (increasingly uncomfortable) moments before saying in unison 'It has.' Clair broke the ensuing awkward silence by saying that the coffee was almost done brewing and that although we had just all eaten we should make an afternoon meal. To which we all agreed and after a little coffee we set about doing just that as we listened to Gram recount (mainly to the girls) how she had been washed off the bridge in the flood and wasn't able to escape the bus until it ground to a halt up against the dam where we had found it. She also talked about the space junk falling to Earth and the devastation caused by the ensuing fires. I'm not sure how the subject of the Academy and RTW came up but it did and Gram didn't want to talk about much of anything else after learning about it. She wanted to know it's location and how long it would take to travel there and how many other people were there and so forth. The Brunzes (being the only ones among us that had ever been to the Academy) spent much of the afternoon explaining everything they knew about it to her in great detail. A few hours before dark Gram abruptly stood from the log she had been sitting on by the fire and announced that she would be departing shortly and was going to start the long journey towards the Academy and that the girls should go

with her. Honestly I have to say I was happy she wouldn't be staying (for whatever reason I just didn't like her) but the idea of the girls going with her saddened me. Well in hindsight I didn't have anything to be sad about because the girls didn't want to go with her...even if they did eventually want to visit the Academy they apparently didn't want to go just yet. To which Gram wasn't all that pleased but she at least had the good sense to not try changing their minds. She wanted to take the bus and after some discussion with the girls they agreed to let her. It was their bus after all and as handy as it would be to us...I personally think they just wanted to see Gram going on her way with minimal fuss so they reluctantly agreed she could take it. After saying goodbye to us and hugging the girls she departed and we all sighed and laughed as the bus rumbled away uphill following the train tracks towards the coast and the Academy. All I can think is that she was an interesting lady and that one day I would like to hear her story but I also know in my heart that she will never be someone that I would feel 'close' to and with her suspicions and albeit her obvious 'male prejudices' she would probably be nothing but a disruptive force to our pleasant little group.

Day 1670. The girls were both moody and agitated after Gram's departure yesterday. At first they said they didn't want to talk about it but as the night wore on they eventually relaxed a bit (which could have been the result of the pitcher of chamomile tea Clair made for them) and they eventually 'spilled the beans' of what had gotten under their skin. Come to find out they didn't appreciate being treated like children (I clearly recall being that age and could completely understand that sentiment not to mention entire generations of others that had felt the same way) but that wasn't all because apparently what really bothered them was being treated like 'her' children. They wouldn't say her name but they didn't need to for us to understand who the 'her' was. Eva went even further to explain that for all the months they had traveled with 'her' that they (herself and Evy) had listened to (been subjected to) long hours of being told about (what she called) 'the evils of all men' and that by the time they had met myself and the Brunzes they were absolutely terrified of encountering any men. She actually hung her head in shame when she told us that she was too afraid to awaken me herself that first night we had met and that is why the hyena had awoken me instead. Rusty, Clair and I told them how we had felt when we were their age and that remembering how we felt was a huge part in us not trying to 'parent' them. We also told them (each in our own way) that they (the twins) were literally the future of the human race and furthermore if there was any chance to not repeat the past it perhaps lay in not continuing the 'social norms' of sexism, racism, classism and ageism along with all the other ugly 'isms' that had lead the world to it's current state. I'm summing it up here the best I can but the dialogue of our conversation was probably the most 'philosophical' one we had ever engaged in together and it was entirely too long and drawn out to attempt reproducing it here so suffice it to say that we finally found ourselves in a truly 'deep' conversation that didn't involve the necessity to remain pragmatic and absolutely focused on our immediate (and/or long-term) survival and that being the case (almost as a side affect) we all relaxed and the girls' moodiness slipped away as the night wore on. All the 'philosophical' talk got me to thinking about 'Earl' (the Librarian) and whether he and the library were okay and when I mentioned him to the others I could tell that everyone was feeling a little guilty about forgetting him. We decided to go check up on him (and the library) as soon as the fires died out a little more and that we should also take him some food just in case he needed some. I haven't mentioned it to anyone else but there is a book store in that town that I want to have a look around in and see if I can find some good books to help 'further the education' of the girls. I damn sure won't ever 'parent' them but I don't see anything wrong with doing a little tutoring. Hell with their incredibly brilliant intelligence they would probably wind up tutoring me! Anyway all that stuff aside we still haven't come up with a plan for what we are going to do but it is looking more and more like we are going to make a trip down to the old homesteads now that some of the smoke has begun to clear up. Mainly we want to see if anything is salvageable from the wreckage of the

space station (and the homesteads) but we also want to see just how bad the contamination is from not just the space debris but also from my decimated solar array and battery bank. We are going to drive the bulldozer down and at least get the contaminants/debris pushed into one pile where we can secure it against being spread all over the place by the wind and rain. None of us are exactly looking forward to it but we all concur that if we are going to (in the long run) attempt to rebuild there then we need to start cleaning up the mess as soon as possible. Well I've rambled on here a bit but before I finish this entry I should add that we are all beginning to regain our strength and are overall starting to feel much better after all the turmoil of our recent ordeals. All things considered we have come out 'on the other side' not that bad at all.

Day 1673. We have been making the trek down the mountain (and back up it) the last few days and doing what cleaning up we can do at the old homesteads. As far as actual salvageable material goes we haven't had much success at finding anything all that useful. We have gotten the contaminants more or less contained to one area downhill where hopefully they won't leach into the local watershed before we can figure out what to do with them. Rusty suggested that maybe we should try to find an old dump truck and a front-end loader and haul it all off to the old landfill and I'm inclined to doing just that even if it takes us making dozens of trips to do so. The biggest problem with that solution wouldn't be in finding the equipment because hell there is plenty of it around gathering rust. The problem would be the fuel and although the girls can make enough for the little truck (which is rather fuel efficient) the notion of making enough fuel for some albeit 'fuel guzzling' equipment is a whole different matter and one that would take some time (perhaps months) to implement. On a different note the craters around the homesteads are gradually filling with water from both the rain and the shallow water table and I gotta admit in time they could really come in handy for raising fish and/or for setting up some hydro electric generators. We will see how it all pans out in that regard because for now pretty much all our focus (and resources) are being consumed by trying to create a 'clean slate' out of all the mess. Anyway I've rambled on here about all that stuff and I should mention here that we have encountered a new threat to our potential wellbeing and survival. I'm guessing that the only reason I never saw (or heard) them before was because they were living somewhere else (before the fires) and just recently they have come to this particular area but the owls are here now and I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm absolutely terrified of them. The first one we saw was two days ago just before dark as we were all climbing in the little truck to head back up the mountain to the Train Depot for the night. It was only maybe ten meters above us and it wasn't just the nine foot wingspan of the solid white creature flying above us that struck terror into mine (and I'm guessing everyone else's) heart, nor the penetrating and all too intelligent eyes staring down at us from it's massive head...It was the limp form of a large lion hanging from it's taloned feet that shot fear into the center of my being like a bolt of lightning. I'm not one to ever truly indulge in feeling panic but I sure as hell felt it upon seeing that creature and every time that I remember those all too intelligent eyes that same sense of panic worms it's way a little deeper inside me. Needless to say we all road in the cab of the truck that night on our way 'home' and since then we have kept both ourselves and the dogs inside the safety of the box car during the night. We've been hearing them hooting nearby at night and occasionally we have heard them circling our camp but so far we have yet to see another one.

Day 1676. The last several days we have all been living with a sense of dread about being attacked by what we have been calling 'the mutant owls'. They are fearsome creatures in and of themselves but what has made it worse is that we have all been having very similar dreams about owls. In the dreams we are in an old barn and there is a 'normal' sized owl trying to protect three of it's young from a man with a stick that is trying to get close enough to them to strike them with the stick so that he can eat them. All of which we know to be his intent in that strange way

that dreams have of conveying meaning/understanding without words. It wasn't until yesterday that we all realized we were having the same dreams and that only came about because after a fitful night of sleep we were brewing coffee and talking quietly around the fire about our plans for the day (which has more or less been our morning routine for weeks now) when Clair said something about not being able to get the owls out of her head and how they had even 'invaded' her dreams. Well that opened the proverbial 'floodgates' and before long we were all sitting there looking dumbfounded at each other as we each in turn recounted having more or less the exact same dream. We spent most of that morning trying to interpret what the dreams meant and furthermore not just why we were having them but why we were All having them. Eva and Evy shed a little light on that last bit by saying that their 'guess' was that the mutant owls were trying to tell us something. None of us asked how they might know (or guess) that but I did ask if they perhaps knew what exactly they were trying to tell us, to which the girls just shook their heads and Evy with a 'far away' look in her oddly colored eyes mumbled something about 'their minds being strong but somehow different' which earned her an elbow to the ribs from her sister that snapped her back to the 'here and now' and looking rather startled she said sheepishly (and albeit lamely) 'Sorry I was just thinking out loud'. Which caused her sister to sigh deeply and shake her head as me and the Brunzes gave each other a puzzled and curious look that said 'Do we really want to press the issue here?' Which we didn't because whatever was going on with the girls and animals was not really our business unless the girls chose to make it our business. Anything else would just feel like prying into something personal that they weren't quite comfortable with sharing yet (if ever) and the last thing any of us wants is to make any member of our group uncomfortable especially considering all the discomforts we are already dealing with just to 'get by' each day. Anyway on a different note we have been considering the possibility of perhaps freeing some of the shipping containers that are anchored to the flat bed cars of the derailed train (there are literally dozens of them strewn along the train tracks) and perhaps hauling them downhill to the old homesteads. Although it would definitely make the rebuilding process faster (and give us immediate shelter there so we won't need to drive back and forth between the Train Depot and the old homesteads each day) it would also mean procuring a large trailer to haul them and doing a lot of 'road work' between the two sites because as it is the old logging road can barely accommodate the bulldozer. The problem was not just the ruts, stumps and all the sharply angled switch backs that would cause a trailer to 'jack knife' but the tree canopy above the roads themselves were really too low to accommodate the height of a shipping container. We even discussed following the tracks down towards town then coming around the 'long way' but that just seems like it would take too long to accomplish in a single day so we would have to either shelter in town or shelter in the shipping container itself overnight and honestly all things considered neither seems like all that great of an option. We are all feeling the press of time slipping away as the days wear on and we need to be getting our respective homes rebuilt but we are coping well enough for now so there isn't really any huge rush other than a mutual desire for each of us to have our own 'space' again.

Day 1677. I've been through a lot in life (especially the last few years) but what happened yesterday just before dark is probably the most bizarre scenario I have ever found myself in. We spent most of the day going from train car to train car inspecting shipping containers and marking the ones worth possibly saving with a bright green swath of spray paint. Evy had found three cans of the stuff behind the seat of the little truck and when she showed them to us and presented her idea to mark the 'good' shipping containers the Brunzes and I ooohed and ahhhed at the sight of the cans. They were just so 'shiny and new' looking and just seemed out of place in the world as it is now. Anyway it was a good idea so we followed through on it and out of all the derailed cars we found nine shipping containers in good shape and another four that we could probably fix the doors on given a little time and the right tools. I'm getting sidetracked here and rather hesitant to actually write out what happened later in the day. Anyway it was getting close to dark and we were just finishing up our evening meal when from uphill of us the hyenas began

making quite the ruckus which the dogs immediately joined in on and well here is where shit got bizarre. A lot happened at once but it more or less happened like this. The hyenas and the dogs abruptly fell silent and all around us above the Train Depot came the whooshing sounds of bird wings..really large bird wings. We all sat there frozen in place with our plates of food in our lap as all around us the giant white shapes of the 'mutant owls' began to settle down onto the roofs of the box cars accompanied by a screeching sound that took my brain a few seconds to realize was their talons gripping the metal edge of the box cars as the owls settled into place, folded down their wings and began silently staring at us with those all too intelligent eyes. I didn't exactly count them but my guess would be there were between thirty or forty of them. None of us moved as they jostled and settled in around us and the silence of the dogs alarmed me enough that I cautioned a quick look in their direction which revealed them all to be apparently fast asleep. It wasn't until that moment of seeing the dogs that panic struck me and I'm not all that ashamed to admit that a trickle of piss ran down my leg just as my plate slipped and clattered to the ground at my feet but I didn't dare move as I looked back at all those eyes staring back at me. Vaguely I heard other plates clatter to the ground as a series of images began flashing through my mind. The images came rapidly at first and shot a bolt of pain bouncing between my temples before slowing to a nearly 'slow motion' crawl which thankfully seemed to lessen the pain. The images themselves were actually the familiar scenes of the dreams we had all been having. The old barn, the normal sized owl trying to protect the three young owls, the man with the stick. Then images that were not in the dream followed. The man falling from his perch on a ladder, the lantern in his right hand falling to the hay below, followed shortly after by the largest owl beating it's wings in the man's face, then the man falling from the ladder. Here the images sped up and became for lack of a better word 'frenzied'. Smoke filling the barn accompanied by the bright light and crackling sound of fire, the screams and curses of the man as he lay 'broken' on a pile of smoldering hay as the largest owl began pushing the smaller owls one by one out of the loft where they didn't so much 'fly' but sort of glided then hitting the ground tumbled out the wide open door of the barn. Then a sort of 'nothing' filled my head and I had the sense of time passing before the images began again. All four owls flying together with the sun at their backs and ahead the unmistakable smoke stacks of some sort of nuclear facility ahead of them. Then all the owls landing upon the lip of one of the smoke stacks and perching there where they began turning their heads first one way and then the other as if inspecting or surveying their surroundings. Then that sense of time passing occurred again and the same smoke stacks reappeared but now with dozens of much larger owls perched upon them. I should note that they weren't as large as the ones we called 'mutant owls' but they were at least half their size. Then the perspective shifted to high above the smoke stacks and below the curve of land along a coast and a vast ocean spreading out beyond the small cove where the facility was located. Then abruptly the images stopped and a feeling arose in me, a feeling that took me a moment to realize was the feeling of 'being asked a question' and after a few more moments clarity struck me and I realized the owls were asking a question and if it were asked in words it would have been 'Where is this place we have shown you?' Well geography has never been my strong point but given enough time I thought maybe I could work out a rough answer to the 'question' being posed. I also knew that the Brunzes could probably work out the answer much faster and as I began turning towards them a vast beating of wings again filled the 'wagon circle' as the owls took flight and departed. All but one that is, which evoked a larger trickle of piss to run down my leg as the remaining owl flew towards us and spraying us with dust, dirt and ash landed across from the fire from us where it stood cocking it's head first one way then the other with it's bowling ball sized eyes boring into one after the other of us in turn. It quit swiveling it's head when it came to Eva and I didn't think it possible but it's eyes seemed to focus even more sharply as it looked at her. She was nodding but she was also shaking and a fine line of drool ran from the corner of her mouth and hung waving in the air growing ever longer as it swayed in the breeze. It's odd the things the

