

For what felt like the hundredth time that morning, Geoff Fordham swept his binoculars over the hordes of people that were gathered on the beach, searching desperately for his wife and daughter and the people who had stolen them.

He lowered the glasses and rubbed his eyes wearily, running his tongue around his loose-fitting dentures. It was no use. If they were down there he couldn't make them out. Not because he was too far away – the beach was only half a mile away from the eighty foot cliffs he was standing on – but because there were too many people down there. The mile long stretch of golden sand was covered with humanity.

He sat down to ease his aching legs, dropping his walking stick carelessly to one side. These days he couldn't stand up for too long before the pain in his legs became unbearable. He had surprised himself by managing the hour long trek from his mobile home to the summit of the north side cliffs, but it had taken its toll on him. He often felt weak, physically and mentally frail, with the world-weariness of an old man waiting to die. He was thirty eight years old.

Two gulls circled lazily in the clear blue skies above him, their harsh cries and the steady breaking of waves on the ragged rocks at the base of the cliffs the only audible sounds. In spite of the eighty degree heat and the lack of any sea breeze, Geoff shivered. The coast should have been buzzing with noise and life. Any other glorious August morning it would have been, as the beach had a reputation as one of Cornwall's finest family beaches, a golden stretch of sand and surf that nestled comfortably in a bay on the Far West

Coast, sheltered from the harsher waves that crashed in from the violent Atlantic Ocean by two sets of steep cliffs on either side. It was ideal for bathing, surfing, all kinds of associated water activities, and even during the height of the season the beach was never crowded.

But today was different. The usual hundreds of noisy holidaymaking families had increased to thousands, more than this beach had ever accommodated before. That should have raised the noise levels, with countless children shouting and playing happily, adults making just as much noise as they splashed each other in the warm waters that tumbled onto shore, radios turned up to full volume to annoy fellow sunbathers.

Instead, the beach was as silent as the grave. Geoff had been watching since 6am as the beach filled up with people walking from the makeshift car park on a hillside at the southern stretch of cliffs, and had seen none of the courting couples walk leisurely along the shore, tossing pebbles out to sea. None of the children played with their buckets and spades. The surfers and water sports enthusiasts had seemingly abandoned their pursuits and were content to do what everyone else was doing – sitting or lying motionless on the sand, as inactive as dead fish washed ashore. Acres of exposed flesh glistened and burned as everyone tried to catch as much sun as possible, as though this was their last chance to do so. Eyes shaded by special sunglasses looked eastwards, from where the searing sun advanced malevolently over the mainland that had obscured it earlier that morning.

All attention was focussed on the dark notch that was visible in the upper right hand side of the fiery globe, which had doubled in size since Geoff had last looked. The hole in the sun was growing like a tumour.

He shivered again and looked downwards at the watchers. From the grassy, crumbling edge where he sat a twisting path led down to the beach in a sharp, zigzagging descent. Anyone down there could have climbed up to where he was sitting and received a more comfortable view of the sun, with more space to breathe and move around. But no one had seemed anxious to move as the beach filled up.

Perhaps they felt safer crowded in by their fellows, Geoff mused. The same false sense of security animals felt in the slaughterhouse, herding closer together as the threat of death came inevitably nearer. He had been thinking of climbing down the path and walking amongst the watchers on the beach. At some stage he would have to if he caught a glimpse of his wife and daughter. But not yet. The thought of walking among the motionless zombies unsettled him. It would be like walking among the dead.

The two gulls screeched as they flew over him, two blurs of white and grey that banked left sharply, heading out to sea. They faded from sight as they flew over Cape Cornwall. Behind him, the headland sloped downwards gradually, merging into a picture postcard scene of rolling hills dotted with ancient villages and the ruined engine houses of disused tin mines, relics of Cornwall's industrial past. The only thing that spoiled it was the sprawling mobile home site half a mile away to the south west. Geoff Fordham's home for the last six months.

