

TENT CITY

Excerpt

Like a long scream of pent-up frustration that's suddenly released, the summer lightening is everywhere, all at once. Long jagged purple lines of it, sky-filling white pangs of it, are everywhere. The only place in all of Tent City where the ground holds any moisture is around the mouth of the communal hose. Otherwise, the encampment is a dry tinderbox. This isn't news to anyone, but what could anybody do about it? It's hard enough scrounging for food, medicine, and fresh water each day, without worrying about fire hazards. A thick shard of lightning strikes two pin oaks growing near each other at the far end of the yard. They begin to burn, the fire's oxygen causing the upper boughs to sway vigorously as the fire consumes them and works its way down the trunks. The ground-dwellers living back there grab their sleeping bags and run from the burning trees as far and as fast as they can. Flying cinders set one of the sleeping bags on fire, and it takes three people stomping on it to put it out, leaving clumps of burnt nylon and foam padding on the ground. Tenters gather to watch and everyone is making the same calculations: Will the fire reach the tents? When? What can we do? As the trees burn, several people try yanking the hose, but the yard is too big and water's arc cannot reach the trees.

A bucket brigade forms rapidly, cooperative energy surging through the throng. Alison Hart, Fran Hauser, Joe Wenkowicz, Bucky Preston, and dozens more tenters, as well as Enforcers, including Dottie Crandall, try getting water to the fire any way they can. But the existing water bottles are ineffectual, the main hose takes too long to fill anything, and the distance to the trees is too great. Several people get as close to the trees as they can to wet the ground by dumping pails of water on the dirt, in the hopes of creating a kind of fire break. But

the heat building around the trees is intense; the fire is leaping to other pin oaks nearby, and within 10 minutes of the lightning strike, a row of trees is ablaze. The first trunks fall and because the ground is so dry, the fire begins crawling across the yard, feeding on dry leaves, twigs, and garbage as it creeps toward the tents. The lightning flashes again, followed by booming thunder, and still there is no rain. Everyone in Tent City is now standing outside, watching the fire progress, rooted in place as they wait for their brains to issue instructions. Mothers stand clutching their toddlers. Fran has run to pick up Baby Doe, who's been living with her.

Sylvia King is standing on the back deck of her house, which is packed with people.