



THE **FIRE** WITH THE TWO
DRAGON SMOKE:
From Before the Third Day

a novel

Zeke E. Sanchez



Triggerfish

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From Before the Third Day*

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“That’s the thing about it. The fire was unpredictable. There was very dry grass and the relative humidity was low, the wind coming out of the south.” Source: an unknown Fire Official commenting on a fire.

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ONE BEGINNING

Willie Sykes had a habit of calling out your complete name. Not all the time, but more than called for. He was just formal that way. Maybe a holdover from an earlier generation. Sometimes the squad leaders or the other young men in the mountains fighting wildfires would also do it as a joke. They would enunciate your name very carefully and with great deliberation. So Bobby Dahl would become “Robert” Dahl and Teddy Marquez was now “Theodore” Marquez. This is what Willie Sykes did. He was a quiet man, not given to puffing out his chest. He was past his prime, and seemed to hobble around while the younger men on the fire crew rushed here and there. Still capable though, he could climb a mountain, he just didn’t *run* up the mountain.

He had one weakness, and it was a glaring one. He played favorites. You could tell who he liked, and who he would let get away with – as they say – *murder*. Not literally murder, but certain guys on the fire crew skirted the rules, and Willie let them slide by. The District Ranger would not have allowed it, but the Ranger himself had reasons to leave Willie alone, to let him run his fire crew the way he saw fit. After all, Willie kept the district safe from catastrophic fires, had answered the call at the right time, in the right way. Had a tough, seasoned crew with a few youngsters who were equally tough and stepping up. No, there was nothing the Ranger could find to complain about Willie Sykes. Willie Sykes was a woodsman, a man without the book learning the Ranger had, but with the years of fire wisdom lining his receding and fire-singed hairline.

This particular District Ranger, Cartwright Mickey, was a strong man, his blond hair streaked by the sun, his shoulders broad, arms strong. He had gained weight since his stint a decade earlier at the Grangeville Smokejumper Center. In those days he ran a lot and trained arduously with other parachuting firefighters. Entering middle-age but still regarded himself as a strong man. Very different from Willie, a man barely above the definition of “skinny.” Willie had a slight paunch, but he was weathered. Where Ranger Cartwright was robust with a bold, confident stare, Willie was the definition of a hardened, backwoods type of guy. No frills. Nothing loose hanging from his shoulders. Had small eyes that squinted, many said from years walking through the fire line, through the smoke. Willie led a crew of firefighters who did not jump out of airplanes but were hardened and as tenacious as the smokejumpers he had served with as a young man. This crew would fly from state to state, mostly in the West, chasing fires.

The Ranger had his favorite, and Willie had his favorite.

It was simple, really. The Ranger’s favorite was nephew, Roger Mickey. Willie’s favorite was more a mystery. A kid out of Oregon, maybe Portland. This kid, Jeremy Luna, was not from the backwoods like Willie. Hell, he wasn’t even related, not even a distant relative. There wasn’t a lot Willie had done for the him. But you didn’t have to do a lot for the firefighters to notice. Maybe Willie had let an infraction go, had not talked to the kid when he screwed up.

The fire season didn’t last much beyond the three months of the summer. But in those three months the young men got to know each other. Not like they had been together for years but they did learn some things about each other. Sometimes good, sometimes not so good. Sometimes things went sour. It all happened at the Ranger Station where they had their barracks.

The kid in question, Jeremy Luna, drove through the night from Boise to get back to the Ranger Station at first light. Later the sun would spread over the three or four wooden buildings. Okay, so the first guys he encountered nodded or were indifferent to his arrival. Jeremy nodded and shrugged. The others were not too friendly with Jeremy, but he didn't give a shit. His cousin, Henry Romero, in his second year with the crew, had made a number of friends, though lately he'd clashed with a couple of people. Besides his cousin, Jeremy had only Big Harold as a friend, and Fernando, a shy Mexican who Jeremy thought needed to come out of his shell. Fernando resembled a lizard. Jeremy himself had a Mexican grandfather so it wasn't a racial thing. There were a couple other men in the crew who looked like lizards, too, he thought, grinning.

Coming out of the bunkhouse was Big Harold himself. He raised his huge paw with a "Howdee!"

Then, "Hey, you don't have to tell me how it went with Lisa. I can tell. You got your engine tuned!"

Jeremy shook his head, smiled. "She was asleep when I left."

Walking towards the mess hall. "She know you were leaving?"

"Told her last night. Told me to wake her."

The Ranger Station is hidden below the slipstream of Hwy 95. The sun rises to the East, and the dangerous, powerful Salmon River runs north and south with the highway. Whenever they went fishing on their downtime or tossed rocks into the river they had to cross the highway. You had to climb to the road, look both ways and sprint across. Passing cars assumed it was a deserted part of the mountains. "Anyway," Jeremy was saying, "She has to get used to me being away. I'm not going to be that kind of husband."

"You getting married?" Harold threw up hands in mock horror.

"Someday, sure. Aren't you?"

Harold nodded calmly. "Yeah, I'll marry someday. Don't intend to be a lifelong bachelor like Freddy. I'm not like crazy Freddy Ricci. I'm not that crazy."

"Freddy likes his barbells."

"He'll never get married. Lives in his car a lot."

"Careful, here he comes," Jeremy cautioned.

Freddy Ricci was taller than Big Harold but not as thick-set. His father was Italian but he was a spitting image of his Irish mother's younger brother. "Hey! There they are, Crazy 'Moondog' Jeremy Luna and Big Harold! You fellas up for some trail digging and hill climbing? It's a good day for it, anyway. We're in luck, the foreman ain't here. Ryan's crew boss today."

"Whadda ya mean 'we're in luck'? What's wrong with Willie? He's a good foreman."

"I'm glad you think so, Moondog. You ain't got on his bad side yet." Freddy spit tobacco out the side of his mouth. It was early and he was having a chew before breakfast. They ambled off to the mess hall.

Freddy was one of the stalwart young men on the Slate Creek Fire Crew. He was the bodybuilder. Big Harold, a former marine was also tough, had played college football for four years. Jeremy Luna himself was not an athlete, though he was capable. He just wasn't interested. There were others in the crew like Jeremy, young men who were not into sports but could do the hard work of a firefighter, digging line with the

heavy ax-adze combination tool, the Pulaski, cutting down trees and limbs with a chainsaw and trekking long distances over steep trails.

Another guy like Jeremy was Walter Gunther who kept his hair short. In fact, Walt was beginning to lose his hair. He had a small round head and deep-set brown eyes. He was deeply intelligent, would be finishing up a master's degree in business and following up with extra classes on quantitative analysis. He told Jeremy one day, "I want to have something to offer them." By that he meant whatever company would hire him to work for them. Fighting wildfires was his way to pay for his schooling.

Jeremy replied, "College really isn't for me. I'd like to do something, but don't know what."

"You'll have plenty of time to figure it out, I guess. I mean during fire season."

"You had a bad fire while I was gone."

"Well, it was at night," Walter said. He had a matter-of-fact way of talking. "Northern California. We had to sleep on the line."

"That have something to do with the accident?"

"I don't know because it happened in another sector."

"Two Indians?"

"That's what they say. They were playing grab ass and fell off a cliff. Nobody believes it."

"The government's story?"

"Yeah, the Rangers protecting their behinds. Don't tell them I said so."

"Nobody believes it?"

"Nobody. It was dark. They must have walked off the edge accidentally."

"But it was a bad fire?"

"A monster fire, but that wasn't the reason they died."

"Well, if nobody saw it, they can spin their story. It's the shits."

"It was steep country. Walking on the edge of cliffs, having to chainsaw giant trees on the edge. But it was dark, so all that business was over with for the two Indians," Walter said. He was older than most of the crew and usually spoke slower than the other men. Did not usually engage in the jocularity, the banter.

Fighting forest fires is digging trenches. Shallow depressions in the soil. The crew unfurls as a large worm on the earth, eating or rather -- destroying -- everything in its path. The first man initiates the fire line, strikes a branch, marks the ground with the Pulaski. Second man takes a harder swipe because he is not marking, he's destroying. First four men in the crew carry Pulaskis. After them come the hoes to shape the shallow ditch in front of the advancing fire. They will deny a fire access to dry brush. They will starve and kill the fire. Finally at the end come the shovels. These men were actually referred to as "The Shovel." They used that tool to swiftly pick up dirt and toss it on any embers scattered about. They tidy up and smooth the line.

Hard work but they were late teens and early twenties. A few had been soldiers. Others grew up on farms. There may have been one or two men who did not have this background, but they were rare. The last men were not athletic, but they endured.

Digging line was what was used to train the men. Their trainer was Willie Sykes, a man of forty with a perpetual three-day growth and eyes that had been strained by forest smoke. Willie had never been athletic but he had the look of hard work about his slender frame. The crew leader would pick a spot somewhere and tell the men to dig either in a straight line up the hill or mountain, or he would say to follow the contour of

the hill. It wouldn't be too hot early in the spring but as summer advanced the sweat would come quickly on the brow. And there was no stopping. There had to be the constant thud of the Pulaski on the thick, rich earth and the scraping of hoe and shovel, or even a rake at the end of the snaking, shuffling crew. Each man learned his part in the movement, and moved comfortably, no longer concerned with what the others were doing. Confidence grew.

They learned to handle the larger chainsaws. Giant pine no longer fell to axes or crosscut saws like in the old days. Giant trees were brought down with long-bladed chainsaws. On occasion the weight of the massive trees would lean into and trap the whirring blade. The operators had to learn how to free it, at times by inserting a falling wedge. It was the technical part of the challenge. There was the fear factor. A large tree is a monster. It may fall in any direction, it may fall on you. Jeremy, had marked down in his diary how impressed he had been by a quick, quirky kid who volunteered to be the first of the new guys to use the large saw. The kid became the first one to tackle a large, mature pine the crew leader chose to bring down. The kid's name was Diamond Tanaka and he became the first to overcome his reluctance. This was the reluctance of standing next to a giant weighing many tons and trying to bring it down. Like standing next to an unpredictable hairy mammoth about to get angry. The next memory Jeremy had of Tanaka came later at a fire when the forest was burnt through, everything blackened and a widow maker came down on Tanaka with barely a hush, and he turned to see Tanaka flying in the air to avoid the massive tree.

BALLED UP FIST

During a fire at a stream crossing the day before, they had walked on a rope strung across the cold stream, walking on one rope and clinging to another. They balanced their boots on the springy rope while holding on at chest level with their full packs to a rope that swayed with their weight. Roger, the squad leader, had mischievously shaken the rope while Freddy Ricci crossed, making him wobble and cling to the rope while leaning out into the water. It was fun stuff, and Roger laughed and teased Ricci. It was fun stuff to see the big weightlifter close to being spun into the swift water.

Revenge was swift -- though not the same day.

The crew had forgotten about it, but not Ricci.

