

Turn It On Again

The town of Garnet was now only sixty or so miles away, but the acquisition of the blocks seemed to have overshadowed the ultimate importance of reaching it. It was hard to know for sure, but I think Bear didn't care about our ultimate destination. As we all interacted and gave out our thoughts and ideas, he only seemed to solidify. Two became three, and whatever tension there may have been between Bear and I first eased, and then evaporated entirely.

At first, Brin cradled the three cubes protectively in her hand, and looked around constantly. She was reacquainting herself with the visible world, and her imperative made perfect sense. She was an occasional participant in our conversation but her focus was outward, and she spent a lot of time looking up into the sky. It was as if she couldn't get enough of the light it contained. The cubes had banished the dark, but having spent so much time in that enemy's land, she was probably soaking in as much as she could. There was a chance that she actually *was* aware of the tenuous nature of her deliverance. Perhaps I had misread her.

Early on, Bear and I were in the middle of an interchange about what the cubes could influence, and the specifics. I would postulate on the former, and then he would spank me on the latter.

"If you put one of them on a propane tank, could we barbeque again?"

"How far is the igniter and burner from the tank? Might need more than one."

"Well, happily we have--."

Brin broke in, an urgency in her voice.

"What if three is too many for me to see the others?"

We both looked at her. I was first this time, eloquent as always.

"Uh, what?"

'She looked back at me, and I could see doubt there. She stopped us by halting her pull on the wheel-barrow. She continued.

"We've been walking for hours. No little lights anywhere. I *have* been looking."

She looked down at the three adjoined cubes in her hands. She separated one of them from the other two, and then looked around. I didn't get far with my response.

"Maybe--."

She cut me off, sounding frustrated.

"There's one *right* over there! How many did I miss so far? Dammit."

She handed me the separated one. Then she crossed the black-top and the gravel shoulder, and hopped across a drainage ditch. She made a short up-hill climb between two trees, and then retrieved something from the tall grass lining the hillside.

She held it up, and it twinkled in the sunlight. Then she returned to where we waited. She handed off the new one, this time to Bear. She looked pretty unhappy as he took it. I asked her what was wrong, not making the leap of logic until she laid it out for me.

"I can't see any others if I can see all the way, just the put-together ones I'm carrying. But I can with just two. Gotta stay in the dark for that, I guess."

"Shit, Brin. I'm sorry." My response felt not just insufficient, but stupid.

She didn't take issue with it. She just took a deep breath, and then put on a small smile.

“Still, this is way better than before. And, I can take breaks. We need as many of these things as we can get, right?”

I stepped forward and hugged her tight, and then kissed her on the forehead before letting her go. I hoped to say with that what I didn’t have the right words for. She just nodded, and then we went on.

The miles passed slowly by, punctuated by occasional side-quests to retrieve more of the blocks as Brin sighted them in her semi-darkness. If they were near the road, Brin would just go and pick them up. I followed her on the ones that she was able to see further afield, and a few times took her direction when the prize was not within easy reach. One had landed on the roof of what turned out to be a well-pump house at the edge of a large ranch. Another was caught in the fork of a tree thirty or so feet above the ground. Climbing seemed to be my new occupation, and I can’t say I enjoyed any of it. By the time we began to see mileage signs for the next town, Junction City, we’d accumulated seven more, bringing our current total to eleven. We stored them across pockets, the wheel-barrow, and Bear’s pack, just in case.

When we caught our first sight of it as we cleared a bend in the road, Bear chuckled.

“Well, they got it half right.”

Maybe two dozen buildings squatted around an intersection where a county route crossed 78. A single stop-light hung above it, once serving all directions but now just a blank fixture. I couldn’t see any smoke rising from the few visible chimneys, and I couldn’t smell any either. We stopped a few hundred yards short of the first structure, a single story house set back from the road with a yard full of tall weeds circling a single oak tree.

I pulled a cube out of my pocket and handed it to Brin.

“Three sets of eyes are better than two. I’ll bet you need a break, anyway.”

She took it, and added it to the two in her hand.

I could see the change in her body language as the dark was banished once more. She seemed to inflate a little, and lean in to what lay ahead. She inspected the blip of a town in front of us with a few slight sweeps of her head. Her words were an aside as she did.

“I need a carry-case or something for these, so I can be hands-free.”

Bear spoke up.

“I’ve got something. Probably temporary, though.”

He shrugged his pack off, kneeling down to rummage through one of the side pockets. He drew out a brick of Saltine crackers shrouded in their plastic sleeve. He carefully opened one end, and dumped the individual crackers back into the same pocket, emptying the rectangular packaging. He handed it off to her and re-secured the pocket.

