

LEONID SKIES

by Carl Frederick

As a boy, Carl Frederick's favorite time was winter where, in the early darkness, the stars came out before his mandatory bedtime. In other seasons, he spent many hours in his local planetarium where he'd achieved something of the status of a mascot. His early addiction to the night sky likely led to his becoming a theoretical physicist. Carl regards his second story for Asimov's as an homage to the awe of the night and to the firmament-obsession of his younger self.

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Rising huge from the coastal island, the dome looked like a bug's reticulated eye. Mark Frey gazed through the windshield at the far-off structure, the seven-foot perimeter wall supporting a transparent hemispherical dome some quarter of a mile in diameter. At this distance away, five or six miles with water intervening, Mark more recalled to mind than actually saw the dome's thin spiderweb of support beams cradling countless squares of Hyperglass. The material, which could be electrically commanded from transparent to opaque, had been developed for domes on the Moon.

His hands involuntarily tightened their grip on the steering wheel. Domes on the Moon. Wouldn't happen, at least not in his lifetime. He'd spent the last eight months of that lifetime on the Moon doing surveys. And then the government had yanked the funding.

Through the rear view mirror, he saw his son studying the brochure, and, next to him, his son's best friend Adrian gazing out the window. Suddenly, Adrian turned and caught his eye.

"Do you think, Mr. Frey," said the boy, "that the weather will be clear for the meteor shower?"

"Shower?" said Mark, "It'll be a *storm* if the predictions are anywhere near accurate. And yes. I did have to use some influence to have the weather changed. The camp people didn't know about the Leonids."

"Really?"

"Really." Mark chuckled. "Are you looking forward to it?"

“Oh, yes, sir.”

Mark regarded Adrian in the mirror—obliquely, trying not to clue Adrian in that he was being observed. The boy, English and super polite, seemed as if he’d just popped out of a Dickens novel. He seemed natural, self-assured and, well, perfect—the idealization of a ten-year-old. Mark gave the bare hint of a shake of his head. *Then again, all parents seem to think their children’s friends are more together than their own offspring.* He switched his gaze to his son. “Kev, are you looking forward to it, too?”

“Yeah. Sure,” said Kevin, not looking up from the brochure.

Mark let out a mental sigh. Before he’d gone to the Moon, Kevin had been as spontaneous and enthusiastic as Adrian, but now ... but now, he couldn’t even get the kid to make eye contact.

His wife had thought a father-and-son camping trip might be a way of re-bonding. She said it in a matter of fact way, as if bonding were something trivial, something that could be accomplished with Superglue. *Eight months lost and wasted on moon base—the abandoned gateway to space.*

Yes, he’d been away, but not out of contact. They’d talked daily—Earth daily, that is. But with the three-second delay, the time it took radio waves to travel from the Earth to the Moon and back, those talks soon became expressions of the trivial—greeting cards rather than human interaction.

Watching Kevin through the small window, Mark felt disconnected still from his son. There still seemed to be a time-delay barrier between them. Maybe his wife was right; maybe it was a question of re-bonding.

It was painful watching his son’s flat expression; he transferred his gaze to the boy’s brochure.

“Campground-X” it proclaimed in big letters. “X for Xtreme fun!”

Mark was aware of his mouth forming a tight-lipped smile—covering a scowl. *X for Xtreme fun.* He didn’t know about that, but he did understand the subtext. X, meaning “NO”: No mosquitoes, no West Nile virus, no harmful solar UV, no riffraff—an absolutely safe, family camping experience.

As he drove, Mark noticed something by its absence: the sign for his favorite campground was gone. *West Nile did that, no doubt.* Even though there were just a few hundred cases of the virus per year,

fear of it had virtually wiped out conventional camping. *West Nile, bird flu, Brazilian Puffweed, the ozone hole, the unpredictable weather caused by global warming—so now we have domed campgrounds, guaranteed mosquito free.*

“Wouldn’t you guys rather camp out under the real sky?” Mark looked into the rearview window. “Wouldn’t it be more fun taking our chances—not knowing the weather months in advance?”

“I think the dome’s great,” said Kevin. “And it’s a planetarium. If the outside is cloudy, we’ll still see the meteor shower.”

“Only a simulation,” said Mark.

“Yeah. And better probably. Real special effects.”