The dingy caravan was a far cry from the comfortable three bedroom semi he had shared with Denise and their four year old daughter Rachel in Plymouth. But that was history, felt like it belonged to another age now after what he had gone through. He doubted that Denise and Rachel had lived as

comfortably since then either. At least he had made friends within the local community, a group of travellers who had looked after him when he had needed help the most. They had tried heal his wounds, or at least the physical ones, offered help and support as he tried to make sense of his shattered world and wondered what to do next.

The sun continued to claw its way upwards to its zenith, its dark stain now a fully rounded sector that continued to eat it away. Geoff checked his watch. Half ten. It wouldn't be long now. And the watchers on the shore, most of whom he guessed had come from all over Britain – and the world – knew it as well. Mouths had opened, raised and pointed fingers jabbing at the sky. He could almost feel their anticipation.

And their fear. Darkness in broad daylight was not an everyday event. The last time it had occurred on these isles was back in 1927, before most of the present watchers had even been born.

Perhaps some of those lost in thought were thinking about darker, less advanced times, when people took a total eclipse of the sun as a sign that the end of the world was upon them. Judgement Day.

Signs. The end of the world. Geoff shook his head sadly. A physics teacher always stuck to proven scientific facts, based his teachings and hypotheses on firmly grounded evidence. He had prided himself on his level-headed view of the world, had always imparted to his pupils at the comprehensive in one of Plymouth's more prosperous areas a sense of order and scientific reason. If someone had told him that after just ten years teaching he would abandon his profession and involve himself with a religious group who were preparing for the Apocalypse he would have laughed in the

speaker's face, telling him or her that there was no room in a scientist's mind for metaphysical imagery and religious hysteria.

But he *had* got involved. Subtly taken in and then completely dominated in a way he could never have predicted, the lives of him and his family had been totally torn apart by the Seekers of the Rapture.

A slim, shining crescent was all that now remained of the August sun, the rest consumed by the hungry moon. The sky had turned a deep, dark blue and as the air turned colder, Geoff looked at the grassy slope of the cliff summit and saw that it was moving.

"Shadow bands," James Caxton had smiled as he pointed at the shifting sands on the small island they shot past. "Just an illusion. Low contrast grey bands. Because the sun's no more than a thin line, the atmosphere around it is shimmering, working on it to produce these lines on the ground. Very rare to see them, though, you have to be right inside the line of totality to have a chance of viewing them. Beautiful, aren't they? Like phantom snakes."

July 11th, 1991. It had been the Fordham family's first eclipse and it had changed their lives forever. Geoff and Denise had been saving for years to go to Hawaii but the eclipse hadn't been their main reason for going, it was just an added bonus. The boat trip from Pearl Harbour to Molokai Island had been a choppy experience for all the passengers who had paid to see the eclipse. The sky had been filled with rain clouds and a large group of vociferous sightseers, seemingly led by the irritating, middle-aged American who had provided Geoff with an unwanted running commentary on eclipses, had paid the captain extra to race the vessel to the gap in the clouds they had

spotted. As it shot across the Kaiwi Channel, Rachel had been violently sick and Geoff had been furious, determined to give the captain and the man who had encouraged his reckless speed a piece of his mind. And then, just as the shadow bands disappeared and the sky went black with the full eclipse, Rachel had fallen overboard.

It was later described as the eclipse of the century because it had lasted almost seven minutes when most eclipses lasted between two and four. But that wasn't the reason Geoff and Denise Fordham's lives changed that day. James Caxton had jumped into the churning ocean after the sinking child and pulled her to the surface, holding her above the black roaring waves as the vessel slowed its engines and turned around to pick them up.

From that moment, James Caxton had them. They were both so traumatised by the near loss of their daughter, and so grateful to the tall, smiling Californian who had saved her, that their minds were open to the beliefs he spouted. He introduced them to the nine others in his party, people he had met as he travelled the globe to view solar eclipses, people who shared the same belief – and goal – he held.