Brin and I both stared at it for a moment, and then back at him in near-unison. He stood up, looking back at us unperturbed. He then reached into his back pocket and pulled out several small zip-ties. He separated one out and offered it to her as well, returning the remainder to their point of origin. He raised his eyebrows at us as he re-shouldered his pack.

“Got a better idea? Should keep them together, even if you have to really move.”

Brin didn’t wait, just slid the three-cube rectangle into the open end of the plastic sleeve. It was a near-perfect fit. She twisted the open end around several times and then secured it with the zip-tie.

The result was a tight, rigid package that she slid into the kangaroo pouch pocket across the front of her hoodie, freeing her second hand. She smiled at him.

“Thank you, Bear. That’s perfect.”

I couldn’t help it.

“But we should probably find you some tomato soup man, stat. Clock’s ticking on those crackers now.”

Neither of them laughed, or even smiled. I held up my hands in surrender.

“Tough crowd. Fine, let’s go. I say straight up the middle. Thoughts?”

We worked it out. Bear would scan left and I right. Brin said she’d pull the cart so we could be ready to shoot. I saw Bear load what looked like metal ball-bearing into the pouch on his wrist-sling, and I nocked one as we moved forward towards the intersection.

Junction City proved to be as empty as it looked. Nothing happened as we passed a couple houses first, and then single-story business fronts. Some of these had glass broken out of the windows facing the road, but not many. There were a few vehicles parked along the curbs in front of some of them, but again, not many. Nothing continued to happen as we stopped in the middle of the intersection, alternately looking down either direction of the county road before returning our attention to the road leading onward.

Some intuition drew my attention to the stop-light hanging above us. I stared at it for a few seconds, and that focus then led to the power-lines connected to it, and then outward to follow along concave arcs as they stretched pole-to-pole on their way out of town. I got it all at once. I turned to them.

“We need to try them all together. This is the perfect place.”

They both turned towards me with twin expressions of bemusement. I gestured widely with both hands.

“C’mon. It’s an electric canvas, and there’s no one here. Let’s see what happens.”

There was a moment when I thought Bear would object. He had a look of concern on his face, but then he bent to retrieve the cubes we’d hidden among our things. Brin started to remove the package from her pocket, but I waved her off.

“No, keep those aside for now. I think we have enough others to show...um...something. There’s a phrase for it. I’m blanking.” Bear came to the rescue.

“Proof of concept.”

I pointed at him as he set individual cubes loosely atop the contents of the wheel-barrow.

“Yes, that. Brin, will you do the honors?”

She stepped in, and started to line the cubes up along the top edge of one side of the barrow. They clicked together one-by-one. Once we passed four, I looked around us, waiting to see what if anything would happen. In a few seconds, she had all eight connected together in a straight line.

Nothing. I felt both confusion and disappointment. This is not what I expected. We all observed the lack of any change around us for a few more seconds before I remembered that Brin could see things I couldn’t.

“Brin? What do you see?”

She shook her head.

“Nothing. It looks the same as the one in my pocket. Just as bright, but no different.”

I sighed, frustrated. I sounded petulant even to myself as I voiced it.

"Well, that sucks. Does that mean it stops at three? What's the point of that?"

Bear spoke up.

"We should try a cube."

He stepped up next to Brin, leaned down, and separated four of the in-line eight. He assembled them in a square, and then did the same for the other four. He brought the two squares together. The instant they clicked together, a *lot* of shit happened all at once.

The stop-light above us winked on, red in one direction, green in the other. Neon signs in store windows came to life, some blinking in a bid for attention. Alarms in several of the vehicles parked along the curbs in all directions started to blare, and their head-lights winked in time. Through store-front windows, fluorescent lighting illuminated formerly dark interiors, and somewhere behind us canned music began to drift out into the intersection.

The three of us rotated on our individual axes, taking in the evidence of our old world returned to life. Brin looked utterly transported, the sounds now coupled with sights spanning a much larger void than either Bear or me.

I was rapt as well, but then the power-lines caught my attention once more. The same intuition that had prompted me to suggest the experiment now screamed at me to stop it.

"Bear! Kill it!"

He did, separating four from four with a small twist. Everything ceased. They both turned to look at me. Brin seemed irritated as she spoke.

"What?"

"We need to get the hell out of here. This was a stupid idea, and I am an idiot."

"Are you kidding me? It worked!"

I shook my head and pointed at the closest power-pole.

"Yes, it did. But how far did it go? When was the last time the world made this kind of noise? We need to *go*. Right fucking now."