“The weather report says the sky—the real sky—will be clear overnight,” said Mark, more harshly than he’d intended.

“Anyway,” said Adrian, “if we camped outside, we’d probably freeze to death.”

Mark smiled. The boy was right. It was mid-November. With the freaky weather of the last few years, even though the days were as warm as summer, the nights felt like the High Arctic.

As the dome loomed ever larger—the island on which it stood was less than a half mile from the mainland—even Mark became taken by its grandeur. And he’d read the brochure. He knew of the advanced white-laser planetarium projector, the lake for swimming stocked with token fish, the forested nature walk. The campground was really a huge greenhouse. He heard the kids in the back also discussing the place: the Saturday-night movies and laser light shows, the cutting edge video games in the activity center, the rabbits.

“No flashlights with more than two cells are allowed,” said Kevin, browsing the brochure, “and anyone caught shining a laser pointer at the dome will be kicked out.” He flipped to the next page and pointed to a picture. “Did you know that they have winter camping in August?”

“So we can freeze to death *indoors*,” said Adrian, looking down at the picture. He transferred his gaze from the brochure to the real thing. “Wow, it’s big. Gee, look at all that glass. It looks weird with the sun

shining through from the other side.”

Mark smiled, but sadly. Adrian sounded the way Kevin used to: happy, enthusiastic.

“How do they keep the bird poop off?” said Kevin.

“It’s made of Hyperglass,” said Mark. “And there’s a high-voltage ionizing cleaning system—laser triggered. And see those towers—bird flyover repellers. And inside, there’s surface lamellar airflow to minimize the need for cleaning.” Mentally, he slapped himself. He was beginning to sound like the gung-ho engineer he’d been before the Moon colony project had been canceled.

“Kevin told me you designed it, Mr. Frey,” said Adrian.

“A small part of it.” Mark gazed longingly at the structure. “You know, Adrian, these domes were designed for colonies on the Moon.”

“But there aren’t any colonies on the Moon,” said Adrian. “Are there, sir?”

Mark understood that Adrian’s question was for politeness’ sake. “No, there aren’t.” He forced a laugh. “But for the Moon design, we didn’t have to worry about bird poop.”

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Mark found an open spot in the dockside parking lot. The lot was linear—two rows of parking spaces with a roadway between them. People and X-porters plied the roadway. The X-porters—golf carts painted to look like animals—served to take campers’ gear onto the ferry and then to their camping areas in the dome. There were three areas: bobcat, wolf, and bear.

Bordering the parking lot on either side stood two rows of bug zappers on poles, built to look like ceremonial torches in some jungle adventure movie.

Getting out of the car, Mark found the temperature pleasantly cool with a hint of a chill in the occasional breeze—a fair bit colder than it had been in the city. Perhaps taking only summer-weight clothing had not been all that great an idea. But then again, they’d be camping under the dome. He still had trouble

accepting the notion.

They each took a small day-pack from the car trunk and then walked toward the ferryboat. The packs contained little else besides a change of clothing, swimming trunks, a flashlight, and, in the boys' packs, video game units. Like most campers these days, they'd rent their gear at the campground.

Mark, wide-angle image stabilized binoculars hung around his neck, cast a quick glance to the sky—beautifully clear—and imagined the meteor storm to come. He hoped the display might trigger the family lust for astronomy in his son. And he had the outside hope that it just might trigger Kevin's sense of adventure. *Right now, it seems as if he just wants to grow up enough to be able to hang out at the mall.*

* * * *

Since the entrance to Campground-X faced the ocean, not the mainland, the ferryboat had to sail halfway around the island. Although the great domed campground took up most of the land, a grassy knoll jutted out from the entrance. Onto this island peninsula the ferryboat docked.

Following the three X-porters, Mark and the boys walked toward the dome. At the entrance, after they passed through the bug blowers, Mark paused in front of the camp office, inhaling deeply, taking in the smell of the woods—the tree-scented output of the forced air circulator. Then he sent the boys off to browse in the camp store while he went in to pay the site fee.

He walked to a counter behind which sat a woman in a leaf-green blouse and wood-brown shorts. A plastic nametag over her blouse pocket indicated she was a "Welcome-ranger." After consulting a computer screen, she said, "Your site is Bobcat Zone, site 27." She chuckled. "You know that means your movie is *Werewolf Park*?"