The following day Jeremy, Harold and Henry crossed the stream with their packs, and the commotion exploded behind them. Ricci crossed before Roger and knelt holding a rope with one hand and lifting the other, wiggling it. And when Roger was in the middle, Ricci lifted the rope slowly up high to where Roger teetered, grinning big teeth, eyes blazing wondering what Ricci would do, and Ricci beginning to laugh lightly, lifting the rope higher, and not stopping like Roger had done the day before. Not letting Roger off the hook. This was serious play, as the seriously freezing mountain stream flowed below. Roger slipped off his pack and threw it to the shore. He was lighter now and could try to balance himself. He dangled on the rope bridge above the rushing water, dangled in midair as giant Ricci raised it higher and higher, a big malicious grin on his Irish face. Ricci dumped him boots and all into the stream. Roger went in with a splash and struggled, flailing, to the bank and two men pulled out the soggy rat. But Roger could not get angry. He was a practical joker, too. Ricci was bigger and muscled, and in this world it mattered. That weekend near lights out they began bantering about Roger's bath in the cold stream, and the crew piled on. Jeremy's cousin, Henry, also said something to Roger, maybe laughed. It was dark, the lights were off, people were in their bunks. Things were going smoothly, Jeremy remembered. Henry said something and Roger didn't like it. What did he say? Not much. Not much at all, maybe, "Hey, buddy, I bet that water was cold!"

"That's rich coming from a wetback," Roger responded. Roger was small and wiry, smiled a lot but had a knife-edge tongue. He must have felt he needed it now. He had full fireman's mustache on a face that could have been that of a department store manager, but a vigorous one. Jeremy took all of this in, liked Roger the squad leader, but Roger had no reason to call his cousin a wetback. Henry had done nothing but laugh like the others, along with the others. But Roger was from California, not Idaho and *maybe that meant something*, Jeremy thought.

When this encounter happened between Roger and his cousin, Jeremy was slowly drawn into his cousin's problems with the crew, and as this incident unfolded he stopped to think it through. *Okay*, he figured. *Take it slowly*. Roger growing up among Mexicans in California had something to do with it. But why? Roger was from Los Angeles. Where was he *really* from? He would say LA, but it was really from El Segundo. Jeremy knew nothing about El Segundo but wondered if the Californian's reaction had something to do with El Segundo. Who the hell knows? Jeremy thought.

Jeremy himself was darker complexioned than his cousin, Henry, but Henry looked more Mexican somehow. Maybe it was Henry's upturned eyes, maybe it was the curve of his nose. Maybe it was that somebody on the crew heard him use the Spanish

language talking on the phone. Jeremy couldn't quite figure it out why Henry seemed to attract demeaning shit like this from guys like Roger.

So that night when Roger called him a wetback, Jeremy's cousin flipped on the barracks lights. He walked over to the other wing where Roger was waiting for him, resting on one elbow. He didn't get out of his bunk. He wasn't worried. "What the hell do you want, Henry?"

"What the fuck did you mean?"

"What? (there was a pause) It was just a fucking joke!"

"Yeah? And I'm getting ready to bounce you off the wall."

"You serious?"

"As serious as a Mad Hatter."

"What the fuck is wrong with you? We're all joking here. What the fuck is wrong with you? Get back to your bunk!"

Henry looked down. Spit close to Roger's bunk. "Fuck you!"

By this time they had an audience, the half-naked, skinny, bony or goofy, sleepy muscular bodies of the crew congregating under the florescent ceiling lights. By now the other squad leader, Ryan Stump, had gotten up. "Okay, you guys, how about we cool off, talk about it tomorrow."

Jeremy had gotten up, too, as had Harold, all walking around in their skivvies. It was Jeremy's cousin, after all, and he was glad Harold was there, too. Some of these guys were hard-asses, veterans like Henry himself, and jocks, and you never knew. Roger had friends. Jeremy was glad Harold was there. Henry wasn't waiting, though. He showed Roger his balled up fist. "I don't give a shit if I lose my job kicking your ass."

The shaken squad leader sat up on the edge of his bunk, caught Henry's gaze and held it. He reached over to his footlocker for a cigarette. He lit it and let the smoke drift. Henry kept his fist clenched. "Okay," Roger said. "Look, you were laughing at me, I simply laughed back at you."

"Did I call you a sonofabitch or something?" Henry said.

"I don't know. Don't remember. Everybody was laughing and talking."

"I said you were a little punk deserved to get his ass wet."

"Nah, you didn't say that!" He waved that away.

"What *did* I say?"

"I don't know."

"Why did you call me *that*?"

"Look this is getting too serious. I'm not a fighter. I'll take it back, okay? That okay with you?"

Jeremy and Big Harold talked to Henry. Henry unclenched his fists. But this incident further deepened Henry's discontent with the crew. The crew already saw him in a different way. For one thing, Henry was more aware of who he was, dug deeper into his Mexican roots than Jeremy or the Mexican, Fernando. Though he and Jeremy shared a grandfather, they had vastly different outlooks about who they were. Since arriving at the Slate Creek fire crew, Jeremy was just beginning to understand just how different he and his cousin were. And he understood Henry was one serious dude.

THE HOWLING WIND FIRE

The fire season began earlier than usual. It was a dry season, with the grass on the hillsides turning brown. The wind whipped up in places, and a small ember from some neglected campfire had expanded like a drop of thick oil on dry fibers. Their first fire would be called the Howling Wind Fire and it was somewhere in Montana. Jeremy wanted to keep his head down and work, and not ask a lot of questions as to where exactly the fire was located. They needed more crews to rush to the area. Half of the Montana crews were in Colorado on another fire. “Saddle up, boys,” Willie told them. Ryan started gently rousing them. It was their manner to be gentle, both Willie the Crew Leader and Ryan the Squad Leader. Neither had been in the military, so there was nothing military about them. They were both tentative, careful, in how they approached the men. Gentle creatures, Jeremy thought. He himself was like that, but it surprised him that the crew leader and the squad leader were like that. Ryan would drive the big Dodge van and Willie the Scout. Once they loaded their packs and climbed aboard the vehicles Ryan headed up a winding road. Jeremy was not familiar with the area, and later could not recall how they got to the high elevation on the winding road. The memory of the other leg of the journey was erased by the hair-raising drive along the cliffs. He would recall it was a gravel road, would recall the dangerous speeds Ryan took, how he wanted to holler at him. “You don’t need to drive like this! You’re going to kill us!” He could imagine the tires sliding on the gravel on the sharp turns. It had happened before. They would all die, he thought, but they would die without howling. He accepted the danger, as he would accept it later on the fire line. He sat braced but quiet in the speeding, sliding vehicle. Ryan drove like a native of these mountains, which he was. Jeremy was from Portland, and this type of driving was treacherous. He cringed inside at his own fears. He held his breath while staring down at the edge of the cliff and the steep plunging, rocky, descent that would be their fate should the vehicle blow a tire.

At this time Jeremy didn’t know the back roads of the Riggins and Whitebird areas. In fact, he would never learn them. He never got to know the local area, the back roads. That was left to Henry and Big Harold, who both liked to fish. They fished the Salmon River across the road, and they fished the many cold streams in the area. Neither had a girl nearby to go back to, a reason to drive to Southern Idaho. Harold was from Iowa and did have a love in that midwestern state and he did call her frequently, but he generally stuck to the Ranger Station on weekends. This weekend they were on the road to an airfield. When he had become an older, wiser man, Jeremy recalled on occasion driving down to Boise to see Lisa. Could not remember asking permission of the crew leader. Doubt he had.

The Howling Wind Fire was the first of the Montana fires they were called to. To get there they were on the road north to the airfield in Grangeville. When they got there, they boarded a prop at the Smokejumper Base. The plane was midsize, the pilots young. Pleasant, overweight risk takers. Risk takers who viewed the weather through their cockpits, not like firefighters. They knew their machines and exuded a certain presence and command. They were entrusted with a small crew, maybe twenty or so men, to deliver to a fire east to Montana.

The pilots treated the crew like the young men they were, not like the fierce firefighters of legend. “Wanna see the sights?” The pilot really wasn’t waiting for a response. He dropped in altitude and meandered among snow-capped mountains, passing through beautiful valleys marked by sheer snow and lonely pine. “That’s where the TV announcer has his vacation home. The CBS guy, you know who I mean.”

“Yeah, we know who you mean,” Roger Mickey said, curling his mustache.

The pilots said, “That’s it, boys” and got a new heading over the last mountain range and headed for an airstrip cut out of the forest. Two choppers waited to ferry the crew to a river flowing between an immense plain of high grass and a sudden dark green forest of pine. This was within the borders of Yellowstone Park, and the crew noted immediately the mosquitoes were large and fierce. A spot of rain fell. It looked like rain, and Harold, the marine, spread out his poncho between the sagebrush for shelter, but the promised rain stopped. Jeremy had begun spreading out his poncho but stopped. In Montana they were on a sagebrush plain by the river, and crossed the river to the low foothills to the fire. When they got there they climbed a small rise and could see local crews in front of them, yellow fire shirts and blue helmets in a winding line. When they ascended the hill behind the other crews they passed an older stubble-faced Mexican man, a man over fifty who appeared exhausted and leaned on his Pulaski. Jeremy felt ambivalent for the older man. There was something terrible and deflating about it. He appeared to be a man who had spent his life working with his hands, and here he was climbing these hills. By now even the crew was struggling, and they were at the top of their strength.

This Montana fire was constant movement. The winding lines of firefighters rose on a distant rise before being swallowed up by the thick pine. There were smoke or thunder clouds in the distance. The storm would threaten, loosen large drops of water then stop. The crew sheltered beneath the trees when the rain picked up but it had stopped. From up on the ridge they could see other crews mustered in an open field far below. They stood there, and then Henry, shoulders hunched over his shorter wrestler’s body, came up to Jeremy and Harold. “Hi, Primo. No rain, huh?”

“You never can tell,” Jeremy responded. Henry leaned on his Pulaski, like he had something on his mind. The mindless chatter was for another time. He wanted to talk.

“I wanted to tell you, don’t worry about Richard.”

Richard was Richard Miracle, real name Richard Milagro, a boxer living in Boise. Richard was from Wyoming but had gotten in trouble there. He had his eye on Jeremy’s Lisa, and had threatened Jeremy.

“He doesn’t bother me,” Jeremy said.

“You mean he didn’t threaten you?”

Jeremy grinned. Jeremy was good natured and instinctively did not want to enlarge any problem he had with the boxer from Boise. “Oh, he talks shit, but it’s just talk.”

“He could come here. He could come here,” Henry warned. He ground his boots into the soil from the chill and slapped his hands together. “A year ago had a dude show up wanting to fight a kid. The kid disappeared.”

Jeremy chuckled softly. “I’m not running. I got my friends here.”

Henry walked back up the line. He padded Harold on the shoulder as he went. “You watch out for Jeremy. He doesn’t take this shit seriously enough. You got me?”