mind notices and remembers. Her whole body spasmed and her back arched so far back that for the first time I noticed she had small breasts whose shape was only visible because of how she was bent backwards. Like I said it's odd what the mind remembers. Then it seemed that all the air went out of her and she sat sagging in her seat with her eyes unfocused and that tendril of drool swaying in the wind. She spoke then but not in any voice I'd ever heard her use. It was completely deadpan with no emotion and an almost 'clipped' way of saying the words. 'Fear us not friends. Did you not see the cat. The cat that would have eaten you.' Almost as if in a trance I found myself nodding and noticed the others (except Eva) nodding also. The words were accompanied by images in my mind. The lion waiting near the truck. Waiting to pounce upon us. The owl catching it by surprise in it's talons moments before it could leap upon us. The owl carrying the lion away and making sure we saw it and saw it very well. It all made a sort of sense in my head as I sat there with piss in my pants and fear in my heart. Eva continued in that same emotionless voice that seemed so out of place coming from her slack jawed face. 'Do you know our ancestral home?' More images came. Familiar images of the smoke stacks, the sprawling facility, the cove and the ocean. My mind (probably near to snapping) thought hysterically something along the lines of 'They are just fucking lost and looking for their home. What the holy fuck!' To which Eva turned to me and again in that same voice said 'Yes. Lost.' Looking at Eva like that was painful and I recall being deeply concerned about whether she was okay or not when Clair jumped to her feet saying 'I know that place!' She did it so fast that it surprised all of us and the owl let out a hoot so loud that I thought my eardrums had ruptured by the intensity of the ringing in both my ears. Eva spoke again and this time I saw the little tendril of drool quiver then snap as the wind briefly gusted and she turned her head to face Clair more squarely. 'Picture the way from here to there.' Time seemed to stretch on forever as Clair and Eva looked into each other's faces. Then the strange tableau was broken by another ear splitting hoot then the flapping of wings and us being coated with another shower of dust, dirt and ash as the owl took wings and flew off repeating it's hoot as it did. Clair fell towards the fire and Rusty grabbed her by the back of her belt just as I leaped up and caught her by the shoulders and between the two of us we kept her from falling into the fire. Looking over her head I saw Evy catch her sister in her arms just as she also tumbled forward towards the fire. The dogs and hyenas all started in on making a ruckus again as if they had never stopped then they did stop as their barks and sounds went from alarm to confusion and finally to silence. We eased Clair to the ground back away from the fire and I left her to Rusty and turned my attention to the girls. Evy sat there with her sister in her lap hugging her to her chest and kneeling down beside them I put my arms around them both and just rocked and swayed along with Evy's motion. Her eyes were burning brightly with tears trickling from their corners but she smiled across the top of her sister's head and mouthed 'Thank You' to me, to which I just nodded as my own tears began to flow. I wasn't sad or even scared or even overwhelmed...I was simply grateful that we were all alive and that we had each other. I don't think I had realized until just that moment how much those four folks meant to me and what I felt for and from them. Which I just can't word out any other way than to say that I not only had a vast love for them but I also felt a vast love from them and maybe I'd have noticed it before if I'd been paying attention and hadn't spent years in isolation away from people before 'the world ended'. Eva began mumbling

something and I dropped my arms and slid back so she could sit up in her sister's lap. Glancing over to Rusty I saw the tears on his face as well as Clair came to and they began hugging each other. Eva looked comical sitting in her sister's lap with her eyes alert and her head swiveling from my face to Evy's with her hair sticking out in all directions and I almost chuckled but managed to hold it back as she said. 'It...They...showed me something that I must tell you all.' then she paused crinckled her nose and said 'but first..Jacob you smell like piss and should do something about that. I'm also so hungry that I could eat a lion and we should perhaps make another dinner and talk after it.' Well I chuckled then and shortly we were all laughing together, helping each other to our feet, picking up our

scattered plates and utensils, pushing the coals into the center of the fire pit and readying the percolator for brewing coffee. Sorry if this one has grown long in the tooth. I've tried to keep it as short and sweet as possible without losing my way in the telling but bear with me a little more and I'll try to draw it to a close. Well since I was only wearing two layers of pants the day the homesteads were destroyed (and I've yet to procure more) I set to soaking them in a bucket of water along with my undies and thermal bottoms and after washing myself off I wrapped my oversized orange towel around my ass and made do with it as we prepped another meal, drank more coffee and discussed what the fuck had just happened. Both Clair and Eva said they felt tired but otherwise fine and we all concurred that we would all sleep well tonight and hopefully without any dreams of owls. During our meal no one asked Eva what the owls had shown her and I'm guessing (like me) everyone figured she would share it in her own time and at her own pace and eventually after our meal she did just that. I had just finished rolling an after dinner smoke and was trying to get every crumb of tobacco out of the fibers of my obscenely bright orange towel where I had clumsily dropped some of the precious stuff while rolling my smoke when Eva asked if I'd roll her one. I didn't even hesitate and I don't know if it was because of how she asked or that I'd started smoking at half her age but I rolled her a smoke and passed it to her. I passed her the stick from the fire that I lit my own smoke with and after puffing her own smoke alight with the burning ember at it's end and setting it down she drew deeply on the smoke, exhaled the majority of it out her nose, she smiled broadly, seemed to relax and passing it to her sister looked me dead in the eye and said. 'Thanks'. I just nodded and settled back in my seat and stretched my bare feet out towards the warmth of the fire. In time she spoke in a voice so serious that it gave me flashbacks to earlier in the day when her mind had been possessed by what I think of now as that 'mutant psychic owl' but it held all of Eva in it as she said. 'There are people to the south of us. A lot of people actually.' She paused, retrieved the smoke from her sister and after drawing deeply on it passed it back before continuing. 'The owls don't call them friends' and hesitating as if choosing her words carefully she continued 'Some of the people are harnessed together and pulling a string of train cars up the very railroad tracks that lead here.' Sort of stunned we all just sat there letting her words sink in and after many moments of silence Eva said 'What's on the train cars?' The silence stretched out so long that I started rolling another smoke from the butt of my previous one. Then looking at each one of our faces in the near darkness and the flickering light of the fire she whispered 'More people. Only they...well they are in cages'.

Day 1678. We talked rather late into the night yesterday and although we were all exhausted this morning our conversation was well worth the time and none of us dreamed of owls. We did talk about what we dreamed as we prepared the morning coffee, rekindled the fire and prepared a simple breakfast of oats and dried waxworms ground into a sort meal and all of it topped with some fake maple syrup that we poured from tiny 'travel' sized bottles. I won't recount what everyone dreamed but I have to say I thought I was the only one that had some really strange dreams until I heard all of theirs this morning. In all our talk last night I realized that there was not a single pacifist among us and if trouble was heading our way we were going to make some 'trouble' of our own. The other things Eva told us last night were beyond both disturbing and disgusting and I'll spare you the grizzly details but I want you to make it clear in your mind that what she revealed sent a coldness through me that probably won't leave me anytime soon..if it ever does. In fact I think it chilled us all and a sort of grim determination has settled over us to do whatever we can do and in Clair's words 'Not fucking stand for it!' So as easy as that our course became set and we transformed nearly half the 'living space' of the box car we've been sharing into a 'war room' or as we've been calling it our 'Tactical Center'. We used several of the empty food boxes pushed together to form a table of sorts and Rusty and Clair set about covering almost it's entirety with maps of the area. I must admit it was damn impressive to see all those individual maps connected together to form a rather accurate

representation of the hills, valleys, streams, roads and everything in between stretching out from the fire tower at the center of them all. This morning right after breakfast when the sun was just coming over the mountains and the light fell perfectly into the box car I got some really high-quality pictures of the entire array of maps with my trusty old mobile device. All their efforts condensed down into one image that I can zoom and pan and focus at will...ah I'll always love technology. After I got the pictures I made several cardboard cutouts depicting different things like the Train Depot, the Fire Tower, the town, the train engine sitting on the tracks, the bulldozer, the derailed box cars and so forth. I also made a cutout of a rectangle and placed it down the tracks from us and wrote on it the word 'them' and closer to us I placed a few square shaped pieces with the words 'scouts' on them. They all seemed surprised when I mentioned last night that a group like that (and especially a group that size) was bound to have not just scouts but most likely raiding parties as well. Everyone agreed that erroring on the side of caution may well save our asses yet. Anyway from what Eva could discern and subsequently convey was that the 'them' were roughly seven days away which would put their scouts at maybe three or four days away. The girl is good I'll give her that because she was able to gauge the speed at which they were traveling uphill towards us and she also pointed out that due to the increase in incline they would either have to use more people to pull their obscene 'train' up the hill or slow to about half their current speed. I was inclined to think (from her descriptions) that these folks were accustomed to getting what they want, were seldom if ever actually attacked and maybe weren't bright enough to string out their scouts at one day intervals both ahead and behind them. In fact I'm sort of counting on all that but I have a few contingencies brewing if the need arises and I'm wrong. After explaining all that and more to the others this morning over coffee they gave me a look as if maybe they were seeing me for the first time and fucking Clair of all people gave me a salute to which I returned a mock salute and said quite firmly looking at all of them 'There will be none of that. We are in this shit together and yeah we are all fucking in charge so no slacking.' Of course we all laughed but Rusty in a pretty damn good pirate voice said 'Aye Captain' to which we all laughed again but damn it ever since then they say 'Aye Captain' to me anytime I point out what we are going to be doing. I swear while I was pissing in the latrine this morning I heard Evy tell Eva 'He's the reluctant general' to which Eva just giggled and said 'Aye Captain' I don't think they knew I could hear them but I'm still thinking about having a private word with them about it later, maybe after dinner or something. I've gotten sidetracked here a bit but I feel it is important to convey these things so bear with me because I'm doing the best I can to keep it short. We have several advantages in the situation and I laid them all out as we stood around the table in the Tactical Center. We have the high ground, we most likely have the element of surprise, we know the terrain not just from maps but from experience, we have communication devices where as the approaching 'them' (again according to Eva's descriptions) were sounding pretty low tech or no tech but time would tell on that account. We have other advantages but those are the primary ones and I asked them all to focus on those as we figure out what exactly we can do (or better yet) dare to do. Our first step was no more visible fires and no lights at night that could be seen from a distance. Our second step was to use today to gather as much water from Rusty and Clair's spring (that miraculously survived the devastation of the homesteads) and make a stockpile of it at the Train Depot and several small caches of it (along with food and medical supplies) at several intervals between the two places. All of which took most of the day to accomplish but we had to do it so that we could start on step three which was to head downhill along the tracks with a scouting party of our own and try to find a place that we can see them long before they see us. So now we have been rolling silently downhill with the engine off and the fading light of day providing our only light (until the nearly full moon peaks out from behind the clouds) and it's been a pleasant few hours of watching the scenery from the bed of the truck where I've been dosing on and off and trying to get the entirety of this entry made. Eva is driving with Clair and Rusty in the middle and the last I looked up Evy was

sitting in the window with her hands on the roof and smiling as the wind was blowing through her hair. I tried to tell her she was going to get bugs in her mouth riding like that and she just stuck her tongue out at me and of all things said 'Aye Captain' and turned away laughing but didn't budge from her perch. For now I must rest and pull this blanket tighter around me because my pants and undergarments are still damp and I'm starting to get cold but it will pass once I'm all snuggled up and resting. I'm damn sure going to need it because in another four hours we are going to stop for the night and I have first watch (hell the only watch) while everyone else gets some much-needed shut-eye before we set out rolling downhill again a few hours before first-light. We have a treacherous road ahead and may we fair well upon it together and do what can be done.

Day 1679. We are rolling downhill again as I lay on my back in the bed of the truck and watch the sky as the early morning light paints the clouds various shades of purple, blue and yellow. It was a long night of standing watch (I actually sat most of the time) but other than some strange barking off in the distance the night passed quietly. The sound of that barking is still rattling around in my head and while it sounded partially like a wolf it also sounded a lot like a coyote. I'd heard a few stories about 'coywolves' in the years before the world fell apart but hell in those days I had also heard such oddities as the earth itself being somehow 'flat', that moth balls would keep snakes away and a vast sum of other things that I can only think of as 'old wives tales' but really just seemed like a bunch of well fermented horse shit. Maybe there were 'coywolves' after all but it is going to take more than just some strange barking in the night to make me a 'believer'. The Brunzes and the twins got a good night's sleep and we all sat talking quietly for some time over an early breakfast of canned 'mixed fruit' and coffee. As we roll along kicking up small pieces of gravel that clang against the truck and that occasionally jar me from my reverie I can't help but note the ticking clock in my head counting down the hours as we draw closer to 'them'. Everything is timing from here on. Timing and also luck that we aren't discovered before we can do what we have set out to do. I'm already feeling the long night of wakefulness catching up to me and bouncing along in the bed of a truck or not I'm going to fall fast asleep and only wake once the sun reaches it's zenith and we stop for a midday meal. The early morning wind is cold and I'm going to put this device away and pull the blanket tighter around me and drift off to sleep where hopefully I'll dream up a better way of dealing with what is ahead than the way that I've been thinking of doing things because after all I'm already losing sleep over it and I haven't even done anything yet.