"I thought I had a choice of three movies to watch."

"Well, you do, really," said the ranger. "But each movie is projected to a different area around the dome. Your site location determines which film you have the clearest view of."

"*Werewolf Park*." Mark winced. "Now that you mention it," he said, "my son did have me arrange that we see a horror film."

“It is pretty horrible,” said the ranger, lightly, as she handed Mark his site receipt.

“Good. I hope he falls asleep in the middle of it. He’ll need all the sleep he can get before the Leonids.”

The ranger gave a quizzical look. “Before the what?”

“The Leonid Meteor Shower.” Mark could scarcely believe the woman hadn’t heard of it. He’d thought that everyone had heard of it. “It’s very concentrated this year,” Mark went on. “A one-day supermaximum. And tonight’s the night.”

“That’s interesting,” said the ranger in a tone of voice that contradicted her comment. Then she added, “You know, our planetarium can do meteor showers.”

“Not like this one. They predict it’ll be the brightest Leonids in four hundred years.”

“We can do bright.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Mark leaned in over the counter. “In medieval times, there was a meteor storm like this. It was brighter than all their lamps and candles—like a pale white, cold daytime. People ran into the streets, screaming. They thought it was the end of the Earth.”

The woman’s look of indifference changed to one of concern. “I hope it won’t frighten the campers.”

* * * *

In the camp store, Mark found the boys looking at the dogs. Perhaps ten of them milled free but arrayed themselves in a near straight line, each under its own scent bracelet.

“Can we rent a dog?” said Kevin.

A store-ranger looked up. He took a scent bracelet from its hook and walked over to Mark and the boys. A Golden Retriever followed—jumping and bounding to get close to the bracelet.

Mark shook his head. "I think we'll pass on the dog. We're only camping for one night."

"Aw," said Kevin.

"I know," said Mark. "Maybe next time. I think we have enough to keep us busy."

"Well, if we can't rent a dog, can we buy rabbit food?"

"Rabbits?"

"It's in the brochure," said Adrian. "The rabbits just run free."

Mark canted his head. "Rabbits and dogs?"

"GM rabbits," said the store-ranger. "They're engineered to produce a scent that dogs hate—and people can't smell at all."

"Fine. We'll take some rabbit food, then."

"Good." The ranger took a package from a shelf. "This should suffice for a one-night stay. Do you need any gear?"

Mark laughed. "All of it."

They rented three sleeping bags, a cook kit, an assortment of foods—freeze dried, fresh, and frozen, and a bag of charcoal.

"Can't we have a wood fire?" asked Adrian.

“I’m afraid not,” said the ranger. “No wood fires permitted. It’s the smoke and air pollution. And we found that smoke makes the planetarium laser beam visible. Destroys the illusion.” He put the charcoal next to the other gear they’d rented. “Special, no-smoke charcoal. But don’t worry. You guys will have fun, even without the wood. Campground-X provides the absolute best in wild camping.”

“*Wild camping?*” said Mark.

“As opposed to programmed activity camping.” The ranger ushered them over to another counter where there were assembled tiny scale models of tents. “Now, let’s choose your tents. Two of them, I assume.”

Mark nodded.

The ranger picked up one of the models and handed it to Mark. “Your boys might like the Star Hunter tent. It has a clear window on the top so they can look out at the stars at night. It has zippable shade of course.” He picked up another little tent. “Or the Black Cat. All black. Like being in a cave. Kids like it—when there’s more than one kid, that is.” He picked up another model, “The Woodsman,” and handed it to Kevin. Both boys pawed over it, zipping the door flaps, peering through the side window, snapping the elastic cords holding on the tent-fly.

“This is a nice tent,” the ranger went on. “You can stand up in it. Makes it a little hard to attach the tent-fly.” He raised a forefinger, as if he’d just thought of something. “But you won’t need the fly. No rain tonight. Don’t know why.”

Mark furrowed his brow.

“There’s a meteor shower tonight,” said Kevin.

“Oh,” said the ranger. “So that’s why the overnight rain and morning fog were canceled.”

“We’d like the Woodsman,” said Kevin.

“And the same for me,” said Mark.

“Excellent.” The ranger filled out a slip. “Do you want us to set up your tents?”

“No,” said Mark. “We can manage that, I think.”

