

Seeds and Stones: Part 1

by Paul j Rogers

Rudy Cam steadied his rucksack when the transport cart hit another divot. He cursed the driver under his breath so that nobody could hear. Inside his bag were the components for a fertilizer bomb, ammonium nitrate sealed in an easy-lock container and a small can of machine oil he'd bought at the hardware store in Haine. Other contents included an old ice cream tub to be used as casing and a length of braided cotton soaked in lighter fuel for ignition.

The asphalt lanes of the Kent Facility were usually nectarine-smooth, but out here, beneath the floodlights of the Easyripe tomato plantation, there must've been some kind of spillage because the ten-seat vehicle was pitching and sliding. To make matters worse, the driver had shown up two minutes late at the rest area and he was tanking it. The picker next to Rudy hit his head on the canvas roofing and then slammed back onto the moulded plastic bench. He grumbled to the driver, told him to ease off on the juice, but the driver was wired up to his headset and didn't hear a word of it.

Rudy had only been at The Corp for a week but that was long enough to know that the start of a shift was never optimistic. Some pickers got lost in thought, others lost inside their headphones. Only the immigrants seemed contented. Going by their faces, picking Easyclean potatoes, or whatever The Corp had scheduled them for that shift, must've been a good gig compared to what they were used to. But harvesting genetically perfected produce for use in the readymade and canned food industries didn't satisfy Rudy Cam. After all, he had a bomb inside his bag. Besides, he was born and raised in Orb, at The Co-op, a sixth generation organic peach farmer from up on The Steeps.

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At the Orb Community Hall, Village Superintendent Cam wanted to press on with the meeting, but the villagers wouldn't settle. Impatience twisted his wind and worry-beaten features, which had earned him the nickname Old Man Cam even though he was only in his fifties. The villagers were agitated by the lack of rain, a familiar theme these past six summers. Their decreased rainfall neatly matched The Corp's arrival on The Plains, and none of them needed telling twice that there must be a connection. Most villagers blamed warm rain cloud seeding — impregnating clouds with coalescing chemicals and super-sulphates to induce rainfall — a practice now banned after the ammonium poisoning scandals. Cam, however, believed that bigger forces were at play as rainfall on The Steeps had been in decline for a generation, although there had indeed been a negative spike the last six summers. To Cam, summer cloud seeding was a phantom, a convenient conspiracy, for it was obvious the entire climate system had changed, and he doubted it'd be changing back anytime soon.

"They're not seeding," Cam said. "Other than the dusters, there've been no planes in months."

Cam tapped the decrepit microphone, a real karaoke relic, and told the villagers that The Corp's ground was fertile because they pumped in seawater, which

they then desalinated. This was a stone cold fact and something Cam planned to elaborate on shortly. Nils Fiveheads, who wore camos in all situations and seasons and had ears like iron skillet, lifted his giant frame out of his seat.

“What about them flashes in the sky over San Pedro?” Fiveheads said. “Perhaps Brother Cam believes they’re UFOs.”

Everybody laughed, including Cam, although those who knew him well, such as his wife or his son Rudy, would recognise that the chuckle was counterfeit.

“No, Brother Fiveheads,” Cam said when the villagers had quietened. “I don’t believe they’re UFOs. But I do believe there’s a military firing range up at San Pedro and there might just be a connection.”

Achilles Smith got to his feet. Smith was Fiveheads’ sidekick and had a penchant for collecting vintage petroliana. He grinned at the assembled villagers, enjoying the moment, milking the attention before he spoke. He even found time to wink at one of the Butcher girls.

“How about down in Ooster?” Smith said. “They got a firing range there as well?”

“Not to my knowledge,” said Cam.

Smith jammed his thumbs into his side pockets and told the assembled villagers that he’d seen lights in the sky over the Andarax Derby Slam. He’d even seen the pickup with the built-in launcher, which they covered with tarp when they were on the move. Cam knew all about that rocket launcher. The villagers were obsessed with it, nobody more so than his son Rudy. The boy used to go out on the quad to look for it, all over the Murray Seaboard, stalking the night, and its discovery led to the events that had seen Rudy Cam leave the family home. Rudy reckoned the old man had gone soft on The Corp, but Cam knew that nothing could be further from the truth. He, after all, had a plan to save the village, and very soon he’d be ready to share it. For now, though, he’d let their grumbling boil dry before approaching such an important topic. Let them focus on that rocket launcher. After all, they needed something to blame. They needed a folk devil.