Day 1680. It's almost time to start my nightly watch but I'm going to make this entry beforehand so I am not tempted to neglect my watch duties and I can feel better having gotten it all 'off my chest' as the old saying goes. Everyone else is settling into their sleeping bags around the fire and I still can't help but chuckle to myself as the Brunzes crawl into their cavernous arrangement of two sleeping bags zipped together to make one large sleeping bag and to further my amusement Eva and Evy squeeze together into one rather small sleeping bag that is decaled with 'super heroes' from the age (that I sometimes think of fondly) before 'the world' changed. I must say that we are by and large a 'merry bunch' and I think we all have a sort of humorous mischief and curiosity about us that keeps us all looking forward to our days and nights together regardless of the perils, the hardships and the fear that is always seeking a way to worm it's way into our perspective and lead us astray. I couldn't ask for a more trustworthy, caring, funny, considerate, talented and downright intelligent group of folks to find myself with in this most peculiar journey of a life. Having spent a long time living in more or less happy solitude I grew over time a deep appreciation for pleasant company and quality conversation. Anyway we have traveled further down the railroad tracks than I have ever traveled before and I can still see the fire tower up above us but just barely. After tomorrow it will probably be gone from sight altogether as we enter into the valley 'bottom' that now lays not that far ahead of

us down the tracks. We found an old forestry station not far off the tracks by moonlight tonight and after carefully inspecting the one room building that I presume was the office and a small metal outbuilding and finding neither danger or anything useful, we setup our 'camp' so that the truck is hidden between the two buildings and our fire is shielded from visibility by all three obstacles on what is more or less the north (uphill) side of the old nearly dilapidated 'office'. After much debate we decided to leave the truck here and continue on foot tomorrow before the sun is up. We haven't worked out how we are going to have a 'night watch' (because I won't be able to sleep in the rolling truck while the others are awake) but I'm confident we will work something out even if it means stopping for twelve hours each day Instead of the six that we have been stopping for. Well I'm going to cut this short because I can already hear the girls snoring and starting to mumble in their sleep (I'm not even sure they are aware they do it but the rest of us are quite aware of it by now). Rusty and Clair will probably fall asleep shortly so my watch must begin and hopefully the long night ahead will once again pass without alarm or incident. I used to joke about how much 'post-apocalyptic hardiness' folks have and how that was how I could determine who would (or would not) introduce liabilities that would endanger my 'survival' and at the end of the day I always decided that my best odds were to 'go it alone' with my dogs and hope for the best. Now though thinking of my companions I have to admit they are some hardy folks and I've never actually considered any of them to be a liability. I'm glad to have met them even if it has been one peculiar damn journey that has brought us all together and forged us into the group that we are.

Day 1681. There was a time about a year ago when I was down by the river in the flats of the valley bottom well below the old beloved homestead. I was thinking about fishing the old river and had even brought along line, tackle and a small bag of various sized waxworms for bait just in case I couldn't catch any bait along my hike or near the river itself. It took me a good bit to get there and honestly I just wanted to lay down and do my fishing later after a few hours of napping in the shade. So arriving at the river I scouted a likely campsite that had plenty of rocks that I kicked into a rough circle and then commenced to gather up some burnable litter and all the sticks within ten steps of where I'd be napping because the last thing I want is to wake up needing to flee and tripping over sticks. Anyway it all made a decent pile inside the rough circle of stones and I felt a growing hope that by sundown I'd have a nap, a warm fire and a feast of fish. So with the stench of a nearby shallow cove that looked rather 'swampy' (it sounded twice as much so) and with the sound of the rushing water nearby and the other sounds of an unfamiliar aquatic habitat fading in my ears I took a much needed nap. I dreamed of a giant cane toad rising up out of the rivers murky depths and closing one eye, it stared at me. It didn't do anything else the entire dream. I woke about three hours later with plenty of sun left in the day and my head feeling for lack of a better word 'fuzzy' and looking down where I had been sleeping slack jawed with my head on my backpack sat a toad that was easily the size of a loaf of bread. The size was one thing but what was creepy was that it was 'licking' (sort of slurping) up all the rapidly diminishing pool of drool and in the center of it's ridged forehead was a single oversized eye surrounded by dozens of smaller eyes of various sizes. When it finished off the last bit of drool it started rummaging in my backpack which would let it make a tasty snack of all my bait. It seemed somehow menacing but not seeing an immediate threat I quickly snatched the bag out from under it after it was unresponsive to my efforts to gently shoo it away. It took me a few seconds to realize that the toad had sprayed me with something that was jelly-like, a milky white and bearing an almost adhesive quality. Anyway the stuff was difficult to get off because the more I spread it the thinner the liquid would spread and it stuck to everything. As a side note I wound up using ashes from a fire and lots of water to remove it from myself but my clothes were hopeless so I burned them later but that's getting ahead of myself in the story. I lit the fire and hoped the smoke would keep the toad (or any other odd critters) away. I was also getting cold and I kept almost remembering what the smell of the goop all over

my torso, face and arms reminded me of. I still can't exactly place that smell and I've taken considerable time since then to think on it. Well I got to getting warm by the fire and started feeling rather damn peculiar all of a sudden and everything around me seemed to first tilt one way and then another way and I found it impossible to stay on my feet so I sat down by that little fire and watched as a giant toad formed from the smoke before me. I remember so clearly it was smoke and suddenly it was this massive grinning toad. Well things got progressively weirder from there on but I'm pretty sure that it was only four days and not the countless indescribable moments that seemed to span lifetimes but I don't know because it all is just memories jumbled with poisoning and breathing smoke for days as the toad in the smoke grinned at me in silence tempting me to sleep so it could take long slurps of my bodily and 'psychic' drool. In some ways I'm still recovering from that ordeal and I'm glad that I was able to eventually get my 'wherewithal' together enough to start hiking back up the mountains and get the hell home so I would have some clothes and a dose of 'normalcy' from being in familiar surroundings. Well that was the weirdest shit I'd seen probably until I saw what the mostly full moon revealed to me last night and what the morning light confirmed. I can see the twins heading back towards me now from uphill so I'm gonna cut this short and go meet them along the path. There is so much to tell and I'll tell it soon but time is pressing and I'm not sure how long the effects (of whatever the folks below me are on) are going to last as they lay sprawled next to the tracks under the shade of two large drooping umbrellas attached to their three wheeled velocipedes sitting upon the railroad tracks with their handbrakes engaged to keep them from rolling backwards downhill.

Day 1682. Well everything I was going to write about yesterday I'm going to have to 'shelf' for later because the details would take me more moments than I currently have but I'll catch you up to speed the best that I can. The folks on the tracks were two of the largest men I'd ever personally seen. They weren't just big they were really large and covered with rippling muscles that looked somehow comical in comparison to their round pot-bellies straining to escape a matching pair of bright blue overalls that looked held together more by grime and oil than by thread and button. They both had large rucksacks that they had thrown on the ground and had unceremoniously flopped down upon in the wee hours of yesterday just before dawn. Anyway they talked and laughed and made many 'toasts' screaming 'Cheers to the man thing and the shell' after which they would laugh more and occasionally smack each other across the belly initiating another round of flatulence accompanied by laughter and more toasting. They did this for several hours as the sun rose and as the time wore on their blows became more sluggish but also more brutal, their laughter grew bitter and their banter became belligerent. Just as I thought they would jump to their feet and start brawling they both grew very still and began snoring louder than any snoring I've ever heard in my life. They were out cold and after tossing some gravel near them and the snoring not being interrupted and them not waking I felt rather positive it would take a lot to rouse them from their slumbering stupor. The tricky part was leaving the umbrellas in place so the sun would not wake them as we disengaged the handbrakes on the velocipedes and rolled them quietly downhill upon the train tracks. The Brunzes moved the novel but clever one person railroad jiggers as Eva and Evy both held an umbrella each in their slender, calloused and able hands. They were standing right next to the two men (hell we all were) but their stupor being so deep they only continued to snore and occasionally let loose a wretched smelling belch or fart. They were a foul smelling pair that is for certain. Well after the Brunzes disappeared downhill and rounded a gentle bend in the railroad tracks the girls and I bundled up the umbrellas, deftly pilfered both rucksacks and hiked uphill towards the old forestry office as rapidly as we could. From the roof of the shed at the 'forestry outpost' (as the girls have been calling it) we had a direct line of site to where far away below us two blue lumps could barely be seen laying next to the railroad tracks. Time passed and eventually one of the lumps sat upright and then gradually the other lump did the same and before long even from that great distance I could see them striking each

other and hear them yelling profusely. They rolled off downhill and out of my view not long after that and then there was a sudden odd quietness that stretched on and on and neither man re-emerged nor was able to be heard for long hours as I layed upon the roof of the shed and kept my silent vigil. Eventually I had the twins take over my post and I went downhill alone to quietly investigate what had become of the two fellows. Well after finding a few stained and tattered pieces of blue cloth and noticing some really fucking big cat prints in the sandy soil at the edge of the tracks gravel field, I started backpedaling out of their and hoped that whatever made that size prints wasn't still hungry. I made it back to the forestry outpost in an astonishing short amount of time and between me and the girls we got the truck rolled up the little road that leads to the railroad tracks and we are now once again rolling downhill with Eva driving and me leaning against the passenger door starting to fall asleep as I bounce along trying to type this all out. We have been watching for the Brunzes but have not yet caught up to them. Until then I'm going to try to catch a small nap and maybe dream a little dream of simpler times when I could do my writing at my writing table in front of my cozy wood stove with the dogs curled up at my feet long before the world changed.

Day 1682. (Again) I drifted off to sleep earlier with my feet up on the dashboard and more or less 'reclined' back as far as I could get into the corner of the truck's cab where the bench seat ends and the passenger door begins which resulted in one shoulder resting on the door and the other shoulder snug against the seat's back because I was stretching as much as I could diagonally across the cab and still be able to have my seatbelt securely fastened...albeit uncomfortably. When I woke from my nap it was to the sound of Evy snoring from behind me and it took my mind a few moments to realize she had also succumbed to sleep and was sprawled out with her feet in her sister's lap and her head crammed into the small triangular space created behind me due to the way in which I myself was sprawled out in the cab. I ached all over but I remember thinking it wasn't anything that a few minutes of stretching wouldn't relieve once we stopped and I could get out and really stretch out a bit. My eyes were feeling gritty and I began rubbing them and trying to blink out the grit as Evy jerked awake and butted her head into my left kidney as her sister tickled one of the bare feet in her lap to wake her up. I grunted and she mumbled something as she righted herself in the middle of the seat and I pulled my mostly numb legs down from the dashboard and sat fully upright. Looking out the passenger window at the trees and thick vegetation we were rolling past I yawned deeply and began rummaging under the seat for my stainless steel thermos of espresso. As a side note I for the most part try to conserve what coffee I have but considering all the recent 'ups and downs' and whatever the hell might lay ahead I decided that maximum stimulation was appropriate and furthermore I just wanted some damn espresso. I found the stainless steel cylinder after undoing my seat belt and after bending close to the floorboard I was able to retrieve it where it had rolled to the back of the cab and found the one place to get lodged in that would stop it from rolling back forward again. I sighed deeply and yawned again as I unceremoniously dropped it into my lap and opened the glove box to retrieve my smoking box. Well a lot happened at once just about then and I will do my best to keep it short and sweet but first I am going to have to tell you about the front bumper on the little truck. A while back after one of the twins (neither admitted it was them and neither blamed the other...) had nearly wrapped the truck around a tree and after pulling it off the tree with the bulldozer and seeing that the bumper had taken the brunt of the impact and was utterly ruined I decided that I'd build it a new bumper if the girls made me a solemn oath that they would always be extra careful and also always wear their seat belt when operating the truck and furthermore if they were doing something 'dangerous' in the truck that they would both use the seat belts. Well long story short they actually did most of the fabrication of the new bumper themselves with me giving them instructions on how to use a draw knife to first remove the bark from a properly sized piece of black locust tree and then how to best handle the chisel and hammer to do the required notching to make the bumper fit snugly against the frame of the truck. I pretty

much just 'supervised' and then used a hand drill to bore the holes so they could bolt it onto the frame. All in all it came out rather nice and the girls later chiseled the word 'luck' into the wooden bumper right at it's center in big blocky letters. Anyway when the huge form of a big cat came bursting from the nearby underbrush, as I reached (half awake) for my smoking box and seconds later the brakes squealed feebly (the truck of course was rolling downhill with the engine off) and I saw stars at just about the same moment I heard a massive thud from the front of the truck and both girls uttering 'Holy Fuck!' It took me a few moments to 'come back around' and realize I had face-planted into the open glove box and head butted my smoking box that if it weren't made from such strong plastic would have been utterly crushed. I looked over at the girls in a bit of a daze to see them both staring out the rear window and once I looked where they were looking I saw what at first looked like a big cat but then my dazed senses realized what I was seeing was actually a human form wrapped in the fur of a big cat. I'll not dive into the details but after getting out and inspecting the still form I determined that it was very dead, very dirty and bloody and looked like one of the two folks who had previously disappeared. I still don't know how he managed to get from where I saw him last to his final resting place beside the tracks wrapped in a mostly intact cat carcass but there he was nonetheless. After giving the truck a brief inspection and not seeing any noticeable damage we piled back in and commenced to once again start rolling downhill looking for Clair and Rusty. We actually found them a few miles later at a secondary pair of tracks that split off from the main ones and was bordered by a grove of poplar trees that looked entirely too uniform to have not been planted by someone at least a few decades before the world had changed. The Brunzes were glad to see us and we were likewise glad to see them. We listened to their rather uneventful tale of coasting downhill until they came upon the secondary pair of tracks where they decided to await our eventual arrival. We then told them of everything that took place with us and by the end I don't think either of them could look more wide eyed and bewildered over the oddity of it all. Anyway we have made a little campsite for the night tucked into the edge of the poplar grove and will soon be making dinner and figuring out what the hell to do next. We had hoped to learn something from the scouts but instead had learned nearly nothing and both of the rucksacks had held only several large water bladders of some foul smelling fermented concoction and some rather dirty blankets all of which we left behind at the 'forestry outpost'. We have once again rolled the truck into a semblance of concealment, this time behind a massive growth of multi-flora. By daylight it's glossy purple paint job is hard to conceal even behind the thick vegetation but by night it will blend into it's surroundings and be difficult to see from the train tracks. I'm laying in the bed of the truck now looking up at the darkening sky and am about to get a little nap in before dinner. The only thing I keep thinking about is what the hell the 'man thing and the shell' are that those two fellows kept so boisterously toasting and cheering while they were sprawled out drinking their foul concoction. There is more that I should write but I'm succumbing to sleep the way a drowning person succumbs to water.

Day 1682. (Yet Again) My nap went well and when I awoke it was to the familiar laughter of my friends as they crowded around the bed of the truck and tickled me awake with a long stemmed peacock feather that I had often found myself staring at where it usually laid across the dusty dashboard of the truck as we trundled downhill all these days. I awoke to more aches and pains than I thought my body could withstand but the dropping of the tailgate and the ensuing chatter over food being set out for consumption made me ignore the discomforts and just enjoy a meal with my friends. They had banked the fire before leaving it unattended and I felt a moment of pride in all of us for what we have faced along our journies both individually and united and what 'raw strength' we all possess in our compassion, consideration and overall awareness. What a group indeed! Anyway I'm going to get some more rest soon and Evy is going to take the watch tonight while the rest of sleep and recover. Apparently the Brunzes journey had not been so serene as I first interpreted it to be and it was in fact a harrowing journey for them to operate

unknown devices on such a steep incline but they faired well and made the keen observation that had the umbrellas still been attached then there would have been times it would act like a sail or as a brake to help slow the odd contraption. I'm not all too sure about just Evy standing watch but I'm pretty banged up and would probably just bungle any sort of crisis situation that might arise. So I'm all snuggled into the truck bed and wondering just how much of everything that is happening I can record with just this tiny device before it loses power. I've been charging it off the trucks battery and the four solar panels it's hood that I'm still not sure of where exactly the twins found them while we cleaned up and 'contained' the old homesteads. I have enough energy left to finish this story so just sit tight because I'm writing it as fast as I can. Eva decided to sleep in the cab of the truck and she is there now as I write this but I think she is out cold because I can hear her loud ass snoring. It doesn't actually bother me at all because when I'm sleeping I'm sleeping and noises be damned unless it is an emergency. Clair and Rusty have further banked the fire and our large coffee pot sits upon the coals ready for anyone's consumption but primarily for whoever is keeping watch. The habits we form together along the journey either mire us or help us to cope with the rugged conditions in a world of unpredictability. I digress though because we have persevered thus far and in my secret heart of hearts I believe we will all do well together and perhaps have at least a few moments to recover before moving forward. We have maybe three days before we 'should' be able to see 'them' down below us. After all they are (presumably) just a bunch of humans dragging an engineless train uphill and that didn't factor in stopping or resting so we were probably not too close to 'them' yet unless there are more scouts or the train makes better time than our calculations are accounting for. Anyway the battery is nearly dead and I'm starting to feel sleepy from all the dinner I ate so until next time be well.