“Good decision. Woodsman tents have Auto Setup. It’s fun—like watching a spider being born.” He ushered them toward the end of the long counter. “Just one more item. If you intend to watch a movie, you’ll need to rent a speaker. You do intend to, yes?”

The boys indicated yes.

“You have two tents. I’d suggest two speakers.”

“Just one,” said Mark. “I’ll give the movie a pass.” He handed over a credit card and his campsite receipt.

The ranger looked at the receipt and smiled. “*Werewolf Park* is your movie. Yes. One speaker is probably right. We’ll drop all this at your site.”

Mark thanked the man and then led the boys toward the door. As they started away, the ranger called after. “The speaker is wireless. But don’t take it away from your campsite. It’ll make a big racket if you do.”

Mark chuckled. “We’ll be good,” he called back. As they walked out into the open greenery, a near perfect emulation of a rural campground, Adrian said, “It sounds like fun—lying flat on your stomach, looking out of your tent and watching a movie.”

Mark laughed. “You know,” he said, “my grandfather told me that when he was a kid, they had outdoor movie theaters you drove your cars into. You watched movies through your car’s windshield.”

“Really!” said Adrian, his voice squeaky with enthusiasm. “That sounds wizard. Why don’t they have them anymore?”

“I don’t know.”

* * * *

They went swimming that afternoon and Mark could not fault the lake. It *was* a lake: grassy banks, the occasional fish, and the bottom was dirt—not concrete. He was even having second thoughts, charitable thoughts, about the domed campground; there was something to be said for being clad only in swim trunks and not having to be slathered with sunscreen. Although the nature sounds were recorded—probably recorded, he couldn't tell—the rabbits were real and of several exotic breeds. He himself was looking forward to feeding them.

After the lake, they meandered over to the activity center, Mark to enjoy an espresso latte, and the boys to check out the latest arcade games.

After the sunny brightness of the lake, the activity center seemed dark—especially so in the cobalt-blue confines of the arcade where a flurry of colored lights from game consoles substituted for the brilliance of the sun. Also in the arcade, a snub-nosed marquee invited campers into the free “Camp Shorts Cartoon Theater.” An assortment of vending machines, taking not money but Yummy-tokens, flanked the theater entrance.

Standing with coffee cup in hand at a respectful distance from an imposing two-person console, Mark watched as the boys played. He realized first that the boys were good. The kids seemed thrilled by the games, and it was clear they were having the adventures of their lives. Mark analyzed that last thought. Kevin wasn't lacking in adventurousness; he just preferred to get his excitement in a virtual world. *I guess with simulations, you're always, in some manner, in control. Real adventure without any real danger.* Mark disdained the notion, but then reconsidered; as a kid in Scouts, it was the same thing—doing things that seemed dangerous, but deep down, knowing they weren't. The scout leaders wouldn't have allowed anything truly risky. *Still, Scouts was real.* Mark held both hands around his warm coffee cup and thought.

He decided that after the games, he'd tell Adrian that he was borrowing Kevin for a while—to take him on the nature hike. He had some talking points, now. Perhaps he could make Kevin see the value of real life over the electronic substitute. As for Adrian, he could deposit the kid into the Camp Shorts Theater for a half-hour and supply him with some Yummy-tokens for popcorn and lemonade.

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Except for the rabbits, Mark and Kevin had the Nature Walk to themselves. They walked in silence and the lack of conversation seemed to make Kevin nervous. He fidgeted, starting at any sound, any rustling of the leaves, any appearance of a rabbit popping out of the undergrowth. Mark couldn't tell if it was nervousness or boredom. Mark himself felt nervous; without Adrian around, he needed to step in and be a parent—and he no longer knew how.

Suddenly, a very large, fuzzy, tufted eared rabbit hopped onto the path. Kevin and his father froze.

“It’s a Giant Angora,” said Kevin.

Mark smiled, remembering how the boy used to be a nut on animals. Seizing the opportunity, Mark slowly sank to his knees and the rabbit came up to him. Mark, amazed at how friendly the campground fauna appeared, stroked the rabbit’s soft white fur. A few moments later, Kevin knelt and did the same.

“This is certainly better than a simulated rabbit,” said Mark.

“What?”

“I mean, a virtual-reality rabbit.”