“Achilles Smith, did you photograph those lights over Ooster?” Cam said.

“No, I did not,” Smith said. “I’m more helpless than a hermit crab without no helmet when it comes to personal technology.”

This archaic idiom drew a few titters from the villagers. Cam sniffed, probably the pollen, and wondered why Achilles Smith hadn’t taken footage of the lights at Ooster because he knew damn well the man could use a camera. The village superintendent removed his spectacles, which were fitted with flip-up sunglasses, and then breathed onto the right lens. When he returned them to that sunburned turnip that passed for a nose, he watched Fred Charbonneau sneak in from the wings, squeeze along a row, bowing his head for the inconvenience, and then settle in an empty seat.

Charbonneau was a successful novelist with no personal stake in the future of the village other than presumably liking it the way it was, so it was a great surprise to see him as he’d yet to attend a meeting since moving to The Steeps in spring. It was also a great inconvenience as Cam was about to propose that desalinating seawater was the future of the village, and to pay for equipment and secure access to The Corp’s pipeline the village would have to exchange communal marshland at the base of The Steeps. The trouble was Charbonneau’s drainage strip was adjacent to this land and therefore crucial to Cam’s plan, so he’d schemed to persuade Charbonneau to part with it once he’d got the other villagers onboard, which, he

guessed, was not going to be easy. Cam knew he must change tack.

“I’ve been all over the seaboard and I’ve seen no goddamn rockets.” Cam said.

The use of that mild expletive drew tuts from some quarters, but he’d bought some time to think. Cam looked towards his wife. Tonight, she had her hair worn down, which made her look older. She was worried about the harvest. She was angry, too, blamed him for forcing Rudy from their home. He watched her scan the hall, cheeks beginning to bruise, eyes of soot, looking with contempt at the other villagers, people they’d known their entire lives, who, for the last few years, had been acting like complete strangers.

Fiveheads must’ve asked another question because he was up on his feet again and the villagers were gawping at Cam with twisted faces. The superintendent cleared his throat and asked Fiveheads to repeat what he’d just said.

“The summer rains have halved since The Corp set up on The Plains,” Fiveheads said.

Fiveheads, now in ebullient mood, didn’t wait for Cam’s response and paced towards the central aisle while proclaiming that The Steeps had been fertile for over fifteen generations, therefore, as rain had always fallen on them but The Plains had historically been arid, The Corp must’ve had a dark hand in making them barren. Cam flared his hairy nostrils because to call The Steeps barren was a gross exaggeration and a good example of how people will decapitate the truth to get a point across. The villagers, however, noisily supported Fiveheads’ summary.

Charbonneau raised his hand to speak, much to Cam’s relief as Fiveheads was forced to relinquish the floor. The novelist had kept to himself since moving here, so his opinions greatly interested Cam because he had no idea what kind of man he was. Charbonneau got to his feet, one hand casually pocketed in lightweight summer slacks, and then stated that it was unfair to compare The Steeps now and in the past as the power plants built along the coast had changed the local weather system. Their winters were now milder; now they could cultivate clementine and Anjou pear at Christmas, impossible all those years ago before the turbines. Cam nodded. It was a reasonable interjection and, more importantly, it revealed a man who he could work with. He thanked the novelist for his salient comments, but the other villagers had long begun talking amongst themselves as Charbonneau was an outsider from East Wexford.

This rudeness made Cam bristle. After all, he was village superintendent and their lack of etiquette reflected poorly upon his office. More importantly, however, he wanted Charbonneau to feel benevolent towards his neighbours as they could not afford to pay him for his drainage strip. As Cam raised the gavel, Nils Fiveheads snorted, a big snort, loud enough to silence the chattering throng, and then barked at Charbonneau that the compensation they’d received from The Power Co. all those years ago had been an insult. Charbonneau agreed that the compensation had not been adequate, but Fiveheads cut him off mid-flow, and said: “It’s truthful we now cultivate pear and clementine at winter solstice, but the rest of our crop has dwindled. Grandpa Fiveheads could grow peach the size of elephant’s testes before they built that hydro plant, not that you’d know owt about that coming from the City.”