“Come with us,” he had begged them. “Don't you see? It was God who threw us together today. God wanted me to save your daughter.” He had stroked Rachel's saturated blonde hair as the boat returned to Pearl Harbour. “She's very special,” he had whispered. “Didn't you hear what she cried as she fell overboard? Do you know what she saw as she stared into the eclipsed sun? Tell them, honey.”

Rachel coughed salt water and stared at Caxton with loving eyes before replying hoarsely: “The mouth of God.”

Nothing mattered after that moment. They had both left their jobs, sold their home and took Rachel with them to live in the ancient manor house outside Truro that Caxton shared with his nine companions, leaving only on excursions – paid for by his undisclosed inheritance – to view eclipses around the world. To bear witness to what James Caxton said he had seen promised over twenty years ago in the complete blackness of the vanished sun. The same promise Rachel had witnessed, and would lead them to before the Second Millennium ended.

The Rapture. Their belief that on the Last Day, God would call the Chosen to Him by calling them from the physical plane. They would literally vanish from the face of the Earth and begin a journey to Heaven in a state of total ecstasy while the rest of humanity perished.

Chile, November 3rd, 1994. Rajasthan, October 24th, 1995. Mongolia, March 9th, 1996,. Venezuela, February 26th, 1998.

Each excursion was an adventure in itself, but each eclipse felt like a totally new experience, as midday darkness struck different parts of the world and their eyes turned on Rachel expectantly. And each time she would point a shaking hand to the skies, whisper one word – “Rapture!” – and collapse.

For three days after each eclipse she would lie in a fitful sleep, tossing and turning in her sleeping bag as if tormented by terrible nightmares. And when she awoke on the third day, she would describe the vision in her dreams.

A dark, gaping hole in the sun which sucked thousands of people from the planet into a black void that consumed them utterly. Millions of people walking a devastated Earth, stepping over countless rotting corpses as they

headed for a gigantic chasm in the distant horizon, a huge crack in the Earth which glowed redly. This, Caxton told his followers, was the aftermath of the Rapture. This was what awaited those who were not Chosen. God would have no need of them or the world they lived on. He would abandon His creation, leaving it and the survivors to the ravages of the Dark One.

Geoff stared idly at the shadow bands sweeping over the grassy roof of the cliffs, rippling the now grey sands of the beach. He shivered as a breeze picked up from the northwest, too cold to be a fresh sea breeze. He looked up. The red colour of sunset had appeared, staining the northwest horizon like freshly spilled blood. He shivered again, but not because of the chill imparted by the eclipse wind.

It was blood that had marked his departure from the Seekers of the Rapture. A year after they had arrived from Venezuela, Geoff Fordham had made up his mind to leave Caxton's circle. Each eclipse had brought them no closer to the truth that Caxton had promised, and instead was having a damaging effect on Rachel. The dreams – or visions – were increasing, visiting her nightly now instead of after an eclipse. Some nights she was afraid to go to sleep, terrified by the visions of Armageddon that haunted her. And since she had arrived back in England, the dreams had taken root in a definite, geographical location. For now she dreamed nightly of a golden beach sheltered by rocky cliffs, near a landscape of rolling hills and disused engine houses. She had shown them a page from a road atlas of Britain, pointed to a stretch of Cornish coastline where the sun would shine no more and darkness would rule triumphant.



Caxton had rejoiced in this, declaring that here was proof positive that God had chosen them, by granting this child knowledge of the location where the Rapture would occur.

But Geoff had had enough. He was sick of the endless prayer meetings, the scripture study, the gleeful preparation for the end of civilisation. Rachel was almost twelve, she'd be a teenager soon. She deserved a better life with people of her own age, a proper school instead of the private tutor Caxton employed, a stable family. Not being dragged around the world in the belief that she would lead a small group of people to salvation. Rachel deserved a proper taste of this world before worrying about being accepted into the next. As soon as he'd spoken to Denise, they were leaving. And Rachel was coming with them.