Harold was also good natured, like Jeremy, and didn't react much to these things. But he nodded.

Henry went back, and Jeremy watched him and the crew leader point to a grass covered field with scattered young pine to where a local crew with the blue helmets milled about. Henry raised his arm pointing to the mountain and followed it up toward the peak. There was smoke up there. Who knew what his cousin pointed to, what the smoke meant?

After hard work on the line for two hours, they were led back down the mountain and across the river to the original open field. Ducked under the helicopter blades while boarding to be taken to where the fire was spreading. It was par for the course, and the newer guys would get used to the maneuvering. Jeremy's buddy, Harold, had experienced many dangerous helicopter landings in Vietnam, but a landing in a wild fire was a new thing. He was nervous about the first landing, expecting the shock of the sharp descents and combat insertions in Vietnam. He had told Jeremy this. They were close and Jeremy watched Harold's apprehension at that first landing, Harold reliving the thud, the shock of the skids hitting earth and marines spilling out under fire around Con Thien. Jeremy had fought fires in a local crew near Seattle and so was familiar with the rhythm and surprises of fighting fires, but Harold was not.

They were strapped in and the chopper rose and crossed the river and continued across the forest and glade. Perhaps Harold was trying to forget his apprehension. It was noisy in the chopper. He turned to Jeremy. Under the blast of the prop, he hollered, "Your cousin's serious about that Richard dude."

"Henry's like that. A little paranoid."

"No shit, he's paranoid. He was ready to fight that squad leader, Roger, the other night."

"He got called a wetback, that's something. Roger's a jerk sometimes. Henry doesn't joke around like that. Never."

Harold was curious. "Why aren't *you* like Henry? You're not touchy about that shit."

Jeremy shrugged. The helicopter circled a heavy column of smoke. "Henry's proud of being a Mexican. Not like a Mexico Mexican, but you know, with roots there."

"You're Mexican, too, somewhere back there?" Harold was curious because Jeremy had a slow, casual way about him, and he didn't seem bothered about his roots like Henry. "How come you're not like that?"

"It's my grandfather, he was a Mexican. Come on! I can't be like my grandfather."

"Yeah, my grandfather was from Ireland. I don't know shit about Ireland. I guess I should."

The two friends had experienced hardship, Harold more than Jeremy, but they both recognized something in each other and that the world was still unfolding for them. The fire jumping from tree to tree overhead was something new, too. But it wasn't dangerous, they could see that, because here the pine stood far apart. Still the wind carried the embers along the tops of the trees. "We got that road back there to get out if it gets bad," Jeremy said. He pointed to a powdery road winding through the trees skirting the steeper hills. "It'll get us back to the river."

"You figure we can trust Willie to get us out of here?"

Ricci had come up on them. He heard them talking. “No way am I waitin’ for Willie if I see the fire closing around me!”

Harold raised his arms vigorously, waved them in the air. “You lead the way, buddy!”

The three of them were put there by Willie to guard a propane tank. Willie ordered them to fight small fires coming their way. They guarded the propane as best they could as the flames came at them on the tops of the trees. None were crown outs, where the heat would suddenly explode the tree at the top. The three men worked, putting out small fires erupting with the little dust devils along the edge of a heavier forest to their west. They were not aware of time. Time had long ago evaporated. They were used to the long hours, those who had more experience. Harold, the marine, had slipped back into his military routines, where time was meaningless in the field. Unless they were on a synchronized operation, the men on patrol simply went about their work. He had even been conditioned to it as early as Boot Camp, where you learned to stand in formation at the DI’s reckoning. You had nowhere else to go, this was where you belonged.

The sun had risen and now moved high and began a very slow descent. The rest of the crew worked a line around the nearest mountain. Willie came to check on the three, and gave Ricci a radio to call him for help if the fire threatened. They took turns going back to the river for chow, joining half of the crew, while the other half stayed on the line fighting a desultory flame. The wind threatened, the clouds darkened, but it was as if a dam of foreboding waters was being held back. They would wait, and wait, and the consolidated crews would eventually tie off the ends of the fire and it would be stopped. It couldn’t cross the lines without a strong push of virulent wind.

But the wind, the virulent wind, did come. It came late that afternoon. There was false thunder where rain didn’t fall. Where lightning didn’t strike. Instead, the air was sucked up from the ground and the trees. Hair and scalp felt electrified, and the three friends glanced around, particularly Ricci who was always the skeptic. He doubted everything around him. It kept him alive, he felt. “Get a load of this,” he said, pointing up the road where a fire line had been dug up the mountain. They could see a churning. It was the crew, running back at a jog. Willie wasn’t in front. It was Ryan Stump and Roger Mickey, the two squad leaders. Now the three friends could see others spill out from around the mountain. They stood amazed as the crowd of men got closer and closer.

Roger came abreast of them. Coughed, lungs fiery. “Make for the river, get going!” He began to push Jeremy and Harold backwards.

Jeremy pushed back. “Where’s the fire?”

“You won’t see it, the wind’s got it, get going!”

The crew was a mix now of men staying in formation, and others running beside them. It was a gang of men. They had their tools and orange canteens. They were moving toward the river. Where there was no smoke the wind now churned the fire, formed a cloud that came after them. It was a controlled fear, Jeremy could see it in their faces; it sent them hurtling down the powdery road. The weaker ones dropped their canteens, held on to their tools. Willie, near the rear of the column saw this and began to yell. “No, no! Pick up your canteens!” A few of the men heard him, and slowed to help him up the road. He was winded. “Go get them, bring them back to pick up their stuff! This is no emergency! I did not call an emergency!”

Ryan ran after the crew. It would be a humiliation in any case. The local crews had also begun to run upon seeing the IR crew break. Willie raised his radio and waved it to stop them. "No need to run, boys. No danger!" Still some of the local crew and the blue helmets ran past him. Their crew leader stopped to harangue Willie. "What the hell are you doing with your crew, man?"

"Hell, I don't know what . . . They're by the river . . ."

"Shit yes, they're by the river. That's where some of mine are by now. Shit, god almighty, Willie. What the fuck!"

"I'm sorry man, I'm sorry. The wind and that black cloud. It spooked some of the younger guys. I don't know. We'll get them together. You'll see. They're by the river. Let's go."

They had started to the river to cross it; had been directed to go there and wait for the helicopters on the sagebrush plain. They were told they would be jumped ahead of the fire. They started in the right direction, started to the river to cross it. But the rank and file didn't know the details. They were told to go back to the marshalling point, but the beast in the sky, the burgeoning cloud had spooked them. The helicopters would pick them up, but the black cloud and the wind was threatening and they had been tentative from the beginning. From the beginning the clouds had menaced. It was like they were being shadowed by something bigger than what they could see with their eyes. They ended up running faster, half-scared, and leaderless. Now they were relieved to be on the far side of the river.

On the plain they encountered other crews milling around, including a crew from Boise. Among them was a face Jeremy's cousin knew well. Henry walked through the crowd quickly to where Jeremy and Harold and Ricci waited with their Pulaskis and packs. "I'm gonna pull you aside for a reason, cousin," he said, pulling at Jeremy's elbow. "I'm pulling you over here so you get a good look at that sonofabitch over there in that fire crew over there. You recognize that sonofabitch?"

Hunched over a Pulaski talking to another man in another crew was the broad-shouldered, heavy-fisted pugilist. "You see that sonofabitch?" he repeated.

Before Jeremy could answer, Big Harold and Ricci came over. "What's the problem, Henry?"

"It's that sonofabitch, Richard Miracle, the boxer likes to fuck people up. You reckon the sucker got on a crew just to track my cousin down?"

"No, no," Ricci said. "Hell, no! There's no way he could know where this crew, or any crew for that matter, was gonna end up."

Big Harold agreed. "Yeah, not likely, friend Henry."

Ricci started to laugh. "Henry you got to settle down man!"

"Oh, man, you don't understand! Jeremy's not a fighter. This man could hurt him."

Harold Murphy scoffed at that. "He a boxer? Kick 'im in the nuts."

Ricci's whole face turned into a wide grin, turned to Harold, bumped up against him. "Harold, you're not encouraging these boys to fight, are ya?" He brought out a piece of chew and stuffed his cheek. "Cool down, everybody. We're here to fight fires. We all stick together. Don't worry." He turned to Jeremy, who had yet to say anything. "We all stick together. Ain't nobody going to fuck with us, okay?"

The crew gathered in small, irregular knots of men. Ricci was holding court. He was prankster, fast with a joke. “You’all didn’t break, you just started running fast. Roger ran the fastest, ain’t that right?” He was in his element, tormenting Roger the “Mouse.” He had thrown Mouse into the cold mountain stream, and Roger had had to suck it up. It was hard to get mad at a fella like Freddy Ricci. “It wasn’t a full out panic, that’s for sure.”

Willie the crew leader was slowly wending his way to the little knot of men. “I have to agree. There was no panic,” he said. But he didn’t come across as convinced. Clearly, he had been worried that the crew *had* been panicked.

“Willie, it wouldn’t have been on you anyway, it was on Roger Mickey,” Ricci assured him. “You had to get the crew back here for the choppers. It was Roger stampeded everybody.”

“Nah, nah!” said Mickey, wagging his finger. “That’s a crock. Let’s get it straight. We were told to get back here on the double. What does on the double mean to you, Freddy?”

“It doesn’t mean running like you got diarrhea.”

“No, it means leading the crew. I did that.”

“There was no panic in this crew,” repeated Willie. He gave Ricci a quick but stern look. He wanted it to end. He didn’t want to be reminded. He said this while they waited for the helicopters. Not the ones hauling water buckets to the head of the fire. These were faster, sleeker things. The crews waited, watched large, big-bellied planes haul crimson red retardant and drop it on distant hills. “We are a good crew, and that was no panic. I don’t want to hear it anymore, Freddy. No more, understand?”

It was Willie finally taking charge. Jeremy turned to Harold. “Good,” he whispered. “We’re turning into a real crew.”

Harold nodded his big square head. “I was beginning to worry.”

They were flown over the mountain, and inserted six at a time in front of the fire. But what had been an ambiguous dark formation of either smoke or rain clouds, burst into a thunderstorm. The crew stood drenched facing at first a gigantic blaze and then a sputtering flame as the relentless rain killed the fire.

