

# Children of the Sun

M C Neuffer

The camp stove and Dad's flare gun were in the attic. I grabbed those but couldn't find what I was looking for. The only light in this creepy place is through the slats at the roof ends. I climbed down the rickety drop-ladder, glad to be back in the land of the living. Attics seem like lost places where things go to be forgotten.

"Mom? Where's the red sleeping bag?"

"Andy, if you want to talk to me, come here. Don't shout down the stairs."

Crap. If she's gonna yell back, she might as well tell me where the damn thing is. But I don't want her getting all spun up and put the kibosh on the fishing trip. Need to keep things light and respectful, at least till we get back. I've been working her for six months, letting her think I was responsible and all, even brought my grades up to solid Bs, and did my chores without asking. A real hassle, but it'll be worth it.

The other guys are toeing the same line. We had a scare when Charlie got googly over Amber Johnson in our sophomore year and started drifting off course. It was a dirty trick, telling her he liked Sara better cause she had bigger tits. But bros before hoes is how it goes. Besides, Gordo hated Amber's brother ever since the jerk snatched his Seattle

Mariners hat back in the fifth grade. He graduated this year, so he'll be going away. They all do. One by one, off to the wild blue, just like Charlie's brother Pete, sent off with the National Guard, old enough to shoot people but too young to buy a beer.

Pete's a cool guy. Cooler still when he left Charlie his beat-up Jeep. Perfect for our trip we've been talking about since seventh grade. Since we first saw those rusty signs. Back then, it was like we were planning a pirate adventure, but that's kid stuff.

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"Push harder," Charlie called from the driver's seat.

"Yeah, why didn't we think of that?" grouched Gordo.

We pushed the back end of the Jeep, but the rear wheel just spun, slinging dirt and burning rubber.

"You got it in four-wheel?" I asked.

"Nope, the front gearbox is disconnected. Pete said it's stripped or something."

"We're going to die out here. I just know it," said Gordo.

"We're not gonna die. The gate's only a few miles back."

Charlie came around the Jeep and smacked his fist against the fender. "You guys give up too easy. Can't just sit here. Need to dig this mother out."

"You got a shovel?" asked Gordo. I bet he hoped the answer was no, or at least only one.

"Or a jack?" I said.

"Shit, Andy, do I look like Triple A to you guys?"

"If we can lift the ass end... not the whole thing, just that corner, we can toss some stuff under the wheel, raise it up," I said.

Charlie spat and looked at the right rear corner that rested hard up on the dirt. "Fine, you got a sky crane in your pack?"

"Nope, but I got a twenty-foot lever," I said.

"Funny, real funny."

"I'm serious. We're surrounded by 'em. Just gotta chop one down."

It sounded like a gunshot when Charlie dropped the tailgate. "Good call, Professor." He held out a hatchet, and a camp saw. "Pick one."

He knew I hated being called Professor, so I came close to calling him Charles for revenge. There had been that one time in science class when I forgot myself and gave a long-

winded answer to Mr. Hamon's question. After that, I made it my mission in life to not sound so smart. If you stand out, you get clobbered by the tribe. "That one looks good."

While Charlie and I sawed and hacked away, mosquitos and gnats swarmed us, shrugging off the two cans of repellent we'd doused ourselves with.

"Hey, Gordo. Make sure this thing is gonna fall away from the Jeep."

I knew Charlie gave Gordo that job to feel important and keep him from offering a constant stream of suggestions. He's always full of those, especially when hungry or nervous. Gordo's always hungry.

The damn thing was stubborn, but it finally toppled. We chopped off the top part and took off the limbs so we'd have a pole and not a Christmas tree.

"Maybe we should take the boat off the top and unload our junk. Make it lighter," said Gordo.

Struggling to jam the pole under the Jeep, Charlie was getting pissed about the whole thing. "It might work better if you sat your fat ass on the hood as a counterweight," he shouted at Gordo. It doesn't take much to get Charlie riled up. We cut him a lot of slack ever since his mom died, but sometimes it isn't easy. His mood improved when my idea

worked, and we were back herky-jerking down the logging road toward the Sound.

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Gordo handed the binoculars to Charlie. “Nobody except a few sailboats way to the south. Signs are still there,” he said.

Of course they were. They’re the lure. The call to adventure. *No trespassing—Government Property* — black on rusting yellow rectangles. Like everyone who passed by Spokane Island, we saw them whenever my dad took us fishing in Puget Sound.

Dad said it was probably an old cable crossing link from Canada. Probably, but maybe not. Maybe the old legends were true. We wouldn’t know about those if Jerry hadn’t done a class assignment to report on something local. He was one of the Four Musketeers, but his asthma turned bad, so he couldn’t make the trip. I told him I’d take some pictures. He found an old reference book from 1903 at the city library. It was so old, might as well have been the Dead Sea Scrolls. The book said Spokane meant Children of the Sun, and the natives claimed it was cursed back then.

