

Onlookers

By Carlos A. Williams Jr.

We exist in a world where reality holds little value. Where stipulations, allegations, hearsay, and the daily dramas of those we observe hold more weight than acknowledging and addressing a need for growth. Life is fleeting, yet we spend it gazing into boxes and seeking the approval of “friends” that we don’t know. Each day a mere tick on the clock that is our existence. This was a day like most others, but it would end with a wake-up call.

The sun sat high in the sky, casting angled shadows beneath travelers in the city. We follow one such traveler, Brad Wojnowski, as he approached the southeast gate of Central Park. He had plans to meet up with his fiancée, Sarah Miller. As he travelled along the sidewalk he scanned the area until he saw her, sitting on bench in the park. He walked over to her and she stood to greet him with an embrace and a smile. He glanced down at the newspaper she had sat aside as she stood. The headline read: “Officials on High Alert after Terrorist Threats.”

“There’s always something going on,” Brad said as he looked down at the paper and then up to their surroundings, “makes you appreciate days like this.”

“Some of us appreciate it more than others.” Sarah said, as she gestured towards dozens of people sitting in the grass, all of whom were actively engaged with some sort of electronic device or another. “How can you be in the midst of a beautiful slice of nature, nestled firmly

within a metropolis, and not be able to escape the confines of a screen no more than 15 inches wide?”

“Well,” Brad said pulling Sarah back in close, “if I didn’t have someone as amazing and interesting as you, I’d probably keep my face glued to the ethereal world as well.” He kissed her and then smiled as he turned to walk, leading her by their clasped hands.

Brad and Sarah walked through the park, enjoying the sights, enjoying life. Sadly, this is not the attitude of the other park-goers. They visited the zoo to the west, where they saw children looking at animals for only a few seconds, long enough to line up a picture before walking off and mindlessly, gazing at their phone to see the majestic creature that is literally standing a few feet away from them. They left the zoo and headed west, down more sidewalks and paths lined with people who are numb to their surroundings.

The couple arrived at the playground. Innocent children laughed as they ran and played. The children are lost in their own innocence. They felt the sunshine, they smelled the grass, they hear the sounds of nature, and they see. They actually see, with clarity, the things that surround them, individually and collectively to form an environment. The innocent children laughed, pleading for their parents to acknowledge their joy. The numb parents did not laugh. They continued to sit next to each other, on benches and on blankets, with their eyes affixed to the artificial light given off from their screens. The numb parents cursed the sunlight for making their devices work harder to overcome the glare, shortening the battery life, while the lives of their children pass by, just out of sight.

Brad and Sarah continued walking north through an open field in the park. As they walked, there was a sudden rush of wind and a very heavy thud, which created a painful pressure in their ears.

“What was that?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know.” Brad responded.

They looked around at other confused park-goers. They noticed some in the distance with their hands raised, but the movements seems as if they were looking for something. Others were picking themselves up from the ground.

After a few minutes, things seemed fine, for the most part. That’s when Brad grabbed Sarah’s attention.

“Honey, look at that.” he said.

As Sarah looked up, there were birds suspended above them. They looked as if they were perched on something, but there was nothing for them to actually be perched upon. As the couple gazed at the birds, they birds were suddenly frightened off by a mechanical whirring.

“What’s that sound? Why are those people running?” Sarah asked in a panicked voice.

“I don’t know what’s going on.” Brad said as he watched people scatter around him.

They noticed that some seemed to strike invisible walls and barriers before falling. Other people were being push backwards by some invisible force they were fighting with. Suddenly the sky became three video images wrapped in a dome shape, with two at each side and one top-center.

“Greeting ladies and gentlemen. I’ll forgo addressing the confused faces amongst the crowd and get straight to the gist of what’s happening right now.” a voice barreled forth from a cloaked figure. “I’ve created a mechanical dome of thinly sheeted metal that has been layered with active camouflage. For those of you who don’t know about this wonderful product brought to us by our own military geniuses, it’s basically TV paper. Tiny cameras on one side with a film displaying the image on the other side. As far as the mechanical part; well let’s speed this up a bit shall we?”

The whirring became louder as the walls of the dome, now visibly, encroach.

“This dome wraps inward on itself. Which means it essentially is the same thing as when you roll paper into a tube to swat a fly. The space in the center will shrink as the thickness of the walls increases.” the cloaked figure explains. “That’s enough of that for now.”

The whirring ceased, although the dome is exponentially smaller than when it began.

“Now, I know there are those of you out there wondering; what do I want? What are my demands? What possible ransom could I be asking of you? I only ask one thing of you,” he said, leaning into the camera with a piercing gaze that sent shivers through any onlookers, “I want you to watch.”

A wave of confused mumbles washed over the crowd and then dissipated as the figure began speaking again.

“That’s right. I want you to continue doing what you were already doing before I, so rudely, interrupted your decadent indulgence. I want you post and repost pictures and commentary. I want you to upload videos to ViewTube. I want you to make this about you. Take

selfies with people suffering behind you to show that you were a part of this. Make dramatic posts about how close it was to being you inside of the dome. Create memes and make light of the suffering of others and hide your ignorance behind some backwoods belief that mourning and being angry at a loss of life somehow means ‘they’ win. I want you to be the depraved pieces of shit that you all are without my provocation!” he said, transitioning from a dementedly delighted tone to a stern and berating one.

“One last message for those trapped inside of the dome.” the cloaked figure said, leaning closer to the camera while still remaining hidden. “Don’t fear dying. It’s a wonderful day to be alive.”