There would be no helicopter trek back to the open plain. They would walk back. Jeremy was not thinking about the crew, rather he was thinking about Lisa back in the valley. Jeremy escaped into thoughts of Lisa, but his cousin Henry marched along like in any another march. He had been in the infantry in Vietnam, a ground pounder, a Leg. Marching was marching. This trekking through the woods and winding their way to where they met up with the powdery road now muddy was something he recognized. But for Jeremy, much of it was still new. He had the previous summer’s firefighting with the local crew in Washington, but it didn’t compare to what Henry had done in Vietnam. Jeremy had come with a good recommendation from Cle Elum and had worked hard immediately at Slate Creek. He had worked hard and gained the crew leader’s respect and trust. Maybe the crew boss saw something in Jeremy beyond his hard work. Why else had he allowed him back in (after his disappearance)? Maybe he had hit a bit of good luck. He could certainly use it. Lisa was living in a tiny house in one of the poorer suburbs in Boise. She could use some of the money he would make on this job. It paid really well, paid well for eating smoke and putting up with the boredom that set in after the dangerous part of a fire had been beaten down. On some fires they

spent long hours walking in a dead world in a landscape of blackened remnants of tall trees, acres of burnt grass and vegetation turned into ankle deep swaths of fine, gray ash. The heat unbearable and drinking water not always readily available. One crewman went back strapped with oversized orange canteens to a water truck parked far away from the main blaze. It was a tough job for the designated water man. He walked in a gray world, trudging through the broken, burnt trees. Normally, the men did not sleep well and by the third or fourth day on a fire were savaged physically. Sleeping on the side of a mountain was not to sleep the sleep of babies. Trees fell over during the night and crashed with a thunderous cacophony down the mountainside. You chose your sleeping site carefully behind remaining live trees if they were around or beneath the lip of a mountain road or trail.

But this had been a quick fire. The local crews would relieve them and get the shit job. Those crews would spend long, brain deadening hours turning over the leftover embers with a spade. Willie said the Slate Creek Crew, on the other hand, was headed to New Mexico. “No need to shower, boys.”

“That why we’re heading out?” Ricci asked him, with a smirk. “Because we don’t require no shower?”

Willie looked up at the sky. “The rain did us a favor, I guess.”

“Oh, well, that’s good enough for me,” Ricci said. “I need to make all the money I can get.” He looked around for approval from the crew. They milled around waiting for the chopper. It would take them back to a nearby airstrip. From there, who knew where they would go, other than to head south to New Mexico. Only the crew leaders had maps, and they didn’t share much information with the crew. Who gave a shit about the details; none had traveled enough for it to matter much.

Jeremy and Harold and Henry migrated to where Ricci and Willie talked. Ricci noticed them and turned all the way around to Jeremy with a shit-eating grin. He was still thinking about the boxer that had turned up at the fire. “Reckon that boxer’s gonna follow you down to New Mexico, Moondog?”

Roger Mickey joined the little group. He was smallish for a firefighter but had an outthrust chest and energy that made him appear ready to start sprinting. Maybe that was why Willie had chosen him as one of the two squad leaders. It was the energy of the man. And he loved to kibbitz. Liked to bullshit. In fact he had a reputation as a bullshitter, though most firefighters respected that he was older than they were and a squad leader. He said, “Leave Jeremy alone, Freddy. He’s not looking to fight the boxer.”

“It’s the boxer’s looking for a fight.” It was Henry.

The bantam rooster wondered if Henry was wearing the face of a war veteran now, or was it the face of family loyalty? He and Jeremy were cousins, and cousins could be tight.

The squad leader’s troubles with Henry back at the barracks the other night had been a close call. He didn’t want to create another incident. The man at the top, Willie, knew all of this, too, and gave Roger a quick glance, then looked down. Willie had heard about the near brawl. The other squad leader told him.

Sixty men milled around waiting for transport. Eventually they marched across the open field to a gravel road a half a mile away. National guard trucks drove them to the airfield, but first they got a quick lunch of cold sandwiches and instant coffee and water. For the twenty men of the Slate Creek crew the flight to the Mexican border took

several hours. It was a smaller airplane this time. There was no sightseeing. They were urgently needed at a desert fire.

Arriving in the dark of the night, the crew was driven to a marshalling point to bunk down in a massive gymnasium. In the morning they were again flown in by helicopter. After the helicopter left, they were directed to a new set of coordinates. They marched in the desert until coming to the remnant of road.

“Look at the stones. It’s definitely a road of some kind,” Ricci said. They had marched far into the desert.

Willie peered at the stones. “Probably old Spanish road.”

For Henry the stones meant something. Whether he had heard stories of old Spanish roads disappearing into the desert, or read something he couldn’t be sure. But the mere mention “Spanish” piqued his interest. So when Roger, Mickey aka “the Mouse” butted in, it got his attention. “Henry, you know this road, *amigo*?”

Jeremy was also listening, and with different ears than was common among the firefighters. He had begun to develop a way of hearing, and maybe seeing, that was different from the white firefighters around him. Hell, he was white himself, had always considered himself white, and been treated as white, but to see Roger Mickey tease his cousin like this, well, he was beginning to slide into something different. He couldn’t say what, at least not yet.

But he need not have worried about Henry. Henry had things on his mind and ignored Roger. But Roger couldn’t help himself, tapped another firefighter’s helmet. “Ask him if he knows where this road goes.”

“No, you ask him.”

Disappointed. “Nah, you’re right, let him sleep.”

Harold was walking at the end of the line and came up to Jeremy. “You keep an eye on this, Jeremy. Your cousin is likely to knock out this dude.”

“Henry was a boxer.” Jeremy said. “Not a pro like Miracle, but he was a boxer.”

“That’s why I say that,” Harold said. “We have enough shit to worry about when we go into town.”

“Yeah, Harold. Every yokel in the mountains wants to try out the big firefighter.”

“That’s why I’m aware this shit. Roger trying to bait Henry. Makes no darn sense; Roger’s a squad leader, should know better. I get that shit in the bars in these mountain towns. Because of my size.”

They got to where they were going. Willie met up with somebody, and got flares and passed them out to the volunteers. He was never one for big explanations. “Who wants to do the backfire?” Gestured to the side of the road slated for burning, and looked around. One came forward and then another. They had been placed at an angle to fire up the desert in front of the oncoming flame. This would deprive the fire of grass and shrubs. It would kill this surge, though you never know if the winds would carry red embers past the dead blackened acres. Years later Jeremy could not recall whether they had eaten at all that day. In fact, he would forget all particular meals except two. There was a mountain fire in California where shave-headed, tough-looking characters from a state prison cooked and doled out the meals. To him they looked rougher than the firefighters, and harder somehow even than the veterans. He couldn’t explain it, but that was his visceral reaction: These were hard men. The crew spent the rest of a hot day engulfed in smoke, beaten down in the sun, and when night came they stayed in the desert.

It was a gradual fading of the sun, it seemed. Faces mostly on the ground digging line, occasionally a look around at the sky made gray by smoke with a blotch of a sun high above. Eventually even the blotch disappeared. The heat was everywhere but then it got cold. The crew chief checked in with his bosses for updates on the radio. They walked in pitch black, they walked blind in thick smoke. “Grab the man in front of you. Grab ahold of his belt. We’re walking out. No helicopter tonight.” No other explanation given. And so with Willie flashlight in hand they wound through the desert, stepping off the end of the world to where everything was burned, the night moonless, avoiding sinkholes of fine puff ash over dangerous deep-tissue burn holes. Stretching across a flat white stone to another. They came to a slight rise where the stones were larger, some half as wide as a Volkswagen bug and topped by fire-vanquished cactus with burnt, forlorn arms of a scarecrow. A helicopter approached them from the darkened sky, its lights flashing, a stream of brilliant light on Willie. Dropped off cotton sleeping bags white under the lights. Jeremy watched the squad leaders get their sleeping bags, saw them strip to their shorts, hang their clothes and fire vests on the arms of the burned cactus. He himself folded his clothes to use as a pillow. It was just as well he did this, as in the dark night sparks followed the limbs of the cactus to ignite the flares inside the vest pockets. The crew awakened to bursting flames and white-limbed, skinny boy firefighters began jumping from wide stone to wide stone to retrieve their clothes, and toss to the burning flares into the dark.

Jeremy experienced wind, smoke, and night - and more wind, smoke and fire, and then they were pulled out of the fire in a helicopter. He would remember the New Mexico fire for its remoteness, for the old Spanish trail, for the mystery of their winding journey through the black night holding onto the man’s belt in front of him. Not knowing where they were going, but trusting the crew leader. Willie had led them to another remoteness on the burnt ground that night and had found the wide stones where they threw down a sleeping bag for the night. The government brought them cotton sleeping bags.



BACK AT THE RANGER STATION

When an aperture opened into the world of forests and fires, and peace and light showed through, you saw Cousin Henry fishing. Henry became a block of granite or basalt rock when he fished. That ability to remain immobile for hours on end had served him well when he would remain hidden in the recesses of the forests in Vietnam. He had been a reconnaissance trooper assigned to the lonely and hazardous duty of spying on the enemy. Often it had been the Ho Chi Minh Trail (HCM) where he passed lonely nights with five other men. Hardly moved sometimes. Jeremy himself did not have his cousin's durability. He had to move around.

He would eventually make up an excuse to leave Henry sitting with his pole and go back to the barracks. He just had to move around. As much as he loved feeling the massive weight of the somber, brown river rushing by, he could only take it in small quantities. He was not captured by the psychic magnetism, the powerful attraction of the weight and rush of the river. He had to go back. But on this day Henry was animated, and wouldn't let him go. No longer contemplative. "I don't want you to go to Nampa, Jer. I don't want you to go to Boise. You got to stay here. I dunno, I got this feeling in the pit of my stomach that you shouldn't go down to the Valley."

Didn't want him to go to Nampa. Nampa was near Boise. There was a reason why Henry didn't want Jeremy in the Valley. It was because Tia Alejandra had brought Henry a warning about Jeremy. She had called him at the Ranger Station. Her anxiety for the safety of a nephew she hardly knew was interesting to Henry. There had to be more, something between Jeremy's father and Tia Alejandra, maybe something that stretched way back decades earlier. Maybe something had happened before dark-haired baby Jeremy was even born. Who the hell knows? Henry's Tia Alejandra liked to keep abreast of the news in town, and acted like a searchlight for her nephew. It was the Milagro brothers, she said. She knew about Jeremy and his troubles with the alpha male in that brood. Jeremy's nemesis had changed his name to Richard Miracle and she was anxious about it, anxious and nervous. She knew quite a bit. Richard Miracle's brothers -- Sammy, Richard and Troy -- were all losers who had done hard time. There were savage beatings of quiet men who walked into one of the Northside's bars alone. Bars where the Miracle brothers hung out. Bartenders would clean up the blood, throw the sliced ears of the victims into the coal burning stoves before the cops arrived. Henry's Tia Alejandra poked her nose into things, really delved into the where's and why's. Relentlessly energetic and religious (at times), she might be into fortune-telling too. A small, even-featured woman who wore her still dark hair in a tight bun, Alejandra kept a neat house and stayed married to a very large, broad shouldered man with blond hair and blue eyes. This man of German extraction from Mexico loved his wife very much, but hardly talked when Henry came around. Always friendly like Alejandra. Alejandra was secretive about her ability to tell the future. So what? So what if she could guess right part of the time? *That was all*, Henry thought. He, himself, thought it hocus pocus, this telling the future, but he tolerated his favorite aunt, and depended on her for the gossip around the little town, particularly the gossip having to do with Townie Mexicans and Mexicans moving in from labor camps dotting the agricultural valley. Tia confirmed Richard Miracle was fighting fires in the mountains, but warned him Richard's two brothers had been searching for his *gringo* cousin,

Jeremy. She called his cousin a gringo but always in a light and friendly way. It was a mystery to her that Jeremy, coming from Portland, could be so dark and yet look so Anglo-Saxon.