“Mr. Fiveheads,” Charbonneau said, “I know I’m not a native of these steeps, but my aunt was born and raised here. Besides, East Wexford is just forty miles along the turnpike. Our weather has changed too. I know this because I’ve studied it.”

Achilles Smith, now on his feet and thumbing his belt hooks, told Charbonneau that the compensation from The Corp had been lower than The Power Co.'s, just a few shares in some lifeless lizard of a bank. This remark tugged at the villagers' heartstrings and they applauded wildly in the direction of Smith and Fiveheads. Cam, however, had no interest in that spectacle. He was interested in Charbonneau who he now felt certain was a man of reason with factually-based ideas unsullied by self-pity and emotion, which cemented his new plan to approach the novelist afterwards, in private, to discuss his drainage strip. For the remainder of this meeting, he'd tie up other business and aim to pass a motion that desalination was a good idea in general. Indeed, Cam now felt grateful that Charbonneau had attended because with the villagers in this mood any suggestion of exchanging the communal marshland on the north side of The Steeps would've been met with outrage and derision.

Yet the villagers had good reason to be angry at The Corp. Cam hated them too. The Corp wanted to buy their smallholdings, so exchanging the marshland for equipment was a risk as The Corp would then have a foothold to The Steeps. But he also knew the village couldn't continue without adequate water, leaving him little choice but to work with them. Cam tried to recall the good times, fireballs on St. Swithun's Day, toad gumbo at Mardi Gras. The people gathered here were once like family, but now, since they'd elected him as superintendent, all they did was bark out their frustrations. Yet they all faced the same problems, the biggest being trying to irrigate peaches without adequate water. Right now, all Cam wanted was for it to rain.

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The transport cart reached Glasshouse 19, the place where Rudy would be working. Tonight they'd be harvesting romaine lettuce. Robots usually pulled this crop, but the sizes were uneven so the task required humans. The Corp guy in charge told them to listen up. He drew their attention to a head of lettuce he was holding. It was made of plastic.

"This good," The Corp Guy said. "This bad," he said holding up one half its size in his other hand. "This also bad," he said tossing the first reject to the floor and then sliding another dummy lettuce from his overalls that was roughly between sizes. After that, he began to play a motivational message from The Corp, as required by company regulations.

Rudy thought about the rockets. When he'd first seen them, he'd shouldered through the kitchen door and flung his soaking sweatshirt to the floor. After that, he'd rung it out over the sink and told his mother that this was their water, water stolen by The Corp, and he had a video to prove it, time-locked and GPS coded. His father, the village superintendent whose job it was to protect Orb's interests, should've been pleased, should've said he'd send the footage to the people up at Haine. But all Cam had done was spoon broth and eyeball the Weather Channel. The next day, not trusting bureaucrats to open digital files, his mother had filled up with a tank of veggie gas and delivered the evidence by hand. Nothing would ever come of it, though. The official line was that summer cloud seeding was banned, that people no longer did it. Rudy didn't believe a word of that. He'd seen the rain drop off year-on-year since he was a kid. Anyway, if seeding was banned then why did The Corp fire rockets at night from a pickup hidden with a tarp?

The recording was still babbling, the monotone narrator now wrapping up his corporate speech, and Rudy's eyes wandered to the cart and the BioBehemoth decal along the side of it. That was The Corp's brand name, although nobody ever used it, their logo a grinning tomato. His eyes moved back to the glasshouse, romaine infinity, no end to it. As he was flipping on his headphones, The Corp Guy tugged his sleeve.

"Whatcha got in your dooflee bag there, picker?"

"Water," Rudy said.

The Corp Guy narrowed his eyes. Sliding nervous hands into his pockets, Rudy added there was also some pizza loaf his old lady had baked and asked if he wanted to take a look. The Corp Guy seemed as if he wanted to, like he was going to take him up on it. One of Cam's mantras popped into Rudy's skull: 'Look 'em in the eye, Rudy Cam. Always look 'em in the eye, right or wrong'. Rudy held The Corp Guy's eye. If he looked away now, he was done for.