Day 1683. Evy woke me a few hours before the sun came up. She had already awoken the Brunzes and they were starting a pot of coffee when her voice brought my already nearly awake mind all the way out of the surreal landscape of a dream I was having about the hyenas and their new pups prowling around the perimeter of the Train Depot while mutant owls dived down amongst one large pack of cats after another as the cats tried to reach the inside of the 'wagon circle' to get at my dogs who all had two heads and were telepathically calling out for the coywolves to come to their assistance before the sun turned dark and the toads came out to assist the cats... Such a bizarre dream but it has stuck with me all day as we hiked down the mountain and into the flat lands. We are currently taking our ease under an old railroad bridge that spans what was probably a small river at some point in the bygone past but now is more or less just a big rocky dry gulch who's edges are mostly shale which by the way makes for some treacherous footing. I was the only one to really struggle as we climbed the short distance downhill to get below the train tracks and out of the sun for a bit. Although the trusses and tracks do not provide a lot of shade they do provide enough to 'break the heat' and it is also just cooler down near the bottom of the gulch but there is the smell of stagnant water and the bugs are rather fearsome especially the mosquitoes which are much larger than any I've ever seen before but at least they are easy to spot due to their tennis ball size. We were going to make a fire and brew coffee here but the longer we have been here the less it seems it was worth the hike down here in the first place but all that aside I've gotten a good look at the engineering and structural integrity of the bridge (at least what I can see from here) and I think we will be heading back up shortly. For now though I'm going to rest my aching eyes for a few minutes and collect my thoughts through the dull fluffy ache in my head that is probably a concussion from when I face planted into the glove box of the truck.

Day 1685. It is difficult to pick a place to begin but I'll just lay things out the best I can and hope I don't miss anything important along the way. As often is the case it is difficult to convey everything that I wish to convey with just this

simple device but as frustrating as it can be it has also been my way of trying to make sense of (and keep track of) an ever changing world. Anyway we left the railroad bridge far behind us that same day that we came upon it and further assessed it's strengths and weaknesses as we made our way slowly across it under the beating sun as large black thunder heads gradually built on the western horizon. By that night the rain let loose and although we had one very large tarp (and five smaller tarps between us) to string up a shelter with, it was still cold, damp and overall uncomfortable with us all crowded under our makeshift shelter without a fire. Well after a fitful night of sleep (with first Eva and then later Clair on watch duty) we dismantled our shelter in the early morning light. We then hiked until a few hours after the sun was fully up before making a little fire under the boughs of a hemlock grove and finally having our morning coffee. The place we had camped at the night before proved to be filled with those big mosquitoes once the rain quit pouring down so we were all anxious enough to be gone from there that we postponed our morning ritual of talking around the fire as the dark liquid brewed in it's pot. The fire was warm and we brewed the coffee a little stronger than usual and also we wound up making two pots instead of just the one pot we usually share. Feeling refreshed (and albeit highly caffeinated) we doused and then buried the remnants of our fire and headed down the tracks and into much less wooded terrain that held few places to hide and was mostly just 'scrubland' that looked as if it had once been clear cut of it's timber and had never been replanted. The two times that we ventured away from the tracks and towards the edge of the scrub brush we heard the unmistakable sound of a large rattlesnake shaking it's tail so after the second time we started walking between the tracks themselves and didn't wander far from there even when we had to relieve ourselves. Towards the end of that day we came across an old farm bordering the train tracks and although most of the buildings on the property had burned down (what looked like years before) there was a small metal shed that smelled like maybe it had been an old honey house. It was empty other than an old tattered bee keeping suit that Rusty pushed into a corner with a stick expecting all the while to hear the rattle of a snake from beneath it. Fortunately the corrugated metal door shut rather snugly and once it was we all sighed with relief because none of us had been looking forward to a night outdoors in what was potentially snake country. The windowless building was rather dark but with the aid of our flashlights we dug out our blankets and sleeping bags and made ourselves comfortable upon the floor. Evy and Rusty were on watch that night and I didn't envy either of them having to sit for long hours in the pitch dark without a fire. They did fine though and we got an early start this morning making our way down the tracks, winding our way through what looked like what had once been pasture land but is now just a tangle of briars and weeds growing twice as tall as I am. We only took short stops (to rest and cool down) today and kept up a brisk pace until even the old pastures faded away as we rounded a lone hill (in otherwise flat country) that revealed what had once been a rather large town nestled in a broad based valley. The place has an incredibly bad odor about it and I'm not sure if it is from the flooded river flowing through the town or from what looks like an old paper mill sitting not only near the river but also near the center of town where the railroad road tracks lead. There is no part of me that even wants to go near that place and all the others wholeheartedly agreed with my sentiment. So we did a little back tracking and hiked up the lone hill overlooking the town below and found an old picnic area to make camp in. There is even a 'scenic overlook' bordering the picnic area and a waist high semi-circle stone wall that had probably saved many a bygone site seer from falling down the steep and rocky face of the hill that looked out so picturesquely over the town's sprawling streets. Now though it's mostly burned (or crumbling) buildings are enveloped in 'waves' of un-tended vegetation which even from this distance I can tell is mostly kudzu. We all took turns with my binoculars seeing whatever we could see the last few hours before dark but other than the swaying of trees and plants in the breeze the place was eerily still. There were no birds, no animals no 'anything' to really be seen and we all agree that there is just something sort of not right about that 'stillness' below us. I didn't tell the others this (yet) but to me personally the old town

feels rather menacing and I have a deep seated intuition that if we enter into it we probably won't make it back out of it. It's difficult to word it out better than that but suffice it to say that something about it is just fucking 'wrong' and since instinct, intelligence and intuition (which by the way don't always agree with each other) has been partially what has kept me 'alive and kicking' these long years I'm going to pay close attention to them. Anyway I've rambled on a bit and dinner is almost finished cooking over the amazingly well preserved barbecue grill that we had the good fortune of finding here. Tonight I'm hoping to get some much needed rest and hopefully by morning the remnants of this concussion will have passed and I can start 'thinking clearly' again and this perpetual 'fuzzy headedness' will be over. As a side note I'm glad we have made it this far mostly unscathed and still in good spirits and once again I find myself marveling at the quality of the people that I find myself with in these days since the world has changed and each day seems a little weirder than the day before.

Day 1686. Today I learned about the Petticoats of the Apocalypse. A group of female 'mareback' riders that also refer to themselves as 'Gentlewomen'. They dissuaded me from using the term 'horseback' in reference to them and their equine steeds and finding them to be the most fearsome group of folks I've ever met with their impossibly shining armor, their polished steel helmets, short recurve bows, bristling quivers of black shafted arrows with white fletchings and (as they called them) their War Mares that were themselves outfitted in a similar style of light armor and chainmail. Fearsome hell...they are some downright intimidating folks. Oddly they are also some rather kind and compassionate folks that probably (in the long run) saved our asses from doing something foolish. We had set out just after dawn to 'scope our terrain' as Rusty put it. I awoke feeling a good bit more recovered from my body's physical trauma and albeit exhaustion from still 'staying in motion' after my initial injuries. Not having to stand watch the last few days has definitely helped and I'm glad everyone else has 'pulled my weight' in that regard and done so with neither chiding nor joking about my current state. In other words I appreciate my friends pulling my slack gracefully and only with genuine concern that I make a rapid recovery. I have to say these folks have really 'grown on me' during our time together and especially of late do to their gentle handling of me while I've been in a vulnerable state. To expound upon the dynamics of our group would take more time than I have, so I often can only summarize the events and experiences that keep us all so focused and downright relentless in our endeavors. Anyway we hiked most of the hill before noon and the Brunzes sketched quick maps of the terrain, landmarks, paths and old roadways grown thick with brambles but thankfully traversable because of the well used game trails. The trails themselves were wide and whatever animal (animals) keep it so well maintained obviously have some girth. I remarked as much and the twins instantly began bobbing their heads in agreement and gave each other a knowing look that I'm not sure they saw me notice. Something in that look reminded me of the owls but before I could grasp any connection the idea slipped away as it just did again as I type this. I have gotten off track a bit so I'll get back on track so just keep them knickers on. It was around noon that we reached a sort of confluence between the network of trails woven through the brambles of old logging roads, gravel roads and paths connecting them all through the scrubby undergrowth of mountain laurels. Well at that confluence was a small clover covered field where we found what we first thought was a pile of boulders but what turned out to also be a natural cave formation. A formation just deep enough that the nearly overhead sun didn't quite dispel the shadows at the rear of the cave but it did let us see several darker shadows that even in that dimness looked to be at rest. As our eyes adjusted and we realized what we were seeing (and the smell hit us) we all took a collective step backwards and then a dozen more until we found ourselves huddling under a mountain laurel thicket at the edge of the field and staring at the cave mouth intently. Evy broke the silence by whispering 'They sleep and will continue to sleep if we leave' and something in that simple statement seemed ominous and we didn't hesitate to hike back up the hill and get back around to the other side of to where we had

setup camp at the picnic area. We circled the base of the hill and in a few places it brought us close to the town and it's seemingly never ending 'waves' of kudzu. It was damn creepy feeling being that close (exposed) to the town and by the second time we had to hike out into pasture land to avoid rock and shale deposits that would be both treacherous and time consuming to navigate we took our ease under a massive old oak tree that stood silent vigil by itself over acres of lush thick rye grass that stretched all the way to the town itself. As we brewed our coffee over a tiny fire the twins started acting 'jumpy' and them generally having pretty damn good control over what made them nervous or anxious me and the Brunzes took a seat across the fire from where they sat and waited because whatever it was they'd surely tell us without any prodding. Eva began to speak but whatever she was going to say she never finished because just then there was a whickering from all around us and the grass parted and we found ourselves surrounded and facing some of the shortest sharpest looking lances that I'd ever seen. My mind took it all in from the armored steeds to the quivers and bows strung across each rider's backs, the leather scabbard behind the saddle to sheath the lance and draw the bow...There we all sat surrounded by a circle of bristling steel and horse flesh and there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it. Well I need to finish my business squatting over this hole in the woods and get back to the now rather crowded camp at the picnic area. Tonight we will eat well, sleep well and get to know these Gentlewomen better as they hear our stories and we hear theirs.

Day 1686. (Again) Everyone except those who are standing watch have bedded down for the evening. The horses (mares) are all picketed on a rope line just outside of camp and each one's rider lays nearby on the ground with a saddle under her head and her feet kicked up atop her saddlebags. Although we did share an evening meal and learned much about each other we are definitely two separate camps occupying the same small geographic area for a brief time. The twenty two women aren't exactly as standoffish as they are a disciplined unit that has no room inside their tightly knit ranks for outsiders. All of which does not mean that their company is unfriendly or cold...there is just a distance that can never be spanned because we aren't a part of their group. Well that's not entirely true because several of them showed some very keen interest in recruiting (conscripting?) the twins and taking them 'back south to the Island' for some sort of testing and possible initiation into their ranks. By the fourth time one of the Gentlewomen began giving their 'pitch' to the girls (which they had flatly refused three previous times) I interrupted the young rider by asking why neither me nor Clair or Rusty were being made the same offer. I don't know if it was because of my smirking tone or that I had interrupted her but the entire camp grew quiet and I found myself the focus of too many weighing and considering gazes before abruptly the woman before me laughed and told me she already had enough husbands and that I would probably make a poor fisherman anyway. Then they all laughed good naturedly and one by one they drifted over and whispered something in the woman's ear and patted her on the shoulder. Myself and my friends just looked at each other in perplexed wonder and later as I tried to make some sense of it all by asking a few pointed questions I was told that I'd already caused enough embarrassment and that I should 'Do what I'm supposed to do' whatever the hell that is. When I asked about what I am supposed to do they just laughed more as if a whole new level of humor had been achieved by me asking. Anyway I still haven't figured it out but no one else attempted to recruit the girls but many of the women asked them (and me and the Brunzes) all sorts of questions and as the night wore on I learned about many things that I had no idea about before this evening. Apparently most of the southern part of the continent is now under water and not just a little water either but a whole fucking lot of water. According to them 'the coast' (as they called it) begins about four hundred and forty miles due south of where we are now located and the Island where they are from is the remaining portion of what was once the southern most 'state'. Being somewhat familiar with that region I was surprised to learn that the largest lake there is now a seaport and the Island itself only extends two hundred miles north of it before becoming an extensive network of shallows and sandbars that 'connect'

it to the continent or what remains of it. I also learned that there are now 'things' lurking in the waterways that make travel via water a treacherous affair and when sailing (they apparently love their ships as much as they love their War Mares) the Gentlewomens lances double as harpoons and that they make great sport of trying to capture the 'things' before their ships can be destroyed by the 'foul creatures'. When I asked for a description of the 'things' they spoke of I was basically told that the 'things' always looked different to everyone that saw them and even in death it bound those who saw them in some sort of illusion that was a projection of their own fears and insecurities. Upon learning this I said 'Great! Psychic fucking sea creatures also!' which brought raised eyebrows from the Gentlewomen and laughter from my friends. So as conversations happen I then told of our encounter with the owls and how they had helped us and how equally amazing we had also helped them. Well mention of the owls drew every eye and ear around and me and my compatriots found ourselves encircled by the women and being asked so many questions so fast that there was literally no way to answer them all. One of the women behind me clapped her hands loudly and instantly all their voices grew silent and the clapper (I presume) then asked in a near whisper 'The last you saw of them...was there an albino among them?' In truth we answered that we had no idea one way or another if there was or was not such a creature among them but when I asked how they knew of the owls all they would say is 'Their feathers always fly true' which I assume has something to do with their arrow fletchings but the Gentlewomen kindly refused to elaborate any further on the matter and would only say 'We are friends to the owls and they to us'. There was something akin to awe and reverence in their demeanor about the topic of the owls and that alone told me that somehow even these Petticoats of the Apocalypse are well met kindred spirits in these most peculiar of times that I find myself in. There is much more that I learned but the hour is growing late and according to our mareback rider 'friends' the train will be entering the town somewhere around sunrise (or soon after) where seventy three other Gentlewomen are waiting in ambush amid the kudzu covered and crumbling ruins of the bygone town. Apparently the train folk had somehow wronged them and they had spent long months tracking them. The group of women currently camped amongst us had been dispatched with the sole purpose of keeping us (me and my friends) from either interfering or being caught in harm's way when (as they put it) 'all hell breaks loose for thirty nine seconds when that train enters the town below.' Surprisingly I have no doubts about the accuracy of that statement given my short time amongst them and seeing both their skill at riding, their overall discipline, their well tended gear, and the comfort and ease with which they do what they do...I have no doubts at all. Anyway I've rambled on here and not told hide nor hair of the parts of the evening that were probably more important and albeit more revealing of the current state of the world and furthermore what all I've learned about 'the early days' and all the absolutely unfortunate things that occurred almost simultaneously but also unrelated to each other that brought about many of the oddities that I've learned to just 'take in stride' as I keep moving forward. It is all strange stuff and eventually when my mind can make some sense of it all I will try to make note of what I can. Sleep is tugging at me and my hands have grown cold typing all this so I'm going to try to write more over a cup of coffee in the wee hours of the morning long before dawn. Until then...Be well.