Henry worried Jeremy with premonitions. "I see you with black eyes and lying on the floor of the Black Cat, yeah, bleeding real bad, brother," Henry told him. "Why don't you stay here this weekend? Get in good with Willie. We're elite firefighters, we have to be here. He should have fired you the last time you skipped out on a fire, bro'."

"We have an understanding, cousin."

Henry tapped his own skull. "That understanding is Willie's a good head."

"I do take my chances. Yeah, I do."

"Ah, Primo. You got to get your head straight."

"Miracle's in Nampa, you say?"

"Long time ago, Two weeks. I called my Tia Alejandra. He was at Albertson's with his wife and baby."

"Your aunt saw him?"

"She's your aunt, too. He was wearing sunglasses. Hair slicked back, knuckles bruised like he beat up some drunk. He's gone now. A so-so boxer who lost as many fights as he won. He can't get a lot of fights in Idaho is what I hear."

"You hear that? Who you hear that from?" Jeremy asked.

"The valley, the scuttlebutt. You need to stay away from the valley, cousin."

"I'm not afraid, it's not who I am. I'm not a tough guy, but I'm not afraid."

Henry had nothing more to say. Fear was something he fought himself, and it was refreshing to hear one of his relatives was probably braver than he was. Brave even though he had not been in his generation's big war.

That weekend Henry drove up Highway 95 north to Moscow. Henry was attending college up there, and was worried about his trailer. He hated to leave it unoccupied. It was incongruous that a tough guy, a former Army Ranger would go back to school, or so he thought until he met others, a Jewish guy from Seattle who had been a Navy SEAL and a heavy-set bearded boxer from Chicago. The previous year he had foolishly stayed on with the crew after the end of the season. By the time he got to the college all the student housing had been taken up, and he was forced to spend all his firefighting money on the trailer. He'd felt like an idiot. Now Jeremy went with him for the drive up there. Henry said, "Yeah, you stay up at the fires till we find out more about Richard, if he still wants to catch up with you."

Jeremy pursed his lips. Then chuckled. "That's not why I'm doing this. That's not why I decided to ride along, cous'."

"Not running? I know you're not running."

They were on the road, taking the curves in the mountains. It was hairpin turns in those days, but the older cousin knew the road. The younger one looked at his own tired face in the side mirror. He said, "You know, cous', I know you know a lot about fighting. You worry this Richard might whale on me, and he might. There's no guarantee he won't but I . . ." here Jeremy paused, changed his perspective from the aperture of stark mountain and sparse pine to Henry's relaxed driving face, "I can't live my life wondering, fearing, some guy's going to break my nose. And I'm just not going to become a boxer or karate guy just so I can whup on Richard Miracle. That ain't me, babe, not me, cousin."

Henry shrugged. Jeremy thought his older, war veteran cousin quirky that way, the way he shrugged at a lot of things. They had encountered each other on occasion when they were growing up, but had never been close. Jeremy didn't know Henry well, not like from childhood. Not like that. Recently had met up again at a family reunion in Nampa, a town Jeremy considered narrow and uptight. He didn't particularly like the town but when he met Lisa, it all changed for him. Then she moved to Boise and he encountered the boxer. That brought his troubles.

"What did you say to Richard?" Henry said.

"Nothing, but maybe I thought he was a freak of nature," laughing.

"What? His broken nose?"

"Yeah, and wearing sunglasses all the time. Nah, it's more how he carries himself."

"Like the dude owns the place?"

"Maybe I don't show the fucker any fear. Maybe he expects people to tiptoe around him, the bastard."

"I don't do that."

"Well, no. You were in Nam."

Henry laughed. "To a dude like that it means nothing. Nothing at all. In fact, it would probably make him a bigger man to beat up a Vietnam veteran. When you are crazy like that . . ."

"Can anybody be that crazy?"

"Look, Jeremy, I'll be straight with you." They were walking in the quiet Moscow streets now. It was late summer and the town was deserted. Very few people or cars. Typical small, isolated university town. It was surrounded by vast wheat farms, rolling golden hills. They walked towards a seedy tavern where Henry liked to go. Not many students from prosperous families went there during the regular term. "Yeah, I'll be straight with you. You come from Portland. I don't know Portland, but I recognize a kid who grew up with the right clothes, the right haircut. I recognize a kid with a warm coat in the wintertime. You know what I mean? And I don't mean it in a nasty way, you know that?"

"Sure." They walked in from the light into the dark of the tavern. "You had it rough. You already told me."

Henry peered at his cousin sideways, and put on a huge grin. He nodded several times, as if to give himself permission to say what he would say. "If you stuck to your own class, you wouldn't have this problem with the boxer."

Jeremy turned to look at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have a Spanish name but your old man made some money. You didn't even grow up in the Valley."

Jeremy got up, ready to walk away. "Henry, you think about this shit all the time, don't ya? This stuff, all this that you worry about, it doesn't bother me." He wanted to believe that, and in a way he did – but in another way, he didn't.

THE FILER CREEK FIRE

On the second Montana fire they took down the giant pine leaning out into the chasm. Jeremy held precariously onto his chainsaw protruding out over the precipice. Not looking down, trying to bring the pine down. But the tree locked the blade and chain in place, pinched it. Jeremy tried several times to free it, but could not. There were terrible things that could happen. The saw could whip out and cut him in two. If he leaned out too far, trying to angle the chainsaw, it could buck out of the tree and knock him into the precipice. Or the tree could snap, arching back at him, killing him on his narrow perch. He leaned out into the air with the saw.

They worked in two's and Harold was there, a hulking but friendly presence on his shoulder. Harold was from Iowa but these towering mountains did nothing to him. It was Harold's first summer with the crew, but even in this predicament he was untroubled. Maybe he didn't know fully how the saw could buck and strike you in the face. Jeremy had seen the terrible damage the saw could do to a face, had seen it on a friend. Jeremy knew himself to be brave enough, and he had tried to free the saw, working back and forth to no avail.

"Here, Jeremy, let me try it." Harold stepped out into the narrow piece of earth between gray boulder and empty sky and worked with the long blade trapped on the cliff's edge. He worked it and worked it while Jeremy, relieved, watched. Harold did it well and freed the saw. "You got it," Jeremy said, happy to acknowledge his friend. Harold was stronger, heavier, and there were times when that counted.

The giant tree came down during a lull in the fire when they were told to clear an area of all the trees. "Take down everything," Willie had told them. "That's the word. Gotta stop the fire here. We got time, the wind's died down."

Willie said take down the trees, but without urgency in his voice. He'd said it more like it was "down time" while they waited for another hot call. Waited to double-time over a ridge, or catch a chopper across another river. Waited for something. *Harold, for his part was still preoccupied with his memories of combat in Vietnam, memories of useless bloody fights over hilltops that they later deserted and turned over to the enemy – preoccupied with running unexpectedly into an armed NVA (North Vietnamese Army) soldier (it had happened to him).* He asked Jeremy what he would do. "Just for argument's sake, Jeremy, imagine what would you do if you had come face-to-face with somebody on a cliff's edge? See how the trail is close to the cliff's edge?"

"I'd shoot him, like you would."

"But here you don't have a weapon. Supposin' you meet the enemy here at the edge of the world on this canyon?"

Jeremy looked around. Wanted to answer the veteran the best he could. "Well, Henry says to use your elbows," Jeremy said.

"Figured he'd taught you some."

"Nah, we hardly see each other outside of this place. But he knows some of that. Vietnam."

"I don't know where he'd find the time for that. Learned it in Vietnam? We never had any time. Always on patrol."

"He was with the Koreans for a while."

"The ROK's. Yeah, fierce SOB's."

“They taught him a little bit, Harold. In close quarters use your elbows and knees.”

“I didn’t have time. I strangled the poor sucker. He was a brave shit. Fought like a devil. I got nothing but respect for the NVA.”

“This down time is good,” Jeremy said. He was looking out over the chasm into where the giant tree had fallen. He then shifted his eyes to where the mountain ascended. It was sparsely covered with pine but then the pine grew thickly up the side of the mountain. They would be hiking across the chasm by going part of the way around it to climb to the other side. There they would build a second line. “None of it makes sense, but a lot of this doesn’t make sense to me. I don’t get to see the maps. Maybe it’s a long line we have to build, though it looks like two separate lines.”

“Welcome to Vietnam, GI,” Harold chuckled. Jeremy turned to see he had that half-crazy man’s look. “That’s how it was. The higher ups got these fabulous maps. Some of the information came down, and our sergeants got some. They marked up their maps. Grunts hardly saw nothing.”

“Henry carried a map all the time.”

“Yeah,” Harold said. “He was a sergeant. I wasn’t. The war was a mirage to me. I only saw and knew what was in front of me. I swear.”

They had been at the bottom of a draw, and Willie told them to move up the trail, “Jeremy take the Pulaski’s!” Heavy stack of ax-steel hoe combinations to be used at the top, taped together and they were heavy. Jeremy grabbed them and started up the steep trail.

Trail was vertical, not like trails laid out for tourists. He moved up rapidly, knowing the entire crew was behind him. By now he was conditioned to this, as it was midsummer, and he could feel the tightness in his legs and his arms and back, but there was no exhaustion or pain, just the heavy working of muscles. He was used to this, and kept moving, breathing a little heavier now. The heavy, steel Pulaski’s in a tight, hard bundle pulled, but he could take it. A guy behind him, he didn’t recognize the voice, “Come on Jeremy, I’ll carry the rest of the way,” but he wouldn’t give them up.

It was his goal to reach the top.

Years later he would see how stupid that was to try to cover the steep climb himself, alone, with the entire crew behind him, but it was a classic mistake of a young man his age, to try to prove something to himself, or to the others, perhaps to try to correct some previous failing, some fresh embarrassment. It was hot now, and his breathing labored, -- feeling challenged to the extreme, but he kept going. He remembered hearing Harold’s story of a marine officer who wouldn’t give up on a march and died, although Jeremy knew it wasn’t the case with him. He wouldn’t die. But by the end when he reached the top of the rise, he was finished, exhausted. He dropped the stack very hard. It was Pulaski’s with their hard wood handles and sharpened steel blades. He stood next to them breathing very hard. When the crew leader came abreast, he ordered the crew to begin digging. He was in a hurry to dig a line. Jeremy stood catching his breath while the others immediately obeyed, crouched down with their Pulaski’s, begin to tear at the earth. The crew leader had no idea what Jeremy had done, did not care because he had other things on his mind. “Come on, Jeremy, let’s dig!” The kid had not time to explain, nor the volume of breath left to explain. He took one of the Pulaski’s and joined the line. *No fucking appreciation!* he thought.