"On your way, picker," The Corp Guy said. "But be advised, there are random security checks before swipe-out."

Rudy gripped his rucksack, his dooflee bag, as this idiot had called it. He lifted it from the asphalt, flipped a strap over each shoulder, and then tramped towards his station.

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Cam rolled his eyes over the meeting room. It seemed there was little interest in his announcement about the broken septic tank and blocked drainage channels on the east side of The Steeps, and right now he'd rather be talking, in private, with Charbonneau. Cam asked for their opinions on desalination equipment which was met, at first, by silence and then, much to Cam's incredulity, by the onset of private chinwags. Village Superintendent Cam brought down the gavel and shattered their noisy bluster with two hard strokes. Appendix du Plooy, a pipe-smoking maniac and ham radio fanatic who'd so far been silently swilling fireballs from his canteen, interpreted Cam's gavel crack as his cue to speak.

"S'intendent Cam," said du Plooy. "I've taken it upon me-self to acquire certain documents."

Appendix du Plooy steadied himself with the back of Charbonneau's chair, confirming Cam's suspicion that he was inebriated. The ham radio enthusiast took out his pipe, went to light it, remembered where he was and pocketed the apparatus

"The Corp are trying to dry us out," du Plooy said.

"Wish they'd dry you out," said Nils Fiveheads.

Cam allowed a brief smile to stretch across his lips. After a moment or two he quietened the villagers' raucous honks and hoots with another gavel stroke.

"Take our rain they might, but our drainage can't be lifted," du Plooy said suddenly finding precision with tongue and teeth. "Our drainage is top-hole. They want The Steeps for vineyards and they'll flog the wine to 'Wexford fancy dans."

Molly Bliss got to her feet. Bliss worked as a schoolteacher up in Haine and was the only native of the village present who'd been to college. She was bright, diligent at least, but spoke down to people such as teachers do. Molly Bliss spoke to everyone like they were seven years old.

"Brother du Plooy, she said, "it's true our drainage would be excellent for grapes, but don't you think the soil is too acidic? Well, don't you? Speak up, brother."

Appendix du Plooy mumbled something about The Corp acquiring the village and then connecting their facilities by the turnpike, but his confidence had gone, words had mangled, and the villagers just looked at him with pity. Cam pondered Bliss's interjection: she was right in her assessment that Orb's soil wasn't right for vineyards, yet it seemed hard to imagine a giant conglomerate like The Corp maintaining orchards. He began to wonder what The Corp would do with The Steeps if they got their grubby hands on the land. The Co-op's premium crop was valuable. Bohos and liberals in East Wexford paid top clam for grand cru organic peaches. But most of their harvest was exchanged for goods and services across the seaboard, and The Corp had little use for five hours' gratis litigation or a six month's supply of wheat beer. That drunkard du Plooy was now holding up his document, waving it like an uncounted ballot paper, wafting it at the seated villagers hoping, perhaps, to fan their chagrin.

"Of course The Corp want our land," Cam said leaning towards the mike which caused his words to pop. "There's nothing secret about their plans. They've already made three offers to buy our holdings."

Molly Bliss commented that each time The Corp's offers got bigger. Cam quipped that this was to their advantage, assuming some of them would eventually sell. Certain villagers began to inspect their shoes after that remark although Molly Bliss wasn't one of them. Cam waited for their thoughts about desalination, but nothing came.

"If it don't rain soon I'm selling," said Nils Fiveheads. "I'll have no choice, see. I'll have no harvest to barter for meat and fuel."

Hear, hear, came the cries of other villagers confirming their intentions to follow suit.

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Rudy was lost in electro beats. He didn't like the music, but it was good to work and think to. He was thinking about the rocket launcher, specifically where on the plantation it was likely to be. The clouds were low and pregnant with rain, the wind westerly, but that told him little. As if it wasn't hard enough to estimate where they might seed on the Kent Facility, The Corp had other plantations, one up in Arroux, the other in Cascade. Kent was the biggest, though, good odds. Still, Rudy had absolutely no idea where they'd launch their seeding sticks from.