Caxton had exploded. The mid, ever-smiling exterior vanished in an instant. He had shrieked curses and obscenities, shocking Geoff with a rage that he had never suspected existed. He had physically thrown Geoff out the door, threatened to kill him if he dared come near the manor house again.

He looked up into the darkened sky. The crescent of the sun was now broken into shimmering beads of light that he knew were caused by the mountains and valleys of the moon cutting across the gold sliver of sun. As the floor of the lunar valley caught up, the Bailey's Beads were extinguished one by one and the sun disappeared completely. It was just after eleven o'clock in the morning and night had fallen.

It had been a night as dark as this when Geoff Fordham had returned to break into Caxton's manor house alone and steal away Rachel. He had almost succeeded. The locks had been stiff and brittle, easily overcome, and

the darkness within was no problem because after seven years of living there he knew the interior of the building blindfolded. Rachel, alone in her room, had been tossing and turning in a disturbed sleep.

They had been waiting for him. As he scooped her up in his arms, felt the warm tears of joy and relief run down her cheeks and mingle with his, the light had come on and a door slammed.

James Caxton and his fellow Seekers were facing him, their faces masks of pure hatred. Rachel was taken from his arms and led to another room to spare her the sight of what was to follow.

The beating had seemed to last forever. Caxton and two men had laid into him with baseball bats, alternating the blows with vicious kicks to his face. As his ribs cracked and broken teeth slipped down his throat the other Seekers had sang a hymn of thanksgiving, praising God that they had stopped their Judas from stealing away their most valued member. Denise had not been singing. Geoff's physical agony did not even come close to the emotional pain he had felt as his wife spat and cursed him, scratching his broken face with her nails and tearing chunks of hair from his scalp.

"How dare you!" she had screamed. "Rachel isn't your daughter anymore – she's been born for a higher purpose, the one who will lead the faithful to the Rapture! *I'll see you in Hell before she leaves us!*"

The police had questioned him in hospital, asking who had beat him to within an inch of his life and dumped his unconscious body in a ditch three miles from the nearest A&E department. He had answered as best he could, told them as much of Caxton's group as was possible with a broken jaw. When he had been discharged a month later they had visited him in the hostel

and told them that the manor house outside Truro had been found abandoned, with no trace of its occupants remaining. The twelve remaining Seekers of the Rapture were on the move. He had left that morning, hitchhiked to the coastline Rachel had indicated, paid the campsite owner six months rent in advance and waited for the Seekers of the Rapture to come.

The days in the campsite had passed in a blur, each more painful than the last as his broken bones refused to knit properly and the day of the eclipse came closer. His neighbours had been helpful and friendly, but at the same time had kept a certain distance from the broken man who wandered alone each day on the solitary cliffs in all weathers, as if searching – or waiting – for someone.

Geoff Fordham looked away from the vanished sun as a sound of singing floated up from a small group of people hidden in the crowds on the darkened beach. The same song that had been sung when he had been almost beaten to death. Somewhere down there the Seekers of the Rapture were singing to the eclipsed sun. Because for them, the end was beginning.

The inner corona of the sun flared around the dark mask of the moon, a white fire that emphasised the blackness of the cold lifeless satellite. And then the diamond ring of light faded, leaving the sky black once more.

This was totality. Geoff held his breath and mentally counted the seconds away. Totality been predicted to last no more than ninety nine seconds. Then he would know if his daughter's vision would become reality, or if it had been dreams of a damaged psyche, ruined by religious hysteria.

The seconds passed by, and the diamond ring of the sun's corona flared once more. Totality was complete. Now, the events leading to this

would reverse and the eclipse would be over. Geoff felt himself relaxing as the singing from the Seekers faded to a worried silence.