They dug furiously for two hours around the mountain. Then the crew leader got a message on the radio, replied and quickly put it away. He walked forward to the lip of the ridge and hurried back. "We gotta go down here," he said to his squad leaders. "We got to go down there and dig a line farther down out ahead of another fire."

Ryan Stump was Willie's other squad leader. He was the quiet one, the tall one with a paper white complexion that somehow withstood the sun in July and August. "We should dig it around the mountain higher up here, Willie."

"I don't understand it myself," Willie said. "Not everything makes sense around here."

"Call them back and make sure." It was Willie's other squad leader, the Mouse.

The three men had the hurried talk while the crew rested, but Jeremy and Harold picked up bits of the conversation. They were to go down into the bowl of the mountain. Without a clear thought, Jeremy found himself doubting. Something about going into the bowl made him uneasy. He had a sense Harold was watching him, watching whether he trusted Willie. He's watching my reaction, the same as I watch his, he being a combat marine and all. He's watching me because I fought fires last year, and he trusts me for that. For himself, Jeremy felt he'd already taken risks beyond his measure, had gone beyond where he had ought to go. He wasn't a hero. Had not gone to Vietnam. Was not a fist fighter or barroom brawler, was not like Henry or Big Harold. Was not like any of those fellas. He was himself, Jeremy Luna. The one who could do. He worked hard. Willie had told him so, that was why he got hired back after Jeremy disappeared to Boise that weekend when Willie said he needed him. But now he had to decide whether to descend into the giant bowl. Harold had been a marine and would do whatever Willie ordered him to do – unless his buddy, Jeremy, told him it was crazy. There was a churning of smoke down there. And though Willie said the wind was channeling away from them down the valley, Jeremy didn't feel right about it. Maybe he had begun to invest too much in himself, in his future. He had spent much of his early youth smoking a lot of weed, drinking a lot with his teenage friends Ronald Huffer and Ricky Barrera. Had been in a lot of scraps, mostly not actually fighting but pulling his friends out of scraps and out of jail.

He never saw himself as a fighter and would fight only if he had to. He was a lover, true and fair. He had loved a lot of girls, not just for the sex, but tenderly. He was that kind of guy. He was a sensitive, careful, quiet guy who could laugh at himself and at the situations he found himself in. But he was also a vulnerable type of guy. He could cry. And at this moment at the top of the ravine that extended into a bowl, that dropped through a narrow defile into a distant valley, he was ready to cry. He doubted that Harold could see the turmoil going on in his head and guts. It became a weird sound that played on his nerves, a dire warning of some kind that strummed his fibers and made him want to cry. Instead, Jeremy pulled himself up to his full height and took a big breath, leaned on his Pulaski for a split second. He was carrying two heavy orange canteens filled with drinking water. He hesitated only briefly. In that moment those feelings of dread settled in his stomach like frozen curds. He was himself again and he wasn't. In this circumstance where all twenty-one men had to walk down into the bowl, he knew he could not back down. Nobody in the crew was backing down, and they were no braver than he was. Yes, the winds might shift, and it was a long way from the top to the bottom where they were going, and it would take a long time, twenty minutes or half

an hour to climb back to the top, and if a fire circled around they would be trapped. He thought of that. Knew the stories of firefighters caught running up hill.

The entire time Jeremy was in the bowl a shadow, a presence, seemed to hover over his shoulder. Maybe he wasn't cut out to be a firefighter. But if he wasn't, who was? He could look around him and see the rough big men, but in the crew there were also wiry guys with less muscle than he had in his own arms. They were there for reasons unknown to him. He could guess, though, that it was for college money, or simply to get a job with the Forest Service. They swung their steel Pulaskis and hoes and shovels, and worked the area ahead taking down trees near the trail where Willie walked ahead marking it with red ribbon and pointing to an old pine to be brought down. This far into the fire season, the crew worked in unison, all determined, seemingly unaware of the danger from the fire behind them and to the left of them where the gentle breeze would occasionally whip up. They could absorb the fatigue, the heat of the sun, the heavy pressure of that yellow orb now orange through the haze, now more oppressive in tandem with the weight of the burning caldron around them. Where was the fire now? Yes, there was some flame in front of them, slowly rising flame that was already there when they arrived sliding and trekking down the mountainside like bears. The fire did not surprise Willie, who had the radio, but did surprise Jeremy, a regular line firefighter. Many times he wanted to ask questions, but he couldn't interrogate Willie at every turn. Hell, you just don't do that.

Decades later, after the smoke and the heat of the oppressive sky had become a memory to be thought about wistfully, he could not remember all of the details. The minutes turned to hours and turned to days on the fire line and became a blur. Some things stood out, like coming out unscathed from the giant bowl and climbing higher into the mountain to a point where they could take a break. How a pool of water was bone-breaking cold, how one or two of the men stripped down to plunge into the pool, how Jeremy also got in. Screaming first to prepare his body and then plunging into it, feeling it grasp his heart and squeeze it. Reaching the other side, pulling himself frantically onto a large rock, shaking.

And the Crew Boss watching with his own thirty-something face older even than his thirty-something years, silent, taking in the youthfulness of the three firefighters who had plunged in, wasting their energy to shock their bodies with the incredible cold, remembering how he had done the same foolish thing a decade earlier. They would shiver and sun themselves on the ledge of rock and have to swim back to reclaim their soot-stained pants and fire shirts.

The break was over and they would go back to digging. The pressure was off for a while. Henry, Harold, and the squad boss, Roger and Willie the crew boss, sat resting while the shaking swimmers buttoned their fire shirts. Then Willie got up, squinted his small, ferret's eyes and nodded to Roger to ready the men. They shook themselves free of the earth where they rested and labored back up the mountain, up the steep gradient, stopped to breathe at the top, then went down on the other side. Through a clearing in the trees they could see the National Guard trucks bringing in the work release prisoners to cook for the fire crews. Down below, far below, was the one road out in an emergency. It was a long way down, though. A long hike down. They would climb up even higher, away from the bowl, as the wind had begun to push the fire up the

mountain and Willie had gotten that disembodied word through his radio that they should follow the ascending ridge away from the bowl, move up. Jeremy was to encounter that voice again. It happened the following day with the crew moving down below at a snail's crawl and Jeremy by himself traveling parallel with them, looking for a spot fire Willie had observed above them. After pulling himself up with difficulty through heavy brush, Jeremy had come to a ledge on the ridge and began moving parallel with the crew below. By the time he got to the spot fire it flared. It jumped from clump of dry grass to dry bush, and Jeremy began moving heartbeat fast with his shovel. He threw dirt, leapt up and down the gradient, breathed hard, sweat accumulating on the brow, chased the fire. It would engulf the ridgeline. He began moving quicker, his twenty-one years of life spurring him on, the vitality his. But the fire began to sprout taller flame. It began to roar at him from two, then three, then four rugged clumps of scrub brush and sagebrush. He began to holler for help. He did not carry a radio. He hollered below, and Jason Otami heard him. "What?" he hollered back. He motioned his arms. He hollered something but Jeremy could not make him out. He hollered down the ravine, but Otami motioned, "What?"

"I need help! Get your ass up here!"

But it was a long way down. The crew appeared small down below.

Now Otami could be seen hollering at the crew leader, and the crew leader had taken out his black radio. And Jeremy was running now with the fire, attacking it, trying to keep it from getting behind him. Behind him were bigger heads of sagebrush and taller clumps of dry yellow grass. Behind him lurked a bigger spread of fire. And he fought the fire, his shovel scraping dirt and flinging it to the flame. Over and over doing this, his breath not a problem, his muscles working, he with a young man's body, but fear gathering steam too, and suddenly it was over. He had conquered the flame. Now he felt his breathing. It was heavy. Exhaustion set in. He felt like a hero. He had stopped the enemy. The danger was contained. He was a hero to himself. A modest hero. He was alone, then abruptly the static of a radio. It cut in and out. And he heard a voice. A bored, fire officer's voice. "He's got it out." Jeremy looked up. Two middle-aged men in yellow fire vests and white helmets squatted on the ledge above him like two aged crows. Squatted just like shithole crows, Jeremy thought. The fuckers did not even acknowledge him with a nod, did not even have the grace to look at him. He was a non-entity, a man who worked with his hands, who did not make decisions. Probably they had seen his long black hair and figured him either a migrant worker or a fucking hippie-type college student, one no worse or better than the other. They were incurious fire-fighting bureaucrats working for the Forest Service, and they never got flustered over Jeremy's imagined heroics. Part of Jeremy's reaction to this boorish behavior by the two crows was immediate and part of it was how he saw it decades into the future when he had grown much older than even these two fire officials. They had talked on the radio to his crew boss below. They had also heard Jeremy's hollering for help, had come to scope it out, to see if there was trouble, had doubtlessly arrived at the ledge to watch him pour the final scoops on the fire. To them, it was something routine to be reported to the crew boss below. Nothing unusual. None of the grave threat Jeremy had held back. None of the gladiator movements on the steep hillside to reach every bush bursting into flame, every spark flying across and behind him. None of the gyrations had been visible to them, only the yelling. And they reported down to the boss below

that “it was nothing.” Nothing to worry about. Jeremy stood dizzy with adrenalin, holding onto his shovel.

They had to pound the earth, tear at it brutally but with skill, tick-tocking endlessly, really without thinking, thinking only of continuing. They were young and strong and could continue like this swinging the heavy Pulaski for hours, which they did. Midmorning had become late morning, near noon, and then, as they watched the heavy, big bellied slow-moving aircraft drop the red retardant in spreading plumes over the fire they collected their tools and canteens and began to move down to eat. Decades later, when he would try to remember those meals, he could not. Only certain meals, perhaps because of the exotic locations, like eating at tables set up near the Canadian border on a peak that appeared as a needle from the very far distance when approached by the helicopter that seemed suspended in the air, in the vastness of space because there was so much of it, so much space between where they were flying and the peak where they were headed. Headed straight for the peak, which turned out to be large enough to land a helicopter and to set up a command tent and several tables for chow. He remembered eating there. He remembered that particular meal. A meal in the clouds.

This meal in Montana, though, was different. It was set up by work release prisoners, shave-headed men, many of them Mexicans and Indians and tough, tattooed white men from a nearby prison somewhere, husky men curious about the firefighters, but tough looking. The crew ate their meals and headed back up the mountain. Jeremy would never be able to remember whether they always ate their meals by the clock or whether the fire determined when they ate. Were there times when the demands of holding a fire line took precedence? Maybe ate only in the evening? He couldn't remember.

The way Willie operated reminded Jeremy of his own father. But what Willie didn't know about Jeremy's father was another story, as was that also of his grandfather. His father, Gray Luna, had taken him hunting a few times. In his younger years he had been surprised at the abruptness of his father's manner. Never one to warn Jeremy about what was to come, he must have believed it was better to initiate the boy into the harshness of the real world suddenly and without warning. Jeremy particularly remembered a cold morning in the mountains of Central Idaho. “Get up, let's go.”