Day 1686. (Yet Again) I fell asleep for a few hours there but didn't get near the rest I thought I was going to get nor can I quite fall asleep again with so many thoughts tumbling around in my mind. So to help dispel them and the bizarre dream I was just having about leviathan forms lurking in murky pools attempting to probe my mind for something that I can almost put words to but just can't. The moon is still bright and the stars are also out and looking beyond the screen of this device to the spreading sky above I can't help but feel infinitesimal in the 'grand scheme' of space and time. I've often had such feelings and oddly enough I find them to be both vastly humbling and also comforting in a way that perhaps grants me the thin spectrum of perspective that often allows me to think 'far outside the box' but also often leaves me clumsily attempting to describe my thoughts and experiences in

a way that will not only make a semblance of sense to others but alas help it all make sense to myself so that I can do whatever it is that I'm doing in such a way that a possibility for a better future exists. In other words it's a great way to bullshit/railroad myself into always doing the best I can do with maximum beneficial impact on all other living things that aren't directly trying to harm me or others but ya know that sort of thinking always leads to grey areas and 'exceptions to the rules' so I just do my best to not overthink it all and pay as close as attention as I can to the elusive 'here and now'. Speaking of which I learned earlier tonight that there is a Post-Apocalyptic Hardware Store (Freehold) about ninety miles south of our current position and the family that operates it are a group of craftsmen that also are making and recording everything they can from music, to old stories, to how things are done and just about everything in between. The Gentlewomen claim that they are but a single 'society' among what they call 'The People of the Drum and the Folken of the Wave' which to my best reckoning are the same people but it seems more complicated than that and honestly I couldn't quite follow the intricacies of the (slight?) differences between the two even though twelve different Gentlewomen tried to explain it to me. Maybe it's just one of those things in life that won't make any sense to me until I witness it firsthand..and even then I might not understand. Anyway I don't want to waste my limited battery power getting sidetracked too far so I'll get on with it but something I think is rather humorous is the way folks (even the Librarian) have adapted to such a curious new world and have been so matter of fact about progressing onward in a 'business as usual' manner as if 'life goes on'. Which I can absolutely relate to even considering my isolation in the mountains. For me the 'world' outside was just gone because the single weather radio tower and single cellular tower quit operating on the same day and my link to the outside evaporated. Yet (as I learned much earlier tonight) it was not such a 'clean break' for others and sparse communication lasted a full year longer than when mine ceased and during that time there was 'news' (of a sort) from far away places and trade routes were being explored. Then several massive hurricanes formed and more or less 'scrubbed the earth' and both my friends and the Gentlewomen were surprised that I hadn't even noticed the violent storms that had raged for months on end. Afterwards the airwaves had grown silent and although there was plenty of short range chatter on the airwaves there was nothing that could communicate beyond a thirty mile range that anyone knew of and now with the satellites fallen there was no telling when there would (if ever) be another world wide communications platform let alone a network to facilitate it. I didn't share my ideas about that last bit but between me and the twins we think we are onto a few good ideas in that regard. I'm going to try to get more shuteye and be rested enough to face the morrow.

Day 1687. As things turned out all hell did break loose in the little kudzu covered town with it's foul smelling river, it's old dilapidated paper mill and it's metal railroad tracks that had an almost polished looking sheen to their surface. That 'polished' look should have been noticed a few days ago but alas myself and the rest of my small group (and apparently everyone else) failed to notice that telltale sheen of the tracks themselves being recently used. Sometimes I think the things we discover in hindsight are mostly things that are blatantly obvious and shamefully overlooked or just unnoticed because of their obviousness. I'll can the more philosophical thoughts for now but I'm going to try to notice the obvious a bit more and hope that my noticing the 'not so obvious' does not suffer because of it. The thing that really gets me is that I'd 'written off' the polished look to those tracks as being created by the two rather large folks that we heisted the jiggers from when they made their ill fated journey up into the mountains. Gah! Foolish assumptions are dangerous and I know better and as much as I would like to blame my recent injuries..I know I should have noticed regardless of my condition. Anyway what happened not long after dawn was rather chaotic and lasted longer than thirty nine seconds but not by much. I awoke in the early hours before dawn (like I planned) and after relieving myself well beyond the tree line of our camp, I started my morning ritual of building up a small fire and starting the coffee

brewing. I was just beginning to roll my morning smoke and as I frowned mournfully at my diminishing supply of tobacco six of the Gentlewomen materialized from the lurking shadows and squatted in a semicircle around the fire before me. The smallest among them was directly in front of me and she said in a near whisper 'What ya brewing?' and as she said it the fire sputtered to life and revealed mischievous grins on all their faces that they were actually doing a pretty good job of concealing but something in their eyes gave them away. Looking back down at my hands I finished my rolling, licked the paper and said with an openly mischievous grin of my own 'Coffee' which produced a chuckle from all of them before the same woman spoke again 'Want some real coffee..' and after pausing for emphasis she added in an almost inaudible whisper 'it's fresh'. Well that got my attention and I leaped to my feet thinking that they were poking fun at me and that my sudden movement might startle them and I'd get to laugh at them as much as they laughed at me. They weren't startled and after catching my smoking box just before it tumbled from my lap and into the fitfully burning little fire, I damn near tripped over my own feet and they did laugh (albeit kindly) as the women immediately to my left and right each took one of my elbows and steadied me on my feet. After somewhat regaining my composure and the women letting go of my elbows and me squatting back down I said matter of factly 'You are shitting me' to which the woman before me laughed wholeheartedly and said rather solemnly 'Never in life' as she reached behind her and then held up a small brown colored cloth sack tied at it's top with a purple ribbon so that I could see it in the fire's weak light. I set my smoking box down and sticking the unlit smoke in the corner of my mouth I held out my hands for her to toss me the sack. After she lobbed it to me (thankfully I didn't bungle the catch) and it landed in my hands I was overwhelmed by the sweet savory aroma wafting up at me from the tiny sack pleasantly mixed with the tangy acrid scent of the smoke from the fire. With my mind savoring what I would see I untied the little ribbon and peering inside was delighted to see deliciously dark looking and finely ground coffee that looked like it would make excellent espresso. Well I've gotten off track here but from the ensuing conversation that followed I learned that coffee beans are grown by nearly every farmer on the Island and that each year they all attempt to create the 'perfect blend' of high caffeine and low acid containing coffee beans and the sack (amazingly gifted to me) was the previous year's best and to top it all the Gentlewoman (that had given it to me) and her family had grown it themselves. Truly a marvel to behold in this day and age and my gears are already turning on how to make sure I can get a stable supply (hell...Stockpile) of the stuff. Anyway with all that I figured that the morning was starting off on the right track but damn it was just a single brief calm before a whirlwind of events that took place that if I can describe them all it will take a good bit of time but I'll do my best so 'hold your water and sit tight' because I'll get to it all eventually. Unbeknownst to any of us (or the Gentlewomen laying in ambush) there was a few other folks that had an equal amount of interest in the train that squealed and squeaked it's way along the tracks leading into the far side of town just after dawn. The train itself was completely hidden by the canopy of kudzu carpeting the town but the sounds that emanated through the little valley were unmistakable. Only six Gentlewomen remained with us as we huddled behind the wall and me and my friends took turns with my binoculars trying to discern anything useful out of the sea of green below. The rest of the Gentlewomen had headed out just before dawn to take up a position between the railroad tracks and the lone hill and the remaining six (the same six from around the fire earlier) had volunteered to stay with us 'just in case'. Just in case of 'what' I'm still not sure but I'm damn sure glad they were there with us as Eva said 'What is that coming from the east on the river?' while Evy said from beside her 'And there to the west on the river also..?' and all six Gentlewomen pulled out matching pairs of tiny binoculars they wore on a leather thong around their necks and although I had noticed the thongs I hadn't seen what hung on them beneath their armor. Anyway Aka (that's the short one's name that gave me the coffee) made a hissing sound and then after spitting on the ground said 'Fucking Pirateers!' Which I learned much later is a sort of cross between a pirate and a

privateer. Anyway after Aka's initial exclamation the woman to her immediate left (I still don't know all their names and asking them outright seems taboo among them) anyway she lowered her binoculars and after also spitting on the ground she pointed to the western part of the river saying 'And the fucking Pirate Queen is with them.' Well right about then was when things got really interesting but I'm going to have to pick this up later because I can hear the clop of horses as Aka and the five other remaining Gentlewomen make their way back up the now well worn road that leads to our camp.

Day 1687. (Again) I'm going to have to pause my normal narrative and try to fill you in on the tremulous events that happened shortly after the squealing and squeaking train rolled into the little town. There was a brilliant glare as the canopy of kudzu over the paper mill appeared to first heave and then like the eruption of some green volcano the center of the heaving tangle of vines spat out the largest fireball into the sky that my tired eyes have ever seen firsthand. With my eyes seeing a wave of colors I yelled 'Down!' as I flattened myself face down in the dirt behind the rock wall just as the 'boom' hit and I felt dirt and pebbles rain down upon my back as a series of smaller booms followed and the scenic overlook stone wall trembled. With my ears ringing and my vision still skewed with after-images I sat up and looking around I saw that everyone appeared to have fared at least as well as I did and we all helped each other up as best we could. The smoke in the air below was thick enough to obscure the river and pretty much everything else but there was shouting voices and screaming echoing up to us from the chaos below. After assessing our options we came to the conclusions that we really had no idea what was happening and that we should at least stay put until the smoke cleared. A few things we were sure of was that the train had stopped moving, the town was burning and there were probably injured folks that were going to need help. As it turns out we were off on that last bit unless I count the folks with injured pride and bruised egos but that's a different thread to this story. So we did what all folks with the high ground and great vantage do...we waited. Eventually we saw the sixteen Gentlewomen that were near us and the railroad tracks galloping towards town kicking up a hail of dust and rocks so thick that they were eventually obscured by it. I have to segue here and tell some of a different story and also fill in the gaps according to someone else that was down below when all hell broke loose this morning. There weren't a lot of jobs when Harold was born in a little backwoods holler in the mountains to a bootlegging cattle rancher that had 'lost it all' bailing the rest of his family out of whatever problems they had caused themselves and usually the more costly part of damages done to the other folks that called these mountains home. The family 'hell raising' whittled the family holdings down to just a scant few acres and in a little shack on one of those acres little Harold was born even though the hospital was not that far down the road. He was young when the new mill was coming to the adjacent town and he remembers his family's excitement because there was a gap his folks could hike through the hills and work there each day and hike the short distance home in the evening. Without the knowledge of that gap hiking to the adjacent town would take a good day of solid walking and then anyone would be too exhausted to even work so the proximity of the gap made it an easy trek downhill in the morning and a pleasant stroll gradually uphill in the evening. There was a lot of debate in both the little towns about what kind of mill was being built and before long everyone was dismayed that it wasn't a new corn or grain mill and it was a 'paper mill' of which none of the two towns townsfolk knew anything about so perhaps there wouldn't be any work. Turns out there was plenty of work and with the abundance of pulp timber and the convenience of the railroad tracks there was work aplenty and unskilled labor for all. By the time Harold grew much older he could no longer smell the smell of the paper mill but as a child he remembers (in his words) 'when the woods smelled like the woods and you could still eat the fish out of the river'. Harold watched most of the folks he knew that worked at the mill not live very long or healthy lives and he soon longed to see more of the world so he enlisted himself in 'the services' and 'even traveled overseas'. He returned back