The warning signs are backed up by rusty razor wire, the big loopy kind you see in prison and war movies. A few spots are overgrown with vines or crushed by deadfalls. As islands

go, it's not that big. About two miles long and half that wide, with a big hump at the north end. The evergreens grow as thick as porcupine quills all the way to the water line.

It was after 3 p.m., two hours later than we'd planned, before we had the boat in the water and loaded up for our two-night stay. Only two since Charlie wanted to get back to spiff up the Jeep for his first date with Sara on Saturday. Pure karma, that. Amber had confronted Sara with the fake tale about him liking her better. Called her a bitch whore in front of the whole English class last spring. What a hoot that was.

"Andy, toss your shoes in. You're gonna get wet pushing off," Charlie said from the back of the boat. I knew that, but he likes being in charge. He gave a yank on the starter cord, then three more to get the outboard sputtering.

On the shore, I stood at the bow and leaned in. Shit, we're too high grounded. "Gordo, move back further. I can't get her going." The boat tipped every time he moved. "Stay low and in the middle," I yelled.

That did it. *Christine* was launched. We figured it would bring good luck to give it a name. Charlie voted for *Amber J*, but I pointed out how that hadn't ended so well. Gordo shot me a look. He'd been the one to tell Amber about Sara and knew Charlie would beat the crap out of him if he found out. Last year he pasted a guy who just for calling him Chucky.

We zipped along pretty good, wanting to get to the island without being noticed. My job was to scan the west side, look for a good place to beach the boat, and hide it, so we don't get busted. Gordo puked twice on the way over, even though there was just a light chop on the water.

We'd brought some short crutches made of two-by-fours to lift the razor wire loops over the top as we drifted in. Gordo whined when he sliced his hand on a barb, but it wasn't bad enough to need more than a good wrap. Hope he's up on his tetanus shots.

Charlie and I jumped out to pull the boat ashore. Green-faced Gordo held on to both gunnels for the short drag, not wanting to move much until his stomach settled.

"We need a high spot for camp," I said. "The more wind, the less bugs will bother us."

"But not too far from the boat," said Gordo. He sucked blood weeping from his injured hand like it was a big deal. My friend, the martyr.

"I'll scout while you guys unload," said Charlie. He grabbed a shoulder bag, canteen, and clip-on vest light.

I pointed at the light. "How long you plan on being gone?"

He grinned. "Be prepared."

Charlie had been a Boy Scout. Made it to Life rank before quitting when girls got more interesting. His mom said they had Indians way back in the family line. He was proud of that. I've got some Norwegian blood, Vikings, so I'm more at home on the water. Took to it like a duck, Dad said about my boating skills. Gordo prefers to set up base camp in a family room before exploring backyards. Charlie always kidded Gordo about having Crisco in his veins.

"I'm hungry," said Gordo.

Well, that didn't take long. "Come on," I said. "It'll only take a few minutes, then you can stuff your face with Cheetos." I love those too. Who doesn't? But I think Gordo lives on them, judging by his permanently stained orange fingers.

When Charlie returned, he said he'd found a place not too far uphill with a rock overhang. After the first load, we set Gordo to clear the ground of branches and rocks.

"Make sure you keep the bears away," Charlie said as we went back for another load.

The island is too small for bears or other things that might want to chew on us. Not many things can live on pine, moss, ferns, and rock. The most vicious animals were otters, and they'd stay close to the shoreline, munching on clams and crabs. They say clams are happy, but I think otters are happier.

Never saw a sad one, but they'll steal fish right off your string line.

We built a nest under the rock shelf and stretched a tarp as a wraparound so we could have light without it being seen.

Rummaging through the food sack, I pulled out two cans. "Whatcha want for dinner? Beef Stew or Beanie Winnies? This canned shit tastes the same to me." I'm tonight's cook, so I got the pot and Sterno stove ready while the other guys loosened up the dirt and stacked pine needles where our sleeping bags would lie out.

"Don't forget to dig some crap holes," I said, knowing Gordo hated anything less than a fully sanitized bathroom with a door that locks. All I had to say to make him shiver was 'Union 76'. On a fishing trip, he was taking a crap in one of their restrooms when some old man opened the door on him. He screamed like a little girl. I don't mention it very often, but I let him punch my shoulder when I do.

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"Go with me, Andy," Gordo pleaded.

"You're being a baby," said Charlie.

"Jerry would have gone with me," said Gordo. "Wish he'd made it."

Gordo wouldn't go into the dark without one of us, so I volunteered. "I gotta pee too, so come on," I said.