Kevin favored his dad with a look. Mark recognized it as the “my dad has really lost it” look. But, having gotten a response, he pressed on. “It’s natural for a boy to want to slay dragons, to want to do great things and have fabulous adventures, but these video games—”

“What’s wrong with video games? Video games are great!”

“But they’re not real.”

“They’re real enough.” Kevin clenched his fists. “They’re better than real.” He glowered at his father, but without making eye contact.

“Look. Kevin. Real adventures are—”

“What good is it going on adventures if you ... if you have to lose stuff?”

“Lose stuff?” Mark tried to puzzle it out. “Do you ... do you mean my going on the Moon expedition?”

“Why did you go away?” Kevin shouted, his voice anguished, his face contorted and his eyes beginning to gleam with moisture. “Why did you leave me?”

“Leave you? I’d never leave you.” Then Mark realized that he’d done exactly that—at least from a young boy’s point of view. Yes, they’d talked every day, but ... “I’m sorry, Kevvy. I just didn’t—”

“Don’t call me that!”

Mark winced. He’d slipped and called his son by his baby nickname. He looked at his son’s tearstained face and understood that there was nothing he could say to explain his leaving. *Maybe in five years or so, when he’s reached the age of wanting exploration—maybe then, he’ll understand.* “Kevin. I had to go to the Moon. It was my job.” Mark realized he was being disingenuous—he had to be honest with his son. “And it was important to me.”

“Wasn’t *I* important to you?” said Kevin, his voice beginning to break.

“Nothing’s more important to me than you.” As he said it, Mark realized he meant it; he’d never willingly leave his family again.

Not knowing what else to do or say, Mark reached out with both arms and pulled the boy to his chest, enfolding him, hugging him. At first, Kevin pulled away. But then he leaned his head against his father’s shirt and sobbed.

“I’m so sorry,” said Mark, gently. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Kevin said nothing and for the next few minutes, neither of them moved nor spoke.

There came a rustling sound, and Kevin, obviously acutely embarrassed, drew back and rubbed his eyes dry with his fists. Quickly, Mark stood.

Jogging down the path, Adrian came into view. “Are you finished with your nature walk yet?” he said, breathing heavily. “It’s almost teatime. And I’m a bit hungry.”

* * * *

After a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs, commonplace fare made exotic by cooking it over wood-scented charcoal, Mark tried to convince the boys to take a nap; they'd have a very late night ahead of them since the meteor shower would peak after two in the morning. But the boys would have none of that. Instead, the three went to the nightly, gas-powered, communal campfire. Lots of songs, hokey skits, forced fellowship, the smell of burning wood, blowing embers but with no smoke. Then, as the flames dimmed, it grew dark. Almost by instinct, Mark looked skyward. But there were no stars. After an instant of panic where he thought the sky had clouded over, he realized it was the dome that blocked the starlight. As he watched, it slowly became totally opaque. Then, from the tree-mounted all-camp speakers, Mark heard a soft voice. It seemed to come from everywhere. "The movies will begin in ten minutes."

Mark and the boys hurried back to their campsite. Although Mark knew the boys should be napping, that would be asking too much. He settled for them getting into their sleeping bags and peering out the tent door, watching the movie.

In his tent, and even without a speaker, Mark could tell that *WerewolfPark* was truly dreadful. And in any case, Mark knew he'd enjoy listening to the kids discussing the film far more than he could possibly enjoy the film itself.

In his sleeping bag, listening to the chatter, Mark smiled. There was something timeless about kids camping in a tent. He heard the boys giggling at the movie and wondered if, when he was a kid, he laughed at horror movies. He thought not. He remembered being wonderfully scared by them. But when he was a boy, there were real dangers, not like now when danger was systematically eliminated from all things. And the boys knew it. Without the possibility of danger, could scary stories evoke fright anymore? *If not, something important has been lost.*

Mark listened as the boys discussed werewolves.

"I wonder," said Kevin. "Could a werewolf change under the full moon in a planetarium?"

"I don't think so," said Adrian. "I think he'd need the real moon."

"But what if it was cloudy outside. Doesn't a werewolf have to see the moon to change?"

"Probably."

“Well,” said Kevin, “what if there was a full moon and it was cloudy and the werewolf went to a planetarium to see the moon. Do you think that would work?”

Adrian giggled.