to the little holler he was born in many years later and took up a quiet job as the local library custodian in the town without the paper mill. Well according to him he had no idea that there were other folks around or that the train was going to be rolling into town or that the explosion would be quite so big. He had spent nearly two years pulling his hay wagon with a team of goats back and forth (the long way) from the library of the town below to the library of what he refers to as 'his town'. Each time he made his unknown number of journeys he brought with him as much aluminum foil as his wagon could hold along with four tireless rims and a jack so he could 'ride the rails' straight into the paper mill where each time he unloaded his cargo and added to what would amount to one big ass 'foil ball' that he would eventually leverage into a storage tank of some liquid that I can't quite recall the name of even though he kept saying it again and again as he recounted his story to all of us. On his return trip each time he would load his wagon with books from the library and haul them back to the library that had employed him for several decades before the world changed. As a side note I must say that he appeared to be quite smitten with all the Gentlewomen and doesn't understand why they haven't given him their names and he repeatedly kept getting this far off look in his eye and muttering about 'not seeing a real woman in years' and it was rather difficult to keep him on track until Aka and the other Gentlewomen (along with Clair and even the twins) went away down the road to 'gather firewood' which left me and Rusty to hear the rest of the story the fellow told. There was a place to the west of us that gave Harold clear sight of town, the paper mill, the river, our hill and a good bit of the flat lands adjacent to the town that were blocked from our view on the hill by dense stands of pine trees. After the initial boom when Harold's giant foil ball finally made it's descent into the storage tank he saw first that there were people on the water in the river in boats and as he was watching them he heard shouts from the flat lands behind him and turning around from his 'precious view of the mill finally getting it's justice' he saw a large group of armored women running after a group of what looked like other women who were riding horses and each rider held a second (and some a third) pair of reins behind them leading riderless but saddled horses. More shouting made Harold turn further and far off to his right a third group of riders broke from the woods adjacent to the field cracking whips overhead and began angling in such a direction that it was obvious to him that they were trying to head off the riders galloping across the field and towards the distant woods beyond. He's not sure what followed because more shouts from the river caught his attention and looking there he saw people scrambling around the boats and flailing at the water all around the boats as if to scare something away. He said he always thought there was something living down in the murky waters of the river but he didn't think his explosion would wake it up. In his words 'Who the hell would have thought such a thing'. Anyway he claims to have then seen a black flying machine burst from the smoke above the town and fly by over his head so low that he 'could count the rivets in the hull' before it streaked away to the south over the train tracks and disappeared from view. While I believe most of his story I'm not too sure he is even sure about really seeing a flying machine that looked like no aircraft he'd ever seen before. Anyway he turned back to the field to see both groups of women encircled by twice as many of the riders that came out of the woods and although they were no longer cracking their whips they all held swords at the ready. In Harold's words 'harassing women ain't right' so he pulled his goats from their grazing and headed towards the field atop his wagon to 'set things right'. The fellow was long winded in his telling (and difficult to understand with his thickly accented 'mountain speak') but it came down to this. Just before dawn a group of women (they call themselves Banditas) clubbed the two Gentlewomen guarding the picket lines of the other seventy one women that were laying in ambush near the railroad tracks and stole all of the War Mares. One of the guards eventually awoke and got word to the rest of the Gentlewomen who re-evaluated their situation and ordered a full withdrawal from their planned ambush and initiated a pursuit. The men (and as it turns out women also) that had encircled both groups of women on the field call themselves 'Cowfolk' and had been tracking the Banditas (for horse thieving) from 'out west'

beyond an inland sea of what was once (to my best reckoning) the mighty Mississippi river which had finally flooded it's banks permanently a few years ago. The Banditas themselves had been attempting to ambush the train and seeing the picket line of horses (War Mares) had decided that the train could wait for another day because as they put it (according to Harold) the mares were 'easy pickings'. Anyway Harold arriving on his goat drawn wagon (somehow) helped to diffuse the tense situation on the field between the three groups and in short order the Gentlewomen regained their mounts and the Banditas were taken into the custody of the Cowfolk. Apparently the Cowfolk consider the Banditas to be a 'tribal matter' to be dealt with accordingly once they make their long trek home. The Banditas on the other hand had willingly laid down their arms and claimed the 'right to process' and according to some custom (not made clear to Harold) were now 'oath bound' to travel home with the Cowfolk not as prisoners but as 'guests' whose job it would be to do most

of the more mundane tasks along the trail home. From what I could tell from Harold's story the Cowfolk and the Banditas are part of a larger society of people 'out west' and the Banditas are a rather unruly group of young women that had wanted to elevate their social status by acquiring new breeding stock for the entire society's woefully inbred horses. Harold seemed to think that last bit was more heroic than simple thievery and was definitely intrigued by such noble minded thinking but I think he just thinks that because most of the Banditas are 'pretty lasses' (his words) and that maybe one of them would turn an admiring eye upon him if he sides with them. Well this has gotten long and now that Harold has been brought back to his wagon by Aka and her group we are awaiting the return of the Gentlewomen and the news they will most likely bear about the fate of the Pirateers and the inhabitants of the train. For me and my friends part we just keep watching down below but other than the boats moored along the river banks (now empty of people) there really isn't much to see other than the burning town and the massive smoking crater where the paper mill once stood.

Day 1687. (Yet Again) The sun has finally set on this strange day and I'm going to do my best to explain as much as I can before weariness catches up to me and I drift off to sleep. Something (or some things) in the river were awoken by the explosion but from what I understand it (they) were not all that interested in rising from slumber and had settled back down after the initial turmoil. The Pirateers for their part had 'abandoned ship' long before the creature(s) settled back down to the river's muddy and murky depths by heading for shore and 'jumping ship'. As unlikely as it seems they had also been trying to ambush the train but their plan had been to stop the train on the narrow railroad bridge that spans the river and leads up into the mountains. As things happen the Gentlewomen and the Cowfolk (along with the Banditas) made their way through the smoldering town and arrived at the site of the train just after the Pirateers and in Aka's words 'The damned train was empty!' All the groups suspected the others of some sort of ruse or trickery that deprived each group of it's 'prize'. From what I've heard I'm not sure that there is any trickery involved other than that done by the train people themselves. The train had been rigged to a diesel powered railroad maintenance car that had pulled it gradually downhill and into the town. The car itself had been blown from the tracks by one of the numerous explosions and was now (according to Aka) 'a crumpled heap' that had been propelled at such velocity that it was now embedded into the red brick wall of an adjacent building nearly a block away. The train itself seems to have faired much better and all Aka would say about it is that it was a 'gruesome totem' to those who had eluded them. When I asked her about the 'shell and the man thing' and if she knew what they were she laughed heartily and said 'There is a big orange shell painted on the side of the tanker car and as for the Man Thing...that is Gentlewomen business that you'd best to stay out of' and even though she said it with a smile there was also a keen edge of warning to her voice and I didn't quite want to find out how narrow that edge was so I didn't press the issue. Apparently the train only consists of four cars and a caboose that was attached but is now missing. There is a flatbed car in the front outrigged with

a massive cage, a box car (much like the ones at the Train Depot), a tanker car (which apparently is full of some fermenting ochar liquid) and a passenger car that while once a plush and beautiful thing, it is now a grotesque portrait of the train's recent inhabitants. I'll spare you the details that were related to me but suffice it to say that it wasn't wild game that had been being cooked in the passenger car's rather expansive kitchen. Anyway the Pirate Queen was indeed among the Pirateers and she was furious about her foiled ambush, the empty train and downright infuriated at the general chaos of the situation and after harsh words for everyone she stormed off shouting orders at her compatriots and headed back towards her boats upon the river that she eventually boarded and sailed away but not before securing a contract with the Cowfolk to help them in their ongoing difficulties with several groups of folks that had been disrupting trade on the placid waters of the Inland Sea. The Cowfolk (and Banditas) are now camped together with the Gentlewomen in the field where Aka and her group returned Harold to his wagon where according to him he has enough moonshine (which he brought with him to celebrate his victory over the mill) that in his words 'Yes-sir-e-bob I got enough liquor to get the moon drunk' Well I'm not exactly sure what he meant by that but he seemed intent upon having a real 'hoot-a-nanny' with all the other folks camping in the field. As it turns out the Gentlewomen, Cowfolk and Banditas are banding together and will be heading south along the tracks at first light in an effort to track down the train people and they didn't say it but I think to also find the 'Man Thing'. Only the Gentlewomen and Harold knows of me and my friends existence up here on this hill and the Gentlewomen being rather close mouthed aren't likely to breathe a word of it but hell there is no damn telling what Harold might say especially if he is lit up on fire-water and trying to impress the ladies...but it's an unavoidable risk. Aka and her 'Fist' (which is what I learned a party of six of them is called) can either go with the rest of the newly formed group camped together in the field or they can accompany us back up into the mountains and then afterwards make the long journey to the Academy. They have left the decision to us and have even camped a little distance away from us so that we could discuss it among ourselves privately. Which we have and come to the conclusion of 'Why the hell not' and I think it'll be both comforting and albeit interesting to make our way back up into the mountains with their company. I keep thinking about how simple my life was before and how my biggest worries were the welfare of me and my dogs and now...Well now I find myself looking at Evy and Eva smoking and sharing a cup of coffee by the fire as they excitedly formulate plans on getting the train engine at the Train Depot running and driving it down the tracks to the little town below and retrieving the abandoned train cars there and then pulling them back up the mountain. There is always something mischievous about the way they smile when they have a great idea and oddly they always seem slightly surprised by their own clever inventiveness and often drag the Brunzes through long conversations that center around finding any flaws to their logic or things they have overlooked and for their part the Brunzes egg them on and just encourage them to trust their own judgement and assess everything as clear minded as they can. As I look at them all chattering away and excited about the future we all face I can't help but to stop thinking about my once 'simple' life and notice the growing bond between us all and enjoy their company because oddly enough they enjoy mine.

Day 1690. The twins and I arrived back at the Train Depot just after dark tonight and the dogs (and even Curly) were excited that we have returned. Evy did most of the driving after we retrieved the truck from where we had 'hidden' it and I gotta say that girl has got one heck of a lead foot and is a damn good driver at that. We left the Brunzes at the velocipedes after we affixed the umbrellas to them and Aka and her Fist volunteered to 'escort' them back up into the mountains at a much less breakneck speed than me and the girls. We had discussed staying together but I was concerned that we had already been gone too long and that the dogs and Curly might be out (or nearly out) of both food and water. As it turns out they weren't but if not for our haste they would have run out of both by tomorrow so I'm feeling good about following my intuition there and making a bee line 'home'. The place is

thankfully still as we left it and it doesn't look like anything has been disturbed which is not all that surprising considering that there are now four hyenas prowling around outside and the dogs doing the same inside the 'wagon circle' of the boxcars. Those two hyena pups are growing pretty damn fast and the girls seem to be quite smitten with how adorable they are. I have to admit they are some cute critters from what we saw of them in our headlights as we pulled up to the Train Depot earlier blasting some old techno music on the the trucks stereo and laughing about how weird our last many days have been. Can you believe it that those girls had never heard music like that and now they are obsessed with finding more of it than just the few tracks I have on my old mobile device. We have spent the evening sitting around the fire talking and laughing as the dogs all try to get some of the attention they have missed out on of late by snuggling up to us. Everything 'feels' like it is going to be okay but I can't help but wonder where the hell the train people disappeared to and what other bizzare things the future holds for us. Anyway it will probably be another few days before our compadres return and we have been discussing preparing a rather large feast for everyone upon their arrival and apparently the girls want to have a 'party' soon after because it will be their birthday pretty soon and although they are not at all sure exactly what they want to do for it but their response when I asked was two matching mischievous grins that made their odd eyes twinkle with mirth in the firelight as they both simultaneously winked at me and said 'We want to have some fun...Captain' before descending into giggling and giving each other a 'knowing' look. I have to admit I'm growing fonder of them every day and perhaps selfishly wish they will stick around and not head off to the Academy but with their skills and talents I know that a lot of folks can benefit from what they know and it will probably do them some good also. Well I've rambled on here a good bit and I promised the girls I would tell them some more stories of when I was a wee lad long before the world changed so I'm going to cut this short, build up the fire, let my best dog lay in my lap and as the old saying goes 'spin a yarn or two'. Looking at them across the fire murmuring to each other as I've been typing this makes me think that the world didn't 'end' and that it is really just 'beginning'. For now though...so long and be well.

Day 1690. (Again) Tonight was marvelous just spending time with the dogs and telling stories to Eva and Evy. There is just something about their company (and albeit the Brunzes also) that makes me feel all 'warm and fuzzy' inside. All of their presences in my life have actually done me a tremendous amount of good and I often wonder if they all have similar feelings or if I'm just going a bit 'soft' as I get on in my years. It could well be a bit of both and I'm actually feeling pretty damn okay about that because it is surely some 'rough living' that I've been doing all these years not to mention the worries about food, water, medicine and all the dangers and potential calamities that are a persistent part of day to day life. A small part of me feels sad occasionally that the world has become what it is and although I thought there weren't many folks left wandering around on this incredibly old rock my recent travels have shown me otherwise. I'm definitely awed by the Petticoats of the Apocalypse and amazed by their prowess, discipline, skill and honorable nature. They are definitely an impressive group that I'm looking forward to trading with and getting to know. They were quite impressed by the front bumper on the purple truck and although I pointed out that the craftsmanship was all the twins work (which as a side note earned some newly appraising looks from Aka and her Fist aimed at the girls) but what really impressed them was the material it was made from and after nearly thirty odd minutes of me rambling on about the merits of Black Locust Aka stopped me and asked if it was really better than pressure treated lumber and if I had more of it. To which I answered 'It sure as hell is better and these mountains are full of it.' After which she conveyed that living where they do on the coast they find pressure treated lumber washed up on the beach from time to time but there isn't any 'new' material to work with. Apparently they have scavenged every piece they can find for building docks, bridges and termite resistant buildings but the supply of it is so limited that

they have had to hold back on (in her words) 'Some larger projects'. I'll tell ya what my brain lit up like a lightning storm in the Spring when I got to thinking about shipping large loads of Black Locust down the train tracks and trading it to them for salt, 'fresh' seafood and that oh so glorious coffee that they grow. It is in fact why I awoke tonight long after the girls had fallen asleep and the fire died down low. I just can't get it off my mind and I'm anxious for the Brunzes to return so we can pour over their beautiful maps and look at where they've made notations of what timber stands are growing where and how we can get them logged, cured and to the railroad tracks for shipment once the girls get the train engine operational. I've never wanted to be a logger but I'm finding it pretty damn appealing at this point. On a different note I got to thinking about music for the girls upcoming birthday party and I think it may be time to dig up what I think of as 'The Archive' which has hopefully aged well in the hole where I buried it all those years ago. I've been hesitant to do so because it would really suck to lose it all to an electro magnetic pulse after it being (hopefully) safe where I put it. It is only a few terabytes of media that I stashed away just in case I ever found myself needing it. It was probably one of my smarter moves in life to painstakingly acquire and sort all those e-books, how to videos, movies and albeit music. Personally I can't wait to see the look on the twins face once we get a computer running and they see the vast amount of information stored inside the little black boxes of the external hard drives that comprise 'The Archive'. Anyway I've cleared my mind of the thoughts that woke me from slumber and I'm going to attempt to 'sneak' back into our shared quarters inside the box car without waking the girls. I'm looking forward to the days ahead and feeling better than I have in a long damn time.