“What, it's colder than all get-out,” the boy had remarked.

“Come on, we've got to get ready. Throw some water on your face.”

Gray had made enough money in real estate that he could afford to take time off to present experiences for his son. One of the memories from Gray's own batch of experiences, was his father, Jeremy's grandfather, waking him up to go work in a freezing warehouse. Jeremy's grandfather had worked in a warehouse and a sixteen-year-old Gray had been awakened to a stark, freezing morning, awakened without preamble or any resemblance of compassion. It was how Grandpa Miguel had been raised and although he had made a better world for himself, he had wanted Gray to experience the harshness of the world before the kid went off on his own. Grandpa Miguel had taken Gray to work in a warehouse during his Christmas vacation, initiating him into working in an unheated, open and freezing warehouse where the onions were being bagged and then loaded into boxcars lined up in the siding of the warehouse. The

trip itself to the warehouse had been a trial. “Why didn’t you turn on the heater?” the kid had complained, reaching for the dials. Miguel had blocked his hand. “We never had a heater growing up.”

“Well, shit, dad! This isn’t then, this is today. We don’t have to live like that!”

“Get used to it, son. The world isn’t going to give you anything.”

Gray had passed some of those lessons on to Jeremy. Looking back past Gray to his grandfather, Miguel, Jeremy was aware Grandpa Miguel was a Mexican American, had looked the part with pitch black hair and the weathered face of someone who worked outside. His grandfather had done stoop labor in the beet and onion fields of Idaho till he left home to join the army. Miguel had then worked in construction, taken some college courses with his army money and eventually owned a small company. He spent a lot of time outside and so his face maintained that weathered look. Gray had inherited some of that look but his hair was lighter, as his German-Irish mother had had lighter hair. Jeremy’s own hair was an approximation of Gray’s but his complexion had blended back to an almost walnut color as Gray had married a woman a quarter Shoshone. Jeremy’s features were ambiguous, though Caucasian, and he had never had trouble growing up with the surname of Luna. His classmates, seeing that he was middle class, a child with no accent, assumed he was a dark skinned Anglo American. There were other white boys whose complexions were as dark as his, some because their fathers had married Italian women during the war, others for reasons lost in the generations.

In the Montana wilderness that day there was more climbing, followed by a trek through a burned, blasted wasteland. It had gotten hot now and there was no shade, no protection from the sun. “Looks like a war zone, Jeremy,” Big Harold remarked. He said this quietly, as if anticipating there might be enemy around. There were times when Jeremy felt Harold’s hyperawareness, as if he sensed somebody still alive in the ashes waiting to take him out. “This is what it was like, except we would come to bomb craters and the smell of cordite or thicker smoke.”

“This is bad enough,” Jeremy replied. “The shade’s all gone. Trees bare.”

They heard the screams. They had only scarecrow trees to look past, as all vegetation was turned to ash, so they could see a long way off where the land undulated. But the screams were over the ridge. They began moving quickly toward the sound. Harold was in front, and Jeremy was behind him, and Roger Mickey had joined them, throwing down the canteens he was bringing them. It was like the wind was issuing a warning. The screams got louder as they neared the crest. “It’s Beanpole, he’s the one in this area,” the squad leader hollered. He had just climbed up to them and was wasted. “Fuck, Beanpole must have tripped into a fire.”

Beanpole was Jerry Pendergrest, a gangly college basketball player. He had cut across a draw by himself to head back to the camp. He had not felt well and was dizzy, and Roger had sent him back. “Shit, I should have gone with the fucker,” he was thinking. “Damn, of all things . . .”

“Damn, of all the things! Damn of all the things!” Ricci kept repeating. He was grinning, and mocked the agitated squad leader. “I shoulda gone with ‘im!” They hauled Beanpole on a bumpy improvised sling of strong locked arms down the

mountain so a medevac chopper would land and rush him to a hospital. They didn't have far to go. There was an opening in the trees on a shelf on the mountain with an area for the chopper, the force of its blades stirring a heavy column of ash. Ricci, of course, kept up his mimicry of Roger Mickey who had fucked up by rushing Beanpole down the mountain to save time. Beanpole had been alone, not an unusual thing on a fire when it was thought safe. Not an unusual thing at all. But Ricci had a knack for finding out an individual's doubts, and didn't much care whether it mattered that the person was genuinely and deeply wondering about what he had done. Roger Mickey had of late begun to wonder if he was really suited for being in the firefighting business at all. He was beginning to doubt himself, and Freddy Ricci, a big man with a wacky sense of humor capitalized on that. He didn't give a shit if Mickey was deeply sorry for Pendergrest having his leg burned or not. He thought the whole world was a stage and they were all actors anyhow and that included the sorry motherfucker Roger Mickey. It was a world of laughter that he craved. People could cry, yes, but in Ricci's world they should also laugh. Laugh at your pain! he believed. That was the only antidote to the craziness he had experienced in his twenty-four years of life.

They went back to work, worked their way down the mountainside, looked for signs of smoldering material. They worked alone with the grey sun oppressively beating down on them through the smoke, intensifying the heat of the day to the point that they became like the burned out, stricken blackened trees. But of course they were not. They were alive, and they had water in their orange canteens and they had a ten-minute break coming. And they would eat at some point. Their lives would go on after the oven heat and the weariness they felt from trudging up and down the mountain looking for hotholes in places where the fire chased the roots into the soil or under rocks and maintained itself in smoldering embers. Up and down, up and down, with little sleep and little rest, and the oppressive heat from underfoot, and from the murky, gray sun.

LISA

Lisa was eager to see Jeremy, so she made the trip north to Riggins. The Slate Creek crew had gone north to the Canadian border, and weren't there. Jeremy hadn't called. And she was a serious girl, more serious than Jeremy realized. She was tired of the few flakey boyfriends she'd had, immature guys with no sense of who they even were. She was ready for somebody like Jeremy. He seemed to be a serious guy, or he *could* be a serious guy, she thought. It was worth a try. There was something there that attracted her. She was tired of chasing around with overgrown teenagers who only wanted to score dope but would do nothing else. Not even hold down a job. Life had been a disappointment lately. Well, you could see Jeremy didn't take himself too seriously, would shrug when others made jokes at his expense. That was important to her. Her own father was a quick-tempered miner from Wallace, Idaho. He had given it up, had quit mining after an altercation with his boss. Moved the family from Wallace to Nampa on the Snake River Plain to become a farmhand. At seventeen Lisa moved from Nampa to Boise to get away from him. Arny, her father, constantly fought with her mother, and it got into Lisa's head. That was why she had parted with them. She could not stand the arguing. Lisa cast her eye on Portland or Seattle, but had ended up going north to Spokane. It didn't work out so she was back in the valley, drifting between Nampa, the agricultural town, and Boise, the state capital. It was quiet but there was an underbelly of recalcitrance and petty crime in the area, too. It hadn't yet become a concern to the townsfolk, but the younger people and the cops knew it. There was the drinking and the drugs. She could see a lot of young people, people she knew, getting into both alcohol and drugs, but in Jeremy she sensed she had found somebody who was an island of sanity. To Lisa it appeared Jeremy had all his vices under control, and that appealed to her. It was comforting to find somebody like that at a time when she herself was finding her own way.

When she got to Riggins it was in a borrowed car. Hers had been towed, and she had no money to take it out of impound. That was part of the reason for the trip. It took her several hours to make it to Riggins. At a bar got directions to the Ranger Station. Didn't know the dangerous boxer followed closely at times and then dragged farther back. Lisa was level-headed but young, had not learned to check her rearview. Besides, she was tired of being aware of everything about her, worrying what her parents would think, worrying about where she would work, whether she should go to nursing school or something. Driving north through the pine covered mountains was blessed. Stopped thinking about all those worries. Had begun to depressurize, to let go of everything. So there was no way to know, to anticipate that the volatile Richard Milagro would be on her tail. That was another reason why she felt the attraction to Jeremy. He had a placid personality. She was going to find somebody who had those qualities she desperately sought.

"And when I find you, what will I say to you?" she thought.

And what will you say to me?

"Surprised that I'm here?" I will say.

"No," he'll say. "God, I'm glad you're here. I couldn't call you." He'll tell me he was out on fires. Well, I don't know where he'd find another girl out here. Not much of a town here. A voice said in her ear, "Oh, they're out there. Don't you worry about that! Wherever there are boys, you'll find girls."

It happened the crew arrived from a fire dirty, wasted, disheveled and they found Lisa sitting in a white painted Ford with one headlight taped to the fender. "Where's your car?" he said.

"Oh, I don't get a kiss?"

"Sure, yeah. Just wasted. Sorry." He kissed her. She brushed his rich dark hair. He said, "Let's get away from these guys. They haven't seen a girl in three weeks."

Harold, Henry, and Roger went by and Beanpole was behind them, limping from his injury. The others filed from the vehicles to the barracks. It had been a long, exhausting set of fires. They had left much of their strength up there on the burned slopes of Eagle Ridge. Harold gave Jeremy a friendly wave. "Treat 'er good, you hear?" to which Jeremy chuckled.

In those moments with the dark coming on fast, before he even had time to take a shower, Jeremy had a presentiment that something was not right. Like sensing first -- then hearing -- the rattlesnake that almost got him. The one at face level in the basalt rocks. It had happened; he plunged head first away from the strike down the steep incline. Had that feeling again, even though he didn't know Richard Miracle was in Riggins looking for him. He never really considered that there was something seriously wrong with the boxer, although he knew he liked to fight with his fists. He couldn't understand how a professional fighter would waste his time beating up a peaceful guy like himself. It would only require of Miracle a punch or two to knock him out. He could see himself lying on the floor of some bar or on the pavement next to his car. Surely that would be the result if he came after him. Miracle was a bully, not a psycho -- or so Jeremy liked to think. Maybe he could talk to him. That or maybe he should buy a gun. It did cross his mind. He had no idea the pro was in Riggins.

Lisa had never put it together that the car that followed her for long stretches at a time was the same vehicle that followed her in the beginning. It was not uncommon to travel with another vehicle or vehicles on these long stretches out West. Towns were sometimes few and far between. But the boxer misjudged the location of her destination and stopped to pee by the side of the road with his hood raised. He lost ten minutes. He arrived in Riggins and she was gone, disappeared up the road to the Ranger Station. The plan to catch up with her in Riggins and confront her, force her to decide between him and Jeremy Luna slipped past him. Months back when she broke it off, he accepted it. Had accepted it but not for long. Was not defeated yet. His parents were from Wyoming, as were hers originally. They had known each other in Wyoming. He was a quarter Russian, while she thought she was wholly Russian. People in the Boise-Nampa area saw him as a Mexican, but he had that bit of Russian blood. Enough to date Lisa Mirnov. He didn't accept society telling him who he could date. He was a fighter. He fought with his hands, but also would do what he would do. He didn't talk to anybody about this shit.