Mark shook his head, sounding a gentle whir as his cheek rubbed the fabric of his sleeping bag. When he was a boy, they didn't see movies on campouts; they told scary stories to each other. *Is there even such a thing as a scary story anymore?* He remembered back to when he'd snuggle all the way into his sleeping bag and read a spooky book by flashlight. He didn't think that Kevin even owned such a book. *But maybe kids these days sneak their laptops under the covers and surf the Net when they should be sleeping.*

He heard the kids joke about smuggling a swarm of bees into the campground and releasing it. Both boys seemed to think it a great idea.

In his sleeping bag, Mark thought so as well. It was good to know that the boys did have those renegade tendencies. He almost laughed, this time at himself. He wondered if, as a parent, he'd reached the “vicarious age,” that age where he borrowed some enjoyment from his child's boyhood.

* * * *

The annoying chirp from the engines. And the flashing lights from the lunar rover grew bright as it came to ferry him and the last of the expedition to the launch vehicle. Mark, sweating, opened his eyes, waking from his dream—but the chirp and flashing lights persisted. Momentarily disoriented from a rough awakening in an unfamiliar place, he sat bolt upright. Then, his brain following his body into wakefulness, he unzipped his sleeping bag and checked his wristphone. One-thirty A.M.—digits clearly visible in the sparkling light. He silenced the alarm and scrambled out of the bag, fully clothed save for his shoes; when he'd gone to bed, he'd had a notion he'd be in a hurry when he woke.

He slipped on his sandals, crawled out the tent door, then stood and gazed at the sky. Brilliant points of light streaked across the sky, leaving thin, straight, white lines in their wake. Tens, hundreds of streaks, bright enough to read by, seemed to cut the heavens. The meteors came from one part of the sky and their streaking made Mark feel as if he were racing into a tunnel of fireflies. The radiant, the region from which the meteors seemed to originate, was the constellation Leo: stars forming a triangle next to an inverted question mark with the navigation star Regulus shining bright at its base. Except now Regulus, the heart of the lion, could scarcely be seen against the dizzying white kaleidoscope of rocks from space burning up in the atmosphere.

A dazzling flash as if from a cosmic camera momentarily washed out the trails of the meteors. A bolide, an exploding meteor with fiery fragments shooting off in half a dozen directions—Mark knew that if he were outside the dome, he'd probably have been able to hear it. As his eyes recovered from the flash he became aware that he *did* hear the whizzes as the meteors streaked across the sky—no doubt his imagination supplying sound effects. With a start, he realized he'd forgotten to take his binoculars, but there was no way he'd return to the tent for them. Then he realized he'd forgotten about the boys as well.

He forced his eyes away from the sky and dashed into their tent, surprised for an instant that the tent door was open and the mosquito screen unzipped. But of course, there were no mosquitoes in Campground-X.

He shook the boys awake and, impatient with their groggy sluggishness, unzipped their sleeping bags. They also had slept in their clothes, but in their case, it was probably not a premeditated decision—they'd likely fallen asleep during the movie.

Sleepily, and under strong prodding, the kids crawled out of their sleeping bags and out of the tent.

They clambered to their feet and stared up at the sky.

“Gosh,” said Kevin in an awed whisper.

Adrian stood open-mouthed, the meteors reflecting in his wide eyes.

They stood close, a silent tableau. Then, after an indeterminate number of minutes, Kevin wrinkled his nose. “What’s going on?” he said. “Something’s happening.”

Slowly, the stars began to fade while at the same time, ghosts of the stars, a few degrees away, became visible and grew in brightness. More meteors than ever crossed the sky, but their brightness and violence faded—and soon their number declined as well. Finally, the ghost stars, shining brightly and not twinkling, entirely supplanted the originals.

“God damn it!” Mark shouted as the realization hit him. “They’ve blacked out the sky. It’s the planetarium. They’re projecting a simulation.” He balled a fist in anger and indignation. “Wait here,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Why would they—” Adrian began.

“Just wait here.” Mark turned and set off at a run toward the campground administration building where they’d checked in. It was almost as far away as was possible in Campground-X, not quite a quarter of a mile away.

As he neared the facility, sprinting past the strangely menacing though dormant X-porters, he saw a light peeking through blinds on the second floor. He thought he’d have to beat down the door, but he didn’t need to. The activity center lounge on the first floor turned out to be open 24/7. Mark dashed into the building, looked for a staircase and sprinted up to the second floor.