We ducked under the tarp into the pitch black. "Wait a minute," I told Gordo. "Let your eyes adjust, or we're gonna trip all over ourselves."

I reached out and found the hand line we'd rigged from our camp to the latrine so our flashlights wouldn't be seen from off the island. "Grab the rope," I told Gordo. "Take small steps."

I bumped into the tree at the end of the line and told Gordo, "Turn around. Back to back." I can't pee if I think someone's watching. Gordo's the same way, but Charlie can water the bushes like a fireman no matter who's around. Last winter, he had us watch when he tried to write his name in the snow. His penmanship needs work.

Unzipped, I started going. A ball of light floated up from the ground in the trees, swelling and shrinking, then twisting into a long line like a snake. Fireflies? No, those don't group up like that. The dense ball sparkled green, not blinking. Shit. What the fuck is out there? I shivered and cut off my stream. Zipped up, ready to run if that thing came closer.

The glob changed shape and just sort of wound through the trees. I violated the darken ship rule and hit it with my light. The globe thing stood stark still, like I'd interrupted it, like it

knew I was there. Bugs don't do that. I had that feeling you get when you think someone is watching you. Some pee dribbled out in my pants. Then the thing disappeared, shooting away like a cannon ball.

"Gordo," I whispered. I could hear his piss hitting the ground.

"What?"

I didn't know what to say, knew he didn't see the light show, or he'd have said something. "You done?"

"Almost."

Rule or no rule, I kept my flashlight on all the way back with my head on a swivel. When we got inside the tarp, Charlie was checking his text messages. Man, I wish I was that cool right now.

I lay on top of my sleeping bag with the flare gun and shovel next to me. My gut got squishy like I was gonna have the squirts. I'd rather crap in my pants than go back into the dark again. We stayed up for a while before Gordo, then Charlie drifted off. Not me. That thing moved like it was searching.

Must have fallen asleep because I almost plastered Charlie when he gave me a shake. My heart tried to jump out of my chest. Blessed daylight came through gaps in the tarp.

“Whatsa matter?” Charlie asked.

I shook off sleep. “Bad dreams,” I lied. “Where’s Gordo?”

Charlie shrugged. “Dunno. Probably taking a dump.”

A rustling sound from the other side of the tarp raised the hair on the back of my neck. I pointed the flare gun at the flap, ready to pull the trigger.

Charlie grabbed my hand. “What the fuck? Wake up.”

Gordo pulled back the tarp, let in the morning light, and tossed in a roll of toilet paper. “Great morning, guys. Let’s check out this burg.”

He’s not a morning person, so that seemed weird. “Breakfast?” I said, wanting time to calm my thoughts. I’d almost shot my buddy.

“Naw. Grab a Pop Tart and eat it on the trail.”

“Everything okay out there?” I asked.

Gordo gave me a look. “Wadda ya mean? Why wouldn’t it be?” It was a cold challenge when his eyes locked on mine. “Grab your gear, and let’s head south.”

“What’s your hurry?” asked Charlie.

“Adventure awaits,” he said.

I struggled up, slung on my pack, then joined Gordo and Charlie outside. Gordo was already making a trail, waving his

arm forward in the old wagon ho command. "Keep up. We can go north tomorrow." Charlie shrugged at me and followed.

I wanted to tell the guys that spending another night on the island was the last thing I wanted to do. But I didn't want to sound like a scared little kid. What could I tell them? What I'd seen faded like a lifting fog. Easy to convince myself it had been my imagination. Daylight is safe.

When we got near the south shore, there it squatted. A small cinder block building, aged and moss covered inside a rusting chain-link fence. It was hard to make out the letters in pealed and faded paint. *Cable Station 23* stood there like a tomb.

I sat on a downed tree and felt the rot give way. My pack was a load of bricks. Charlie joined me, keeping his eyes on Gordo. Along the way, he and Gordo had kept up a running conversation, most of which I missed being the last in line and trailing well back. I heard Charlie yell at him to slow down a few times.

Gordo grabbed the fence, gave it an angry rattling shake, and then disappeared around the back side.

I looked at Charlie. "Fuck it," I said. Charlie nodded.

I snarfed down peanut butter crackers and dried sausages. The good ones, not Slim Jims. Those are nasty, made of brown paper and grease. Mom only buys the good stuff from

Swiss Colony. Charlie took my offer of a summer sausage roll and carved off a big chunk with his knife, then handed it back.

Gordo came around the building pacing, chanting something low under his breath, eyes gleaming like he'd gone native or something.

"He's been nuts all morning," Charlie said.