And then it happened. The sky lightened and the people on the beach became more visible. And Geoff saw that some of them were being lifted from the sands. He fought to control his shaking grip on the binoculars as he focussed on an elderly man who was pulled gently from the ground by unseen forces, a look of terror and incomprehension on his features. He hovered a few feet above the shoreline, like driftwood in an ebb tide, as others joined him. A thin young woman in a red bikini, a toddler plucked from his mother's arms, an overweight man in his forties, naked belly rippling as he span around, were rising as well. In a matter of seconds hundreds more joined them, their faces communicating to all watching the terror they each felt. A terror that was gradually replaced by a visible feeling of pleasure as they looked upwards to the hidden force that took them higher. Ecstasy bathed their features, mouths wide open in silent joy.

Geoff looked around him, sweeping the glasses in a full circle. Wherever he looked, thousands – hundreds of thousands – of tiny dark figures graced the indigo sky, floating like phantoms from all points of the compass, diminishing further as they rose higher. He restrained himself from raising the binoculars further because he didn't want to be blinded by the sun when it escaped from the dark moon.

Because that was where they were heading. As the risers converged, they formed a perfect circle around the eclipsed sun. Countless dots of humanity illuminated by the sun's corona, giving the imprisoned star two ghostly haloes rather than one.

As more specks of humanity rose from beyond the horizon, Geoff wondered at the people remaining on Earth, why they had not been taken. The beach had probably lost about three thousand people, but there must have been still five times that number remaining. Was that the same elsewhere, across the world? He shuddered as howls of anguish filled the void their loved ones had left.

The loudest cries came from the Seekers of the Rapture. Not one of them had been taken.

Except one. Geoff's eyes widened through the binocular eyepieces as a young girl, perhaps no older than twelve or thirteen, rose from their midst. She looked around her, trying to grasp her mother's outstretched hand, but then turned her attention to what she saw beyond the moon and the hidden sun. An audible cry of joy escaped her lips.

Tears ran down Geoff's cheeks as he watched his daughter join the Rapture.

She was the last. Her body faded to an indistinct dot as she rose into the company of the ascenders. As if this was a signal, the circle of writhing humanity shrank and closed in on itself, millions of people from across the globe converging on a single unseen point that lay in the centre of the blackness that denied light to the despairing watchers remaining on Earth. The darkness swallowed them completely and the sun's halo flared a final time before the cold moon slide away from the sun and allowed its light to shine once more.

But the light had changed. The bright yellow of golden August sunlight had changed to a deep red that shone balefully across the horizon like a

sunset in Hell. A crack of what sounded like thunder split the air across the coastline and rolled away in all directions as Geoff became aware of a shudder that moved through the ground beneath him. More tremors, gradually increasing in strength, followed in short bursts. The beach below, stained crimson with the hostile sun's bloody light, rippled the same way it had when the shadow bands had first appeared that morning.

Geoff moaned softly as the cliffs shuddered beneath him. How stupid had they all been? This was what Rachel had seen in her visions, but the Seekers of the Rapture had been so arrogant, so assured of their own salvation and eager to see the end of the world that they had not even considered that they would be among the first to experience it. Not one of them had even questioned the word she had uttered during her dreams. Rapture? At some points it had sounded like *rupture*.

The ground shook again, stronger this time, and Geoff knew that it was time to move. He reached for his walking stick and got to his feet. It was pointless trying to escape the Rupture – the cliffs crashing onto the terrified watchers below would only be the start of its rampage, and as dark chasms opened in the planet's surface on a global scale and swallowed whole or crushed people to death, the survivors would look around at what was left of the world they had known and consider the prospect of trying to survive in a broken, desolate wilderness. Perhaps jumping into the abyss would be preferable to a living Hell on Earth.

But Geoff Fordham had one last thing to do before he died. He prayed to the God that had surely abandoned him that he would reach the sands below and see the looks of despair on the faces of the Seekers of the Rapture

before the cliffs crashed down on them all. But most of all he wanted to see his wife and remind her of the last words she had said to him.

He turned to the trembling path and began his precarious descent.