Day 1691. I have to admit that it has been a pretty damn fun day. First thing this morning the girls woke me with both of them setting two hyena pups to licking my ears to wake me up. I was deeply sleeping after my brief time awake last night beneath what remained in the sky of the recent full moon. Hell it could have been a blue full moon for all I know and it was a damn pretty sight even between the clouds and smoke that thankfully has cleared up a good bit since the full moon. Anyway while I was sleeping they brought the hyenas (all four of them) into the 'wagon circle' with my dogs who fucking miraculously didn't lose their shit and (according to Evy in her words) 'They didn't lose their shit at the sight of them hyenas and furthermore they wanted to Play with these pups.' Which didn't stop me from mildly scolding them about making decisions for other folk's animals but it was difficult to be too stern with playful little pups in my lap and beyond me in the dog yard of the 'wagon circle' I could clearly see all the dogs and hyenas laying around the fire pit, looking at me like 'Where is breakfast. We is hungry out here being happy in the sun'. Hard to be stern indeed when I add in the girls' laughter as they say together 'We made espresso!' Which damn sure got my attention and setting the pups aside 'I got up and got to it.' The espresso the girls made was awesome and sipping it as I had my morning smoke among the dogs and hyenas was actually pretty damn exhilarating and also it was a well made brew. After I was done with the first cup I asked the girls if they knew what an archive was and I was delighted to see them bob their heads in the affirmative before I told them a short tale about me compiling an archive of media, sorting it, and then ultimately burying it in the ground like a 'time capsule' safe from harm and to potentially be opened later. As mesmerizing as a tale I spun to them in the end all I could do is shrug and say 'It was meant to rebuild the world with and maybe have some good music for the apocalypse also' to which they both laughed so much that it set the dogs howling and the hyenas making their strangely human-like sounds. That laughter will be in my head for all time..especially since I joined in on it. I'll tell the rest of the day's events later because Eva has just parked the truck at the Library and we are going to get us a computer and a real sound system today for their upcoming birthday party.

Day 1691. (Again) Today turned into quite the long adventure and it was well past

dark when we arrived back at the Train Depot with the music blaring from the speakers in the little purple truck and the truck itself along with a 'new' fully enclosed cargo trailer riding pretty low on it's axles from all the stuff the girls loaded both down with. I of course added a few things but I doubt the few pairs of pants, shorts, socks, shirts and underwear I added to the load made that much of a difference. At first I tried to dissuade them from overdoing it but then a thought occurred to me that those two girls had literally lost everything in life and I'd met them with them possessing only the clothes they were wearing and their indomitable respective personalities. So considering all that and that they both seem quite committed to some fantastic birthday extravaganza I did what anyone else with half a heart would do...I indulged the fuck out of them, helped them fulfill their quest for gathering goods and delighted in their merriment along the way. I'll pick up where I left off earlier and not get too sidetracked here in the telling of today's long journey. Hanging upon the door of the Library was a sign that read in almost illegible script 'On Honeymoon With Wife' but the 'wife' part had been scratched out and under it was the word 'wives' written in blocky all capital letters followed by twelve exclamation marks. Thankfully the Library was open and I didn't have to convince Harold that we were going to remove from the Library not one but several computers and possibly a sound system if one was available. Well I gotta say that it was the twins idea to get multiple computers in case one broke or if we needed one for something else other than just playing some music and accessing the hard drives that comprise the Archive. It was also a good idea because all the computers were the same make and model which would mean all the parts would be interchangeable. I earned some appreciative looks from them over that last observation but I just thought it was rather obvious. After loading up the six computers we tarped them off in the rear of the truck with all their various paraphernalia including some really nice large screen monitors and headphones. We searched for a sound system but unless we wanted to start removing the speakers mounted in the yellowing drop ceiling there just wasn't anything suitable so after some short discussion we decided to head further west to an adjacent town that other than passing on the interstate (when we went to get the bus) I had pretty much avoided other than the one time I visited it's adjacent landfill. After telling the girls that it was much larger than both the paper mill town and the library town and that unlike them it had once had 'real stores' at it that folks from all the adjacent towns would shop at...boy did they perk up. I guess even after the apocalypse the idea of venturing from one small hick town or another into a 'bigger and better' town still holds quite the appeal. To put it simply we all got pretty 'stoked' to venture into unknown territory and see what useful stuff we could find. I'll spare you all the details of the places we visited throughout the day but whooa did we find some really handy stuff and also the girls got a tremendous amount of things for what they continually keep referring to as 'The Party!' I swear that every time they say those two words they say it with some real zest, a gleam in their eyes, mischievous smiles on their faces and oddly what I can only describe as 'finality' as if it were the only 'party' that ever could or would happen. The way they laugh after saying it isn't exactly creepy but it's damn close. Anyway we gathered everything from several really nice sound systems, to extension cords, to wires, to breaker boxes, to tools, to kiddie swimming pools, to twelve volt batteries, to clothes, to bedding, to cleaning products, and all kinds of other odds and ends. They even found a large disco ball along with several smaller disco balls that they swear are not just for 'The Party!'. I'll just say that if there was ever going to be a post-apocalyptic rave then from what all those girls loaded down the truck and trailer with is going to make for one hell of one and it's all their own idea with me just pointing out the more practical things they would need like audio cables and such. What I think is pretty damn cool is that they want me to play the music for them (in their words) 'While we do our thing' and I'm extremely looking forward to helping them do exactly that in any way that I can because hell I could damn sure use a good party just about now in life and I have a feeling that partying with the twins, the Brunzes and perhaps Aka and her Fist could make for one hell of a good time and could be pretty damn fun to

boot. Well I've rambled on here and the day has exhausted me but it has also got me thinking about what songs would be nice to listen to not at the 'end' of the world but at the beginning of it and I'm going to make my way away from the dying fire light and onto the cozy mattress that we brought back today and was the only item (other than the disco balls) that we unloaded from today's adventure. I have a feeling that I'm going to sleep better than I have in years and have pleasant dreams about thumping music echoing through the valley and the laughter of my friends as the 'do their thing'.

Day 1692. It's early morning and I'm up before the girls. I'm sipping coffee and enjoying some quiet time around the fire with the dogs and hyenas. I'm not sure why those last two get along so well but I suspect it has something to do with the way the girls are with animals and I'm not all that unconvinced that in some strange way they can communicate with animals and perhaps help animals communicate with each other. Whatever it is it's a damn odd sight watching them all getting along so well, watching my dogs teach the hyena pups and occasionally them all playing with each other in a large tangle of various sized bodies that surprisingly hasn't resulted in any snarls or fights. It's actually kind of mesmerizing in it's own way but hell so much has changed in the world already so what after all is one more change to remark upon or think it to be 'overly odd'. They have all proven themselves (other than the pups) to be great guardians so as a united pack I'm sure they will do equally as well or better at what they do. I didn't mention it yesterday but one other thing that I did find yesterday was an entire case of one pound bags of tobacco. I dunno how no one looted it long ago from where it sat in the store room of an old tobacco shop but it was there covered in dust while the rest of the store was absolutely empty of even it's lights and shelving. It's some pretty stale and harsh tasting stuff but at least it's some tobacco and I can perhaps quit thinking about my stockpile of it that was destroyed by the fallen space station what seems like an eternity ago but really was not all that long in the past. The ability for humans to adapt and continually keep moving forward has often amazed me in life and the marvel of myself doing it has not been lost upon me these last many weeks. Anyway I've been thinking that today we should use the bulldozer to push the box car that is furthest from the tracks (that makes up the 'wagon circle') out of the way and just drive the truck and trailer inside to unload it. Then perhaps if the twins are up for it we can retrieve a few of the unused box cars and double the size of the 'wagon circle'. We can also line them up in such a way that we have an actual opening to walk/drive in and out of rather than having to climb over a box car each time we enter or exit the 'wagon circle'. I think it's a pretty good idea and I'm glad that I remembered having it just before drifting off to sleep last night but it will definitely take most of the day to accomplish and I don't want to infringe upon their party preparations so we will see how it goes after they are up and get some coffee in them. Ahh Evy just came to the fire with Eva not far behind her and they are both wearing matching fuzzy purple bath robes and they both have what I call their 'don't talk to me until after coffee look' upon their faces but they are smiling and staring at the already brewing coffee pot sitting upon the fire as they each pick up one of the hyena pups and cradling them in their arms begin rubbing their little bellies. Well the coffee is almost done and as has become the morning habit we will sit and talk about our dreams, plot our day and enjoy each others company.

Day 1692. (Again) There is always so much that goes on in a day that I often feel that these entries are woefully inadequate in capturing my experiences and the nuances of my thoughts but nonetheless I do my best to convey what is possible and file away as much as I can in my own memory. Perhaps one day I will be truly capable of recounting it all but alas I know that along the way some details will be lost, misplaced or even forgotten altogether. Today was pretty damn good though and the three of us accomplished a heck of a lot during the nearly fourteen hours of daylight we had available. Evy was opposed to helping moving the box cars around to reform the 'wagon circle' because she wanted to spend the day working on the

train engine. Apparently she retrieved some new fuel line and fuel filters when we were on our previous day's outing and she seemed rather convinced (that in her words) 'Today is the fucking day I fix that darn train!' and the passion in her voice lead both me and Eva to laughing and each in turn encouraging her to 'do it' and if she needed help to just let us know. To be clear they were both very excited about expanding the Train Depot by adding more box cars to the 'wagon circle' and even more enthusiastic about not having to climb up and down the damn stairs all the time but Evy had a dream that she said 'showed her the way' to fix the train engine and she was dead set upon seeing it fulfilled. So me and Eva went to work with the bulldozer pushing the box cars around and just as we pushed the final one into place the blare of the train whistle (also called an air whistle) screeched so loud that for a split second I didn't know what the hell it was and my head whipped around towards the direction of the sound so fast that I gave myself a damn 'crick' in my neck before I realized what was going on and saw a very dirty faced Evy waving at us through the train's window with a triumphant smile upon her face as Eva broke into a run towards the train and I turned the ignition off on the bulldozer just in time to hear the idling train engine before Evy fired off the whistle again in two quick bursts that could undoubtedly be heard for miles around. Anyway I'm pretty wiped out from the days activities and am starting to feel the tug of sleep but we have got to finish fashioning a gate for the new entryway into the expanded wagon circle before I can succumb to rest. All three of us went for a ride in the little truck earlier and retrieved four large cattle gates from a few of the old farms around here along with a hundred odd feet of hogwire that we lashed to the gates after setting one gate atop another to form two very large gates that we need to now go lift into place and mount on their hinge pins so I'm going to wrap this entry up, finish drinking this espresso and get to it before weariness overtakes me.

Day 1693. It is getting close to noon and I'm thinking the Brunzes will be returning either tonight or perhaps tomorrow morning. I'm calling it an 'educated hunch' but if my rudimentary calculations are even half-what accurate then theirs plus Aka and her Fist's companions should (maybe) arrive in that time frame but it is also just a feeling nagging at me that they are steadily approaching. I've probably been alone with the twins too long and their combined sublime psychic presence has me inclined to following my intuition more and wondering if whatever makes them the way they are is contagious or is 'rubbing off' on me in some way that I cannot quite quantify into meaningful words. Either way I don't mind because they are great company, the dogs are happy with the hyenas living amongst them and hell I'm even happy and that is rather damn amazing considering the journey I've made to where I am now. Right this moment I am taking my ease by the fire brewing some of that delicious coffee that I got from Aka. Life could indeed be much worse than it is and on top of everything the train engine now starts up immediately and purrs like a giant black smoke belching kitten. This morning I was praising both the twins on everything they have done and especially about getting the train running and their other more mechanical projects that they have shown a deft (and skillful) touch with during our many days together. They both beamed nearly identical smiles and thanked me for my praise. They thanked me more as I continued to prattle on and eventually I think they grew a bit embarrassed and changed the subject by announcing that they were going to spend a few hours painting the train today and although I haven't gone and looked at it yet their answer when I asked what they were going to paint on it was them both laughing heartily and together saying "A Kitten" before quickly finishing off their coffee and heading to get their paint supplies. I've spent today in one of the recent boxcar additions to the Wagon Circle and after a little bit of sweeping I unloaded the four fold-up tables that we got the other day, and after setting them up in the boxcar, I then unloaded all the electronics related stuff and started the long process of setting up as much of it as possible. The girls told me last night that the train itself is just a giant electric generator that powers AC motors to turn the 'wheels' on the train. Although the train hasn't actually been moved yet, as it is it will make for one

hell on an electric generator. The girls said that by the time their birthday party arrives that they will have figured out how to 'tap the AC power' on the train, move the train downhill a short distance from the Train Depot, and all the needed wires ran from the train to the boxcar (the one I've been setting up the electronics in and thinking of fondly as the Hack Shack). According to them I'll have 'plenty of time for a sound check before the party so if anything burns out we will have time to replace it'. When they mentioned that last bit I asked myself 'What if I'm what burns out' but luckily I coughed before I could laugh and perhaps have them think I was laughing at their proposals. Anyway things are definitely moving along. Well I have to cut this one short because the coffee is done and I'm going to go hike some of it over to the girls where they are painting on the train and check out how bizarre of a paint job they have been giving the old dirty and rusty thing.

Day 1694. Well the Brunzes along with Aka and her Fist arrived back late last night just as the twins and I were having our last smoke of the evening around the fire at the center of the now greatly improved Wagon Circle. We had actually just got done laughing over my inclination to give places names when the dogs and hyenas began making such a ruckus that it set the mule to braying loudly in it's stall. Beneath all the noise we could just (ever so faintly) hear the grind of metal on metal produced by the jiggers rolling on the train tracks. The girls began building up the fire while I settled the animals down and then went out the gate to meet our approaching comrades out beneath the stars near the train tracks with a flashlight. After flashing my light at them six times and receiving the pre-agreed eight flashes in return I sighed a little sigh of relief that it was actually them and not some unknown party that could potentially prove problematic. Aka's Fist actually reached me first and greeted me in their customary silence that was not quite uncomfortable. They sat in their saddles appearing to watch everywhere and nowhere all at once as the slow grating sounds drew closer from down the hill. They eventually arrived and after securing and dismounting the pedal driven apparatuses they both startled me by wrapping me in a big hug between them and emphatically telling me it was good to see me. For my part I returned their embrace to the best of my abilities and after disengaging myself from them (and greeting Aka with a salute) I lead the way to the newly constructed gates where we were met by the twins who had opened the gates and stood to either side of the entrance. After the horses and everyone was inside the twins went about closing the gates in what seemed like an almost solemn and albeit ceremonial fashion. I was nervous about the dogs, hyenas and horses all being together but the former had settled around the fire and looked in our direction with only mild curiosity. Their was more hugging between the Brunzes and the twins as Aka told me about their rather uneventful trek up the train tracks. Even though the twins and I were rather exhausted we put together a warm meal for the others before ambling off to rest for the night. This morning around the fire as we talked about our dreams both the Brunzes expressed how great the changes to the Wagon Circle and Train Depot itself were and they were both especially impressed by the new gated entrance. We also told them of our trip to town, the Hack Shack, the now running train engine and the coming birthday party. That last bit really got all the newcomers attention and before long everyone (including Aka's usually tight lipped Fist) were excitedly chatting about the possibilities to (In Eva's words) 'Have a really fucking good time'. For myself I've done my best not to get caught up in the frenzy that has apparently taken over everyone else as they make costumes, build decorations and pretty much do their best to convert the entire Wagon Circle into something related to the upcoming party but I must admit that deep down I'm definitely 'feeling' the hubris as I think about what music to play and just how much damn fun it is going to be to be blasting out some tunes powered by the train idling on it's tracks. Well the day is burning away and if all this stuff the twins want for their birthday (like the lights and music) is really going to happen then I've got to get back to working with the others on getting it all setup.