I was famished from not having breakfast. A can of peaches, juice and all, chased down the crackers and sausage. Not real healthy, but I'll burn it up. I leaned back on my pack and then closed my eyes to let the sun warm my face. Needed to take a leak, but I was too tired to get up after staying awake most of the night. Gordo and Charlie wandered toward the water, arguing about what to do next. As long as I didn't have to get up, I was satisfied staying right here.

Gordo nudged my feet with his boot. "Wake up. Charlie's waiting."

Shit, I'd fallen into a deep sleep. "How long was I out?" The shadows had shifted further east.

"Long enough, pal, long enough." He had his pack over his shoulders and shifted back and forth as if he was late for something.

"Take it easy, man." I didn't like this new Gordo acting like an asshole. I stood up and geared up. "Where's Charlie?"

“Just over the rise. Come on.”

As we trudged up, Gordo lagged. Good old Gordy was running out of steam. Up, over, then down a twisting trail of scuffed dirt and broken ferns.

“How far did he go?” I asked Gordo.

“Around those rocks.”

There he was. My skin goosed up when I saw him kneeling in a shallow depression. His naked body was glowing, arms outstretched. Thousands of those green lights circled around him like a tornado. Gordo should be screaming like he'd done in that Union 76 restroom. Instead, he gave me a shove toward Charlie.

“Get in the circle,” said Gordo, but it wasn't his voice. It was deep, gritty, mean.

I twisted away from him. “Fuck you, Gordo.”

“No fuck *you*, Andy.” He raised his hand and pointed a gun at my head.

My gut dropped, and I took a step back. “Where'd you get a gun?”

Gordo's face stretched. His mouth opened so wide it looked big enough to swallow a basketball. Those green things swirled inside that maw. His laughter boomed. “Charlie brought it. He tried to shoot us.”

My legs felt like they'd grown roots, but I managed another step back. "Us? You and me?"

"No shithead. The children, all fucking *all* of us they tossed in the hole. Get over there. Better if you're alive, but fresh dead is okay too."

I looked at Charlie. He was burning up but hadn't moved, still on his knees, still with his arms held wide. The ground inside the circle opened, but he just hovered there before sinking into the green light, sinking slowly, like in quicksand.

When I heard Gordo cock the revolver, my legs refused to move, my vision blurred. Shoulder straps slipped and my pack dropped at my feet. I gasped for air and fell to my knees. My mind screamed, *fight or die, fight or fucking die*. I reached into the side pouch of my pack, found cold metal, then grabbed the top strap of my bag.

"Get up, get fucking up," insisted Gordo.

Coiling my muscles, I gathered every ounce of energy I could muster and swung my pack at his head. He ducked, but it gave me an edge. I jammed the flare gun into his pudgy gut, pulled the trigger, and felt it pop. Falling on my ass, I saw the flare sticking out of his stomach. His body shook, and the green horde streaked from his mouth into the hole. Gordo looked down at the flare as it flamed, clothes on fire, his fat sizzling.

Tentacles of light snaked from the hole, wrapped around his legs, and dragged him into the pit. I scrambled back, puking yellow peaches all over myself. I couldn't pull my eyes away as Gordo's flaming body disappeared like Charlie.

My hand had a white-knuckle grip on my pack. When I shoved it away, two flare cartridges fell out. I tossed them into the fiery pit. Two pops, flashes, and more flames when they ignited. Screams like a thousand tortured banshees lashed out. Drained of all I had, I sat on the bank of the hollow, watched the hole close like it hadn't been there, hadn't taken Charlie and Gordo.



Everyone claimed there wasn't anyone named Charlie or Gordo. I clammed up when there was talk about having me check into one of those mental places. Cops said there was no sign of anyone having camped out on the island. No Jeep, no boat. Just poof, all gone.

I knew I wasn't nuts after finding the initials Charlie carved on that tree trunk in the woods where we hung out. CD+AJ — Charlie Dolan and Amber Jennings.

*Missed that, you fuckers. Thought you'd covered all the bases.*

Now they're back, calling me like a fog horn, calling the one who got away.

Jerry squirmed, testing the ropes, eyes wide, pleading. I know he's uncomfortable, tied up and gagged, but comfort is not on tonight's menu. Blood trickles into his right eye from where I clocked him. I gave him a kick to make sure he stayed alert.

"My life's been nothing but fucked all these years. Nobody believed my story back then. Not the cops, or my parents, not Amber or Sara. But you knew. Even though you kept quiet and played dumb, I could see it in your face."

Squaring up my Mariners ball cap, I tossed the bow line onto the dock. A peaceful release washed over me, the first in years since my world caved in. I glanced at Jerry to make sure he was still hogtied, then patted the cases of C4 for good luck. "Hope you don't get sea sick, pal." I pushed the throttle forward and pointed the boat toward the island.