He glanced up from the beds and saw The Corp Guy ambling around checking pick crates. Rudy reached for his callipers and made a show of gauging lettuce although he had no need for the tool as he'd been doing well enough by eye. He felt his shoulder tapped, more of a squeeze, but when he pivoted there was nobody there. Rudy turned back to his work to find a young woman in Corp light summer Gore-Tex grinning at him. It was Kona Fiveheads, Nils Fiveheads' younger sister. Rudy flipped off his 'phones.

"Watcha doing here?" Kona said.

"Picking lettuce," he said.

Kona laughed. Rudy was pretty sure she wasn't mocking his menial task because it wasn't that kind of laugh, more like a chuckle at the stupidity of her question and the inevitable brevity of his answer. She leaned back against the wheel arch of a two-seat buggy, the kind of vehicle they only gave to elite staff, and then asked how Cam was doing, although being a polite girl she referred to him as the

village superintendent.

“The same,” Rudy said. “Still waiting for rain.”

He returned to pulling lettuce because The Corp Guy was somewhere, prowling. As he worked, he told Kona the last he’d heard she was at university in East Wexford. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear that’d been lifted by the breeze and told him she finished graduate school last year.

“As you can see, I’m working for the bad guys now,” she said.

They exchanged a sort of grin because there was too much truth in those words for them to be ironic. Kona scratched her nose, came over all serious, and told him she was a field researcher, monitoring growth, evaluating pestilence, that sort of thing. As crazy as it sounded, she had a small team working under her. Rudy nodded, keeping his face neutral, not wanting to give her any clues about what he might be thinking. It’d be good to catch up she told him while checking her fancy-looking phone, and then asked when his next break was. Not for a few hours, Rudy mumbled, before sensing movement over her right shoulder. It was The Corp Guy. He’d crept up and was listening in. Kona followed Rudy’s eyes and turned to face the foreman.

“One of my assistants called in sick,” she said to The Corp Guy. “I’m requisitioning this picker for a few hours.”

The Corp Guy grinned. Be his guest, what did he care if this guy made no money. Kona told him he’d be assisting her so this picker would be making money, thirty credits, in fact, and she’d see to it personally that he received it. Upon hearing that hefty point remuneration, The Corp Guy’s eyes began to bulge and his smirk disappeared into his jowls.

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Cam thumped his palms onto the lectern, thus ending his oration about the need for a desalination unit and connection to The Corp’s seawater piping. Naturally, he’d left out a few important details, namely that they’d acquire the equipment and access rights in exchange for marshland on the north side of The Steeps. The villagers had listened with interest, yet nobody would ask a single question even when solicited. He’d expected at least someone to bring up financing, and when they did he’d planned to say that a bank in Haine was structuring a deal for the equipment. Still nobody would ask a question, not one of them. At last Molly Bliss raised her hand.

“Our children are leaving, Brother Cam. Many have taken work at The Corp.”

“Your boy included,” Nils Fiveheads said.

Village Superintendent Cam expressed his desire to get a motion on desalination before they moved on to other matters, but Bliss was having none of it, describing the problem with their young as a diaspora. Their youth, after all, were the very spirit of village life. Cam winced at the woman, wondering, perhaps, whether she’d caught wind of his plans and was attempting to filibuster. Without enthusiasm, Cam described their youth’s migration as natural. Many rural communities were struggling. The young men wanted to earn money to buy vehicles or watch their favourite sports teams. The young women wanted to visit cafés while adorned in the latest apparel. Since his great-great-grandfather’s time young people had dreamed of saving enough money to leave for the bright lights of East Wexford.

“Anne-Marie Butcher’s the solution,” Nils Fiveheads said. “She pops out nurslings every week!”

The villagers roared with laughter at Fiveheads’ coarse humour, causing Anne-Marie Butcher to blush and stroke her swollen belly.

“Her eldest’s already ripe enough to breed,” said Achilles Smith. “Those Butcher girls will replenish dwindling stocks!”

“Enough of that,” Cam said.

And it seemed that, for once, the villagers supported their superintendent, for Achilles Smith was known as the deflowerer of many a local virgin. Smith sunk in his seat, smirking, casting furtive glances at Nils Fiveheads who, temporarily, wanted nothing to do with him. Molly Bliss, who had the trade winds ruffling at her frock by now, reminded the villagers that The Corp gave bonuses to workers who lived in their housing facility down in Ooster, and then turned towards the superintendent and said: “Did you know that, Brother Cam, well did you?”