Day 1696. I feel like there is much to explain about what all happened during the twins birthday party and the events that lead up to us all still being awake into (and beyond) the wee hours of the morning. There are parts to the last many hours that I can only deduce and more or less 'guess' at what actually occurred and now after only a few hours of sleep as I find myself sitting in the woods alone with both my thoughts and my dogs, with the murkiness of those events swimming away from my mental grasp it may not be the best time to record such things but I think perhaps in doing so it will help me to put the pieces somewhat together. I guess that the first and obvious thing to note is that we were all (including the twins) pretty fucking high. I would probably candy coat that fact if I were a bit more of a prudish person but for one I'm not and for two what the fuck does it really matter to be unwilling to conceal that most fundamental truth...in other words we were fucking 'loaded'...so what! The night started off looking like it might rain which was a bit of a downer but the twins made it clear that (in Eva's words) 'We don't give a damn if we get all fucking wet!'. As a side note here I want to say that they were both avid users of 'foul language' long before keeping company with me and my surly mouth but hey I'm not into being the post-apocalyptic language police anymore than I am into trying to be a parental figure to them as I have clearly stated numerous times before. So back to the story here before I get off on a tangent. It was looking like rain and maybe a lot of rain so given the girls enthusiasm to 'sally forth' regardless, Aka set her Fist to collecting firewood while she and the Brunzes helped me lug all the music equipment up on top of the boxcar that lays east and parallel to the train tracks and get everything setup along with a variety of tarps, pieces of plastic and umbrellas to cover everything in case the ominously looming rain broke loose. Getting everything setup took much less time than I thought it would and I quickly found myself in the position of asking Evy to go start the train so that I could start doing a sound check and make sure that everything was working before it got dark and started raining because (based on past experience) troubleshooting a sound system in the rain absolutely fucking sucks. She had the train purring along in no time and I danced a little jig of excitement as I watched all the devices before me on the folding table light up as I toggled their power buttons. I had spent a good deal of time recently thinking about what song to play first and of course the only song that really 'fit' was Ring of Fire and I went with one of my favorite versions of it sung by June Carter and Johnny fucking Cash. It was downright eerie that as soon as I started the music the sky grew rapidly darker and the first time that fabulous duet said the word 'love' a bright flash of lightning crackled in the distance behind me and thunder rumbled through the little valley whose eastern ridge the Train Depot is situated on...and I laughed almost maniacally and bumped the volume up a few notches. I had forgotten how good loud (really loud) music makes me feel and something that I didn't quite know was broken inside of me felt like it had taken the first step towards mending but that is a whole other story altogether and I shouldn't get sidetracked with it here no matter how much I would like to do just that. Before the song was over Clair came up and set a plastic gallon jug of what I first thought was water on the table in front of me and as she gave me a hug she whispered in my ear 'I love that song! Enjoy the moonshine!' before kissing me on the cheek and skipping away over the tops of the boxcars and back towards the way down into the Wagon Circle. Knowing well that I wouldn't need the entire gallon of moonshine nor would it be wise to start over indulging whilst atop the boxcar playing music...I nonetheless popped off the lid and took a rather large draught of the stuff and was thankful that she had watered it down for me because it was so smooth I probably would have drank too much of it too quickly and been faced with the challenge of just staying erect and functioning as I did my musical duties. Below me as I watched the original pile of firewood first double then quadruple in size as Aka's Fist (joined by Aka and the Brunzes) kept bringing in load after load of firewood with the little purple truck and while stacking some to the side they mostly kept building on a rather elaborate looking 'bee hive' looking structure that was sure not to go out even in the most thunderous downpour. Song after song played out as the day grew closer to night and the 'bee hive' got so large that

they were standing in the bed of the truck to be able to add more wood to the top of the structure and I have to say that the way they all worked together was both efficient and rather mesmerizing to watch. For my part I pushed the gallon jug of moonshine out of my immediate reach and started rolling several smokes so that in case I did dive a little too heavily into the shine I wouldn't have to fumble around trying to roll them later and possibly wasting any of the precious tobacco. I was just finishing rolling the twenty third smoke when Aka started waving to me and motioning that I should join them around the 'bee hive' for what I presumed would be the lighting of it. Waving back I took another liberal draught of the shine and then carefully made my way down to join my comrades. Even with just a few shots of the twins excellent shine in me that walk was probably the last few truly sober moments that I had all night. Looking back on those moments I have to ask myself if I knew what I knew now would I really change anything...my resounding answer is...fuck no! Anyway everyone gathered around the fire (except the twins who were nowhere around) and we discussed who should have the honors of lightning the fire and truly kicking off the festivities. I suggested that the twins do it but was informed by Rusty that they had other activities planned and had said that their cue to start those activities was the lighting of the fire...which according to Rusty the girls had said 'Yal figure it out'. So we figured it out and it was Clair who got the honors and whoa did it light fast. I hadn't given much thought to what type of wood they had gathered and just figured they had added some foreign substance to it that made it produce the purple and red flames that produced an equally purple and red smoke that rapidly filled the entire Wagon Circle. The stuff also sparked like crazy and we all took several steps back from it as we were engulfed by the sweetly aromatic scent of the smoke and the high heat of the fire. I didn't know why (well know I do) but we all started laughing as the twins emerged from the living quarters boxcar wearing elaborate peacock feather headdresses and what took me a few moments to figure out were flesh toned full body suits that at first glance made them appear to be naked. They each held a long switch in their right hand and as they began doing this sort of dance/prance around the fire and through the billowing smoke and sparks they were swatting each other and counting off the years they had been alive. I'm going to be clear here and just say it was probably the most bizarrely beautiful and albeit graceful birthday spanking that I had ever witnessed. Before long they were both laughing and all of us were laughing along with them and clapping along with the music that was playing. I don't know if the song 'Jackson' had ever been played at a shindig quite like that but somehow it fit perfectly. I would like to say that That was the end to the strangeness of the evening's festivities but really it was just the beginning. I will spell the rest of it out later but for now I'm just going to curl up here in the sunshine with the dogs and take a little nap and maybe when I wake up I will still be smiling but my thoughts won't be so elusive.

Day 1696 (Again) I did not nap all that long before awakening to one of the dogs making noises as it pursued (or was being pursued) over some dream landscape that had her little front feet twitching against my right hand. I smiled a little as I got up and watched her come awake, jump to her feet and give herself a thorough shaking before looking around and looking unimpressed she flopped back down on the ground and was asleep again in seconds and a few moments later her little feet were twitching again. I am still unsure of why I find everything so amusing today but I have a feeling that I am still experiencing some of the effects of the smoke the night before. The smoke from the firewood had taken over the twins birthday and made it a much more peculiar series of events than anyone could have anticipated which is what has lead me into the woods today to see what is so 'peculiar' about the wood that was burned in the fire or at least try to figure it out. All I really had to do to find where the wood was gathered from was to follow the perfectly shaped ruts left by the purple truck on it's many round trips the day before...but I got sidetracked picking blackberries, then I wanted to have a smoke under a large sycamore tree and evidently wanted to take a nap. Even though I only slept a short time the dreams that I had were surreal in how much time passed in them and the

vividness is even now hard to shake. Not to get sidetracked but during my nap it seemed like I was talking with the Brunzes and the twins and much of the conversations were simply humorous and for lack of a better word 'absurd'. After the nap I made it to the little grove that looked like at some point it had seen a small tornado or high wind event in the past because all the trees within a quarter acre were dead and knocked over in not so much a mess but in a rather uniform way with the majority of their tops aimed either north or slightly north east. The place was an interesting site in and of itself but the more interesting part was that growing on and inside all of the downed black locust trees there appeared to be some sort of purple colored parasite that I'm hesitant to call a fungus because it looks more like a sap (or resin) coating the wood just under the bark. I did not check every downed tree in the area but I checked enough of them that I am confident that most (if not all) are showing signs of something that I have never seen before in all my years of working with black locust trees...something different. I took several samples of the stuff and put it in a sealed plastic bag for further examination. I was careful not to touch any of the 'purple goop' as I gathered it but just the smell of it as I shaved off pieces of it with a pocket knife brought back vivid memories of how the smoke smelled the night before. When I noticed that I started holding my breath as I collected the samples. So about the night before when the smoke filled the Wagon Circle and the twins pretty much captivated us all by proceeding through an entire night of costume changes that occasionally appeared to be more acts of 'sleight of hand' than costume changes as they changed props, danced jigs, laughed, did magic tricks (some of which I am not sure were not done with actual magic) and to sort of top everything as the night wore on and the sun was just about to rise the twins produced harmonicas and started playing the loveliest tunes along with the music that was already filling the Wagon Circle much like the smoke...the music was good and their music was delightful. At some point one of us realized what was going on with the smoke and why we were all feeling as peculiar as we were feeling. I think that it was Rusty actually but we were all laughing and agreeing and trying to halt our own laughter long enough to simply say...there is something in the smoke. Looking back on it I should add 'there is something potent in the smoke'. Anyway it was Clair that gained some sort of lucidity and rallied everyone to pair off with someone else and try to keep each other hydrated. It was a good move on her part. Later in the evening I shared the watered down moonshine with Rusty when he showed up dancing to the music atop the boxcar. He danced until he could not stand on his feet anymore and had fallen asleep with his head beside one of the speakers and Clair sprawled out beside him with her head on his chest. By the time the sun was rising the only folks awake were myself and the twins who were sitting, smoking and talking beside the fire. There was a moment of perfect calm that I recall very clearly just as the sun started to make it's way over the mountains and the music lulled for several moments before starting in again with some very relaxing jazz. I laughed and the twins hearing it waved at me and pointed towards the sun and all I could do was laugh some more and wave back to them. Just about then I heard (even over the music) an approaching rumbling sound that almost sounded familiar but I really could not place it and not wanting to turn the music down immediately I looked towards the source of the sounds and saw approaching down the hill beside the train tracks the many headlights of an approaching vehicle. Upon seeing the lights I turned the music down slightly and as I climbed down into the Wagon Circle it dawned on me that I knew that sound but I still could not place it. When I got down by the fire Eva told me I should get the gate and I just did what she said because neither one of them seemed very alarmed and if anything they were feeling quite the opposite. So I got to the gate but instead of just opening it I slipped through to the other side and closed the gate behind me. I felt a little better about doing that when both a dog and a hyena joined me outside before I could get the gate closed. Eventually the bus came into view and the dog and hyena faded into the background as it did. My gut told me who it was but I had learned to listen to my head as well and it's better to be safe. When the bus stopped near the gate before me and after turning it's headlights off the engine idled down and was

silent after letting out a near sigh of a backfire out of an exhaust pipe on it's roof. I remember thinking 'even the backfires are getting tired in this world'. Which is about the time that the door opened and out stepped Gram in all her strange planes, angles, metal and carbon fiber reinforced plastic. By the look on her face she was not happy and the sawed down double barrel shotguns duct-taped together to make quite the impressive hand cannon that she held braced against her right hip. She looked like the ugly end of business gone wrong and I ain't ashamed to admit that I pissed my pants a tad when I realized what she had aimed at me. I raised my hands and started backing away just as I heard to very different types of growl coming from my left and right sides. I said something like 'Easy now' and I still am not sure if I was talking to Gram, the dog, the hyena or myself but I kept saying it as I backed towards the gate where the twins were now standing just on the other side. A lot of things happened at once but pretty much things unfolded as follows. Gram seeing the twins with her one good and half blind eye was positive that they were naked even though they were in the outfit that they had started the night with and were wrapped mostly under a large blanket that they were sharing for warmth. Gram started saying over and over 'You face painted naked hussies' in such a shocked way that each time she repeated it she sounded surprised and then would repeat it again. Then in mid-utterance she stopped and looking at me said 'You are feeding them drugs, keeping them caged and playing music...' She trailed off before shaking her head eyeing me accusingly and as she hefted the hand cannon at her waist a powerful punch appeared from the night and Aka stood over an unconscious Gram. Then Aka was raising her hands as a voice from behind her said 'Now. Now. Hold steady'. It was a voice I knew and it sounded like it had gained quite a lot of calm authority since the last I had heard it. Cara had returned and by the look on her face she wanted to know what the hell was going on as well but she was also smiling and behind her on the bus there were several other folks as well and they had all seen what had transpired with Gram which made things a bit awkward. Neither the dogs nor hyenas seemed to be bothered by the newcomers who gathered around the fire in the Wagon Circle just as the sun started to really shine down and some soft jazz played in the background and new friends and old friends were well met and the day wore on filled with laughter and conversation. Gram eventually awoke in the bus where Cara and Aka had carried her to earlier while she was unconscious and I guess that the first thing she saw was Aka sitting vigil over her because in Aka's words 'I want to chat with her' and so she did. I guess their talk went well because other than just glaring at me Gram has of yet tried to harm me or be anything other than civil...but still just the memory of that crazed look on her face is enough to make me cautious and albeit slightly terrified when I think about what might have happened if Aka had not intervened when she did. Cara seems quite impressed by Aka and her Fist and they have spent most of the day talking trade routes, shipping corridors, smuggling routes and pretty much anything and everything to do with moving cargo along the coast either by land or water. For the most part I just listened in on what everyone was talking about and kept adding firewood to the fire (a firewood that did not create the strange smoke) and tried to just relax until Rusty awoke and took over tending the fire while I went hiking to locate the source of the peculiar smoke. So now I think

I should make a move on it and get back to the Wagon Circle and see how everything is going and how we are going to accommodate the new folks I did get all their names but I'm keeping this entry brief so suffice it to say we are all well met and I will get to explaining the new folks eventually because evidently they came to stay and help with whatever they could help with according to their various skills which I also will not detail here...but wow they are all intelligent and most importantly friendly so that is pleasant. They were also well stocked with their own food and water supply on the bus. According to Cara (who actually drove the bus) Gram had been acting erratic for several weeks and had nearly succeeded driving the bus (along with everyone on it) off a steep embankment that lead down to a flooding river. It had taken Cara and three others to gain control over the bus and remove Gram from the driver's seat. Once she was removed she had been locked in on of the bus's two bathrooms. They had narrowly escaped and once placed

in the bathroom Gram had quit struggling curled up in the small bathtub and fell asleep. Anyway I'm going to just keep it short and get back out of the woods before the rain moves in.