The figure then sat back, fading into the shadows before the feed was killed, and the original view of the interior was resumed, once again giving the illusion of a clear dome. The crowd of people stood horrified at the video that had just emanated from the dome. Their terror soon turned to disgust and shame. The eyes of the crowd turned in on itself, those with cameras and phones out wished they were invisible, as the eyes of their peers burned holes through them. Some of them couldn’t bear the feeling of humiliation at the judgment they were receiving and put their devices away. Other, more stubborn onlookers kept rolling. Some of them sneered and continued on their way, recording and taking pictures. Several of them even turned their cameras on the crowd, commenting to their potential viewers on how they aren’t deterred by the detestation being directed at them.

The crowd’s attention was quickly torn away from itself as the contraption whirred back to life. The earth churned beneath it as it slowly spun in on itself, shrinking inch by inch. A true

feeling of helplessness ran through the crowd. Amid the shouts and pleas to any god or potential assailant that leapt into the air, one voice went up to hush them all.

“Ladies and gentleman, please step back several feet.” as the man spoke, dozens of police scattered, setting up barricades. “I am the lead agent with the FBI. This is now a federal terrorism investigation, any impedance or willful interference with this investigation will be considered an act of treason. I will not repeat that, so I hope we are clear.

The officers and federal agents seemed busy enough, although one could say they were simply running a relay race with some obscure rules. They moved a lot, yet no one could say what they achieved while doing so. This did not go unnoticed by the crowd, as concern rose about the fate of those trapped inside. An elderly man approached to ask the lead agent if there was a plan to get the people out. The lead agent responded by sharply snapping his fingers, after which two officers escorted the elderly man away.

The crowd became upset, it seemed that the people inside would die in front of them and no one was doing anything. The crowd began to shout at the agents and officers on site. A firefighter stepped in to try to calm the crowd. He was successful and received a pat on the back and thanks from the lead agent. As they walked off, he too asked if there was a plan to help.

“Hell, we don’t know what we’re working with here. This thing could be a bomb, or some sort of trap. We’ve figured out that the broadcast from earlier was actually pre-recorded and also went out over several hijacked stations. I’m not going to rush into anything and make myself look stupid on national television. Just keep doing your job and keep these loons away from that thing. Don’t you have some cones or something?” the lead agent says to the fireman.

The fireman stops in his tracks. “Yeah, I’ll get them from the truck.”

The crowd reached its breaking point. Though some remained calm, watching those trapped inside squirm and retreat from the shrinking walls, one middle aged man throws his phone angrily and struck the dome. Shortly after a storm of electronic devices began to pelt the shrinking structure. Panels flicker and dim as they are struck. Whatever the fate of those inside, there are those who protest willfully watching it take place.

The fireman returned. He made his way past the barricade and raised his hand as he approached the dome. The debris storm ceased. The fireman turned, putting the energy of his rotation into the swing of his axe. He strikes the dome, splitting the metallic hull and shorting out a section of panel. The crowd followed suit and rushed the dome, beating the panels with anything they had on hand.

A voice from the crowd shouted, “ If it’s cylindrical rotation, the layers should be the thinnest at the top!”

The fireman climbed up with his axe and began to dig into the metal. As the top of the dome was torn open, layer by layer... The last layer is breached, sending a rush of dust and debris into the firefighter’s sweating face. He blinked erratically to regain his sight; he looked down into metal structure as the crowd fell dead silent.

“How are they?!” a random voice shouts from amid the crowd.

The firefighter doesn’t lift his gaze, with a blank look on his face he simply responds, “They’re gone.”

Sorrowful shouts of despair roll through the crowd. Gasps and feelings of sorrow seem contagious within the sea of people.

“Listen... Listen!” he shouts, quieting the crowd. “They are gone. There’s no one in here. They’re not here.”

A few men who stood around the base of the dome clamber up, avoiding the jagged edges. Mumbles of consensus shoot back and forth between them.

“He’s right,” one of them shouts, “nobody’s in here!”

They looked down at the churned earth at the bottom of the dome.

“Stand back.” Fireman ordered as he climbed through the sharp, splintered metal and dropped to the ground. As his feet struck the dirt, there was a hollow thud that resonated from beneath him. He demanded his axe. Immediately after it was thrown down to him, he struck at the ground, eventually tearing through another layer. He heard cries for help through the slit he had torn open. He shouted down assurances as he worked even harder.

Eventually a hole that was large and mostly free of jagged edges existed. The people trapped within were lifted out and embraced by strangers as they emerged.

Brad and Sarah eventually had their turn at an interview with the lead agent.

“So basically, you’re saying that this guy didn’t want to hurt you guys? This contraption actually open a space in the ground to hide you?” the lead agent asked.

“I wouldn’t say that. The panel in the ground didn’t start to open until the banging started on the outside. I think if people just stood around and didn’t try to help, that the device would have carried out crushing us all.” Brad responded.

“Sir, they’ve found a code encrypted in the video broadcast.” an officer announced to the lead agent.

“Well? What is it?” the lead agent asked.

“It’s a group of ten digits. They believe it to be a phone number.” the officer said while handing over a sheet of paper.

“I guess those nerdy analyst come in handy once in a while. Get me a secure line with a tracer running.” the lead agent said. The officer hurried off at the order. He returned shortly with a large black cube, from which he detached a portable phone.

“Here’s your secure line, sir.” the officer said as he handed the phone over.

The agent dialed the number, standing impatiently as the phone rang on the other end. As he waited, Brad Wojnowski and Sarah Miller had just sat down in their car near the edge of the park.

“These are the times that make life all the more worth living.” Sarah said, as she passed a cell phone from her purse to Brad.

“Indeed they are, my love.” he said with a grin. “Hello agent Mills, so good of you to call.” Brad continued his conversation with a grin, watching the agent who stood in the middle of the park, gesturing furiously. Brad let out an amused cackle and asked, very plainly, “Why are you so upset, agent? It’s a wonderful day to be alive.”