There, he found a number of doors, one of which had the legend,

Campground Operations

Authorized Personnel Only

Roughly, he twisted the doorknob; he was quite willing to bash that door down if he had to. But the knob turned and Mark stumbled into a room filled with electronics: control panels, video display screens showing the camping areas, and an audio panel with a desk microphone. A man sat at what was obviously the nerve center—the biggest panel with the most numerous switches and sliders. He stood. “I’m sorry,” he said, “campers aren’t allowed up here.” He narrowed his eyes, “Unless there’s an emergency.” He took a step forward “Is there an emergency?”

“Damn right, there’s an emergency,” Mark said, gasping from his run. Seething, he broke his gaze from the man and glimpsed a desk plaque with the legend, *Douglas Cranford, Evening Supervisor*. Then he darted to the window and pulled up the blinds. “That, Mr. Cranford,” he said, pointing to the sky. “*That* is the emergency!”

“The meteors?” The supervisor came over to the window and looked out. He laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s just a simulation. It’s not real. There’s no danger. You can go back to sleep.”

“I know it’s not friggin’ real!” Mark was aware he was shouting. “Turn off this stupid phony sky. I want the real sky.”

“Our planetarium sky is the most faithful, the most—”

“Turn it off !”

“I’m sorry, sir. I can’t do that.”

“Can’t!” Mark darted to the control panel and started throwing switches at random while looking out the window to see if the sky had changed. “I’ll show you *can’t*.”

Mr. Cranford strode to the panel and tried to return the switches and sliders to their previous settings. “Will you stop this!” he said. Four hands played over the panel switching and unswitching. “I can have the police here in five minutes.”

Mark, seeing he was having no success, sighed and stepped back from the panel. “I’m a customer, a camper,” he said, trying for a soft, civil tone. “I request, no demand, you switch the dome back to clear.”

“I’d like to accommodate you.” Cranford sat, heavily, and swiveled his chair to face Mark. “But I’d lose my job.”

“What?” Mark waved an arm toward the window. “For letting people see the night sky? Ridiculous!”

“Yeah, I know.” Cranford slid the chair forward. “Look. I’d like to switch the dome transparent, but a camper called. She said her children were frightened out of their minds.”

“You mean, because of some narrow-minded idiot who—”

“I looked and she was right. The meteor shower was much too violent, much too frightening for our campers. I had no choice.”

“Of course you have a choice.” Mark turned toward the door. “But since you won’t exercise it, we’ll just have to go *out* and watch it—under the real sky.”

“Go ahead if you want to die of exposure. You’ll freeze out there.”

Mark took a step toward the control panel. Nervously, the supervisor stood again, interposing his body between Mark and the panel. “I can’t believe this,” said Mark, pointing to the banks of controls. “Technology should help us explore the unknown, not hide from it.”

Cranford glanced at the control panel. “Oops,” he said. “Now look what you’ve done. You turned the announcement system on. They could hear us throughout the entire campground.”

“I don’t care if they can hear us on Mars,” Mark shouted as the supervisor reached for the switch. He turned on his heel and stormed out the door, slamming it behind him. He flew down the stairs and began jogging back to his campsite. Just as he left the building, he heard Cranford’s voice—soft and modulated this time—coming from the all-camp speakers. “I apologize for the disturbance,” he said. “A misunderstanding. Everything’s fine now. You may return to sleep in complete safety.”

“Safety!” Mark spoke the word as an epithet. But, as he padded back to the site, he thought again. He could well be cavalier with his own safety, but he couldn’t take chances with the kids. They had no cold weather clothing and the summer-weight sleeping bags were useless. Cranford was right; the kids would freeze. *Wait! We could watch from the car. What am I thinking! We’re on a friggin’ island. We’d have to swim.*

He slowed to a walk. *Maybe the dome simulation will be enough. The kids are accustomed to simulations. Anyway, how can the real sky ever compete with full-color, holographic immersion games?*

When he reached the site, the boys were waiting for him. Then he saw the three sleeping bags rolled up at their feet.

“What! I...” Mark struggled to make sense of it.

“We heard everything you said,” said Kevin.