“I’m aware of how they operate,” Cam said.

“He should do,” said Fiveheads. “Young Rudy’s a Corp man now.”

Bliss, blissfully unaware that she was repeating common knowledge, explained that The Corp even shuttled workers in and that Orb’s dear saplings then spent their wages at The Corp Megastore. At that moment, Appendix du Plooy got to his feet to speak, which was startling because the other villagers had abandoned the convention over the last half hour and had been shouting out unfiltered thoughts while seated.

“Imagine that,” du Plooy said. “Giving your wages to the rotters you’ve just toiled for. Those kids must be imbeciles!”

Appendix du Plooy was a bachelor and never had anything good to say about Orb’s youth. He never had anything good to say about anyone and his remark caused a minor scuffle, with Achilles Smith, keen to make amends for his faux pas about the young Butcher girl, taking a half-hearted swing at the old soak to win approval from the group. Mrs. Cam, the superintendent’s spouse of thirty-one years, managed to get her arms between them and Smith suspended his assault. Mrs. Cam, who did indeed look much older with her hair worn down, steadied the drunkard’s arm and helped him, shaken but still grinning, from the meeting room. Molly Bliss, who might as well have been chairing this meeting now, reminded the villagers that their children were too tired to help out in the orchards when they visited on their days off.

“The Corp’s strangling them,” said Anne-Marie Butcher. She was trying to stand, trying to follow the protocol that’d been re-established by Appendix du Plooy, but she was so heavily pregnant that the villagers around her fussed until she’d been re-seated. “They’re stealing our rain and they’re stealing our children!” Anne-Marie Butcher said in decibels loud enough to keep earthworms underground after a downpour.

Perhaps it was the sight of a pregnant woman screaming, hormones haywire, or perhaps it was just their collective need to shout and break things. Either way, the villagers unleashed their frustration at The Corp, the lack of rain, and the harshness of modern life upon each other. Cam looked towards his wife, who was standing in the doorway arms folded. He squared his papers and then started to return his things to his doctor’s bag.

“Are you leaving, Mr. Cam?” Charbonneau said.

“There’s little point staying, Fred.”

Above the cacophony of that rabid bunfight, Cam told the East Wexford

novelist that he'd like to talk to him outside, but Charbonneau had an appointment and suggested popping by his farm later, which the superintendent agreed to. Charbonneau checked his wristwatch, appeared to have a change of mind about something, and then asked if he might make an announcement. Cam told him to go ahead although he'd like to see him gain control of this crowd. To the superintendent's mild amusement, Charbonneau stopped the bedlam with five hard whacks of the gavel.

"The Corp have defeated you," Charbonneau said to the villagers. "Look around you. Yes. Just look around."

For some reason, perhaps the shame of being scolded by an out-of-towner, the villagers obeyed. Fiveheads had broken a chair in two, which was now frozen mid-air above his head; Anne-Marie Butcher with Achilles Smith in a headlock; Molly Bliss skirt up on all fours. To cap it all, the drunkard Appendix du Plooy had returned and was urinating against a wall. One-by-one the village folk righted themselves and returned to their seats.

"Good people of Orb," Charbonneau said. "Let's close this meeting correctly with some words from our superintendent."

Cam waited a good long while before he spoke. He wanted them to know how disappointed he was with their behaviour. Just for good measure, he let the wall clock tick down another minute before he said: "There is only one thing I have to say. All those in favour of desalination, say aye."

"Aye," said Charbonneau

"Aye," said Fiveheads.

"Aye, said Achilles Smith.

Within a minute the rest of them had supported and the motion was passed. Cam caught his wife's eye again. She still had her arms folded, brow still creased.

"One more thing," Cam said. "It's true that Rudy's now working at The Corp. He took the job for the same reason your kids did because this harvest looks like another poor one. Nobody's child has done more for this village, nobody's. I want my son to work The Steeps like his family's always done, but it's his choice."

Cam moved his eyes from villager to villager, lips pursed, veins bulging.

"Yes, Rudy's at The Corp," Cam said. "But it's the boy's choice."