“We heard the guy say oops,” said Adrian. “And then you said you didn’t care if they can hear us on Mars.” Adrian giggled. “Then we got our sleeping bags together—Kevin said we should do it. We can watch the meteors from outside—in our sleeping bags.”

Mark and his son exchanged a glance containing a deep message. Mark, thankful for the eye contact, didn't quite know what that message was but, as would be the case with SETI, the fact of a message was orders of magnitude more important than the message itself.

Mark reached over and tousled his son's hair. "I really appreciate the thought," he said. "But we can't do it. They're summer-weight bags. We'd all freeze."

"No, we wouldn't," said Kevin. "They're *all*-weather sleeping bags."

"What?"

"They're temperature adaptive," said Adrian. "We read about them in the brochure."

"Really?" Mark still felt behind the curve.

"Come on, Dad. We don't have all night." Kevin picked up a bag. "The fibers expand as it gets colder. We'll be fine."

"It's so they can use the same sleeping bags for their winter camping." Adrian picked up his bag and looked at Mark expectantly.

Mark laughed. "Okay." He scooped up his bag. "Let's go, then." He led the way toward the entrance. Then the boys took the lead and he sprinted after them.

At the entrance of the campground, they paused, looking through the small, tinted-glass windows of the night-doors. The frost-encrusted ground shimmered under the white fire from the sky.

"You know," said Mark, "we could just watch the shower from here."

"No," said Kevin. "Let's go outside."

“Yeah,” said Adrian.

Mark smiled. That was the answer he’d hoped for. “Fine!” He pointed toward the lone tree on the knoll, leafless and dark against the streaked brilliance of the sky. “To that flat spot in front of the tree. We’ll run there and jump into our sleeping bags, shoes and all, ‘kay?”

“Yeah,” from both of them. Their eyes were sharp, alert—like cats.

Mark opened the door and the cold wind wafting in from the ocean hit him like an icy fist. He took a quick breath and ran for the knoll. From the corners of his eyes, he saw the boys running beside him—and then ahead of him.

When, a few seconds after them, he reached the knoll, the boys were watching the sky and shivering.

“You know,” said Adrian. “I read that the radio waves from the meteors go right into your head and it sounds like sound.” He gave a spasm of a shiver. “Gosh, it’s cold out here.”

“Come on, guys,” said Mark, pulling the release cords on both the boys’ bags, “into your sleeping bags. Now, please!”

The barked command got their attention. They unrolled their bags side by side, and dived inside them.

Mark unrolled his bag beside Kevin’s and cocooned himself within it, with only his nose exposed to the cold. After a minute or so, when his body had warmed the inside of the bag and he no longer felt like a frozen slab of meat, he ventured to look out. The meteors rained, lighting the sky with smooth streaks of brightness and reflecting oscilloscope-like waves from the rippling ocean.

Glancing earthward, Mark saw the boys, with barely more than their eyes visible, staring up at the sky. He peered at Kevin, what little he could see of him. The boy’s blond hair looked like sparkling silver under the light of the plunging meteors.

Kevin, apparently sensing that he was being observed, turned his face toward his father. “I liked the way you talked to the camp ranger,” he said. “That was neat.”

Mark felt a welling up of parental pride—strong enough to even encompass Adrian. “Kevin, I can’t begin to tell you how incredibly proud I am of you.”

Kevin gave a shy smile.

“Hey, look,” came Adrian’s voice. “On that branch. There’s an owl.”

Again, Mark smiled. *The kids are okay.*

“Wow, he’s enormous.” Kevin gave a hint of a chuckle. “Maybe it’s a vampire owl.”

Adrian giggled. “You know,” he said in a low voice, oddly serious. “Thinking about *Werewolf Park* ... I wasn’t scared when we watched the movie, but I’m a little bit scared now. And ... and it’s sort of fun being a little scared.”

“Yeah.”

Mark wasn’t scared, but he realized that his own sense of adventure, which he’d not even understood had been damaged, has been restored by the experience.

A noise from the campground entrance caught his attention. One by one, he saw kids carrying sleeping bags, some wearing sweaters or jackets, some not, come furtively through the door. Many had a parent in tow. Quietly, like ghosts, they ran to the knoll, got into their sleeping bags—and watched the sky.

Mark smiled at the growing assemblage of adventurers. *The kids are okay.*