He was pissed. Richard was pissed. Realized he couldn't go to the Ranger Station. Even if he found the location, he couldn't go there because those guys were rough. Even a professional boxer would run into trouble there with so many toughs like that congregating around him. He figured at least one or two were bound to be hard asses. One of them was likely to take a boot to him or Sunday punch him. It wasn't like

in the movies. Men from this background didn't fight fair. He didn't fight fair himself, had taken out people by surprise at many a bar.

A certain fear, maybe not fear, but a certain caution gripped him. He wasn't afraid, but a part of him put on the brakes. He had driven here, followed her, wasted the gas money, impulsively. He was an impulsive guy. Did not much believe in planning anything. Life was shit if you planned it. He knew plenty of guys who tried to plan their lives and it all turned to *quacha*.

Meanwhile at the Ranger Station, the trepidation Jeremy felt began to ease. It was a Saturday and they had the day off and he was feeling uncharacteristically calm. The sixth sense many people do not believe in was working on him. It didn't mean he knew Richard had decided to leave, decided to follow a different tact. A different approach. Jeremy was thinking things through at his normal pace. He knew he had to change how he lived his own life; Jeremy didn't have this all figured out clearly. He sensed something changing in the universe. He was talking to Lisa outside the mess hall, having already showered and eaten his breakfast and had his coffee. "Whadda you wanna do today?" he asked.

"Whatever you want, babe," she replied. "Can we go somewhere for a few hours?"

"Like what? Go for a hike? Or go into Riggins for lunch?"

"A drive, show me the area?"

"Thought you'd be tired of driving!"

"You'll be driving, I'll be looking at the mountains."

She seemed to hesitate. Okay, here it comes, he thought. Good ol' Lisa.

"I was wondering," she said. "I want you to know I didn't come here only to see you. I'm being honest."

"What, you come here to see Harold?" He rubbed his ear, grinning

She rolled her eyes. "Crazy guy, no!"

"Something else? What?" he said.

"Jeremy, my car got towed."

"Yeah, you got money, I know you got money, why don't you get it out?"

"I lent \$500 to my brother. He's a worthless case, won't pay me back."

"You don't have a brother. What brother?"

"Never told you because he's a Black Sheep. He's older, left a long time ago, comes back like this when he's in trouble. He's a half-brother, Jeremy."

"Shit," said Jeremy. He looked up at the sky. It was a brilliant sun above.

"Whose truck did you borrow?" He was staring at the banged-up vehicle.

"A girl I know. She wants it back."

He looked at her well-formed round face, her curved dark eyebrows. "I can give you some. Not all." He counted out the bills. "Is that enough?"

"It'll have to do. I'll have to ask Arny. I hate to do that."

"He's your dad. He has to help you."

She shook her head. "That's like closing a prison gate on me, Jeremy."

The third day on the Filer Creek Fire and Jeremy could barely see the men ahead of him. Ghostly figures moving slowly through the smoke trying to flank the fire. They disgorged from the trucks and moved steadily up to begin the fire line. Steadily because exhaustion had begun to creep up on them. Even their youthful vigor was being sapped. Willie, the crew leader's face was stricken in the eyes. Jeremy got a quick look when he

went pulling himself up by branches to the head of the line. Willie always blinked a lot, and always moved with hesitation, but here he was in a hurry. Normally he moved with a hesitant step, always worried about his crew. Jeremy figured it was a good trait for keeping firefighters alive.

Filer Creek was just one of the areas where they were fighting the Montana fire, and they could have named it after the county, but it crossed over into another county, so they just kept the original name, the name of the area where lightning had struck some dry brush late on a Monday evening. Smokejumpers had parachuted in during the night and one had broken a leg up high among some boulders, and their leader was clenching and unclenching his fists regretting sending them in when it was growing dark. They fought the fire among the boulders and lost the battle, and a local hotshot crew came by helicopters. A turbulent wind beat them back and outflanked them.

A half hour after they had begun digging a line, Willie came up to Jeremy and tried to give him in a nutshell what he had learned about the fire, about the smokejumper with the broken leg and about the Bitterroot Hotshots being outflanked. "I'm probably telling more than you need to know Jeremy," Willie said. They were taking a water break. Willie wiped his brow, leaned against a massive pine. He wondered why he trusted Jeremy so much. Probably he reminded him of a son who had died in a car accident. Died in the middle of a highway waiting for an ambulance with Willie driving furiously to get there on time. Jeremy looked a lot like him. It made Willie uncomfortable when he finally made the connection consciously. He moved away, turned around and gave a little wave as he moved on down.

Next he came to Roger Mickey. "You've got to get the men to this point . . ." he said, pointing to a soot-smudged map. "Try to do it by ten, okay?"

"You want miracles again?" Mickey said.

"Every day, all day," Willie responded. "You're the best, that's what Cartwright says."

"Yeah, but he's my uncle, Willie." Mickey knew everybody knew. He was comfortable with the situation. Cartwright Mickey was a good District Ranger, well-respected. Roger, his nephew, also knew his business.

Willie hesitated before going back down the line again. "I'm worried about the wind shifting. You notice anything, you call me. Get the men out of danger, you understand?"

Roger Mickey had never seen Willie worried like this. But there definitely was a sense of a powerful storm brewing somehow. Was it the formation of the mighty ridges around them, the monumental-sized boulders where the smokejumpers had failed to quench the fire? Was it in the layout of the mountains, the funneling of the smoke, channeled into a compressed area between the high ridges, or would it become a cloudburst later in the day? Or was it simply a foreboding being projected by the fire managers themselves, wondering about the high-density smoke, the heating up of the ridges where the fire climbed quickly and dangerously?

"You're doing a good job, Harold," Willie said to the big firefighter where he stopped next. "Murphy, you're a strong guy, I'm going to switch you up, put you on the chainsaw for a while. Can you do that?"

"Beanpole having a problem?"

"No, but he needs a break. The leg's bothering him. You do it for a while, learn the ropes out here. He'll stay with you, okay. Two men working together."

The Slate Creek Firefighters did not call themselves a Hotshot Crew, though they travelled all over the Western U.S. Years later, when Jeremy was looking at what a hotshot crew had become, he saw they had a lot of specialized physical training and detailed knowledge about fires. His own training had had some classroom instruction, some PT and mostly on-the-job training. It didn't feel like it had been focused and intense like what he was seeing on the internet. They were an Interregional Crew and were mostly very physically fit young men, so he knew they could do the job. Back in early seventies they were confronted with a spreading fire during a dry summer. It being several days since they had slept comfortably and well, they were tired. Their adrenalin rush ebbing, they felt gravity pulling them down. Their eyelids felt heavy, and the thick steel-reinforced boots weighed them down as they struggled with the heavy Pulaski's to dig a line, following the squad leader at the front. The funneling of the smoke and the threatening clouds sent mixed messages to the young men, and a mild anxiety they felt was just enough of a threat to keep them digging at a steady, continuous clip. They would not stop, though they finally did take another break to eat cold C-rations, to rip open the cardboard boxes and olive-green cans. They broke them open and ate the tasteless grub. That was how Jeremy remembered it. Grub. Funny thing was, decades later when he mentioned it to Harold, his friend remembered in fine detail not liking the ham and beans, remembered liking the peaches. Remembered the pound cake. Jeremy could not, as hard as he tried. Could barely remember opening the packages, whether they came in a plastic bag or in a small box container. Harold could remember because he had been a marine, had lived outside eating C-rations for a year in Vietnam. Jeremy had missed it all.

It seemed like they would never get out of that area, a saddle with high ridges and a steep rise where they were going. Jeremy knew from past experience the climb could lead to a false summit. Willie, of course would know definitively, from the maps the Rangers handed out to him. For Harold and Cousin Henry, two experienced infantrymen, the layout of the land was something to puzzle over and nothing more. They were used to reckoning the dangers inherent in moving into places Harold called "fuzzy areas," places of uncertain geographic makeup. The marine was always on high alert in places like that, places with hidden recesses or tree cover, places where the fog could hide outcroppings, boulders. He still found himself walking like he was in Vietnam. It had been five years since he left Vietnam, wounded in the shoulder, taking six months to recover and then playing football at a small college in Iowa. Once while trudging up a steep trail, in front of Jeremy, he had suddenly turned and started walking backwards as if carrying an M-16. Taking short, choppy steps backward, eyes darting wildly from side to side and back, "Look, Jeremy, you got to check behind you. You can't sleep out here."

Jeremy, as was his nature, had simply smiled. Henry, who was in front of Jeremy, had said, "Jeremy wasn't there, bro'."

"I know. I know. He was the lucky one."

"I wonder how high we got to climb?" Henry said.

"This is the steepest climb," Jeremy said. He was struggling for breath.

He had to lift his knees up high and use his Pulaski for leverage. "Why are we digging up in the clouds?"

It was a day that promised rain, or rather it was a day where judgment hung suspended in an overcast sky when what was needed was torrential rain. A downpour to quench the fire spreading like fingers through the gullies, the draws, following the curve of steep ridges. Willie folded his map into the fire vest. Felt a concern for the safety of his crew on this day, something he would not articulate to his bosses. It was anathema to question the right thinking, the planning ability of his superiors. He had a wife and kids at home. It was his second wife and his children were in grade school, and he was helping a niece through college. She was his dead brother's daughter, a bright kid. No, he was not about to begin to make waves, but his restraint would go out the window if he truly believed his Slate Creek crew to be in danger. Gazed up at a leaden sky, gauged the energy of his charges, and motioned for Mickey and Ryan Stump to come to him. "Go ahead and break for a quick lunch. Then we go up." He pulled out a white map in a plastic sheathing, pointed to where he wanted them to go. "When we get there, we'll be putting in a line to meet up with the Bitterroot crew coming in from the West. This is a tough place to stop a fire. I've never seen them try this before among the rocks where you can break a leg or fall and die."

Jeremy was certain he heard Willie say that, "Never seen them try this."

Henry echoed his thoughts, "Among the rocks?"

They rested with their backs against a steep shelf of granite, its shadow arched over them and over the trail that wound below. Years later, Jeremy, when he sat down to write his memoirs was never certain he had actually heard those words "among the rocks". Was never certain of a lot of things, and many of the young men who had been on that fire, who could confirm these things for him, well they had dispersed across the country, and a number of them had passed away. Some in car accidents or hiking or boating accidents, dying that way because they were physical guys and risk takers. Odd that he would begin to shiver at this moment. But the fog did bring with it a certain cold now being blown down from the ravine instead of up from the floor of the canyon. It was a cold that manifested in the shade at this high elevation. It was all canyon and high ridges up here, along with draws and gullies, and with growths of giant pine and then scrub pine ascending up the mountain to the mammoth boulders.

The shifting of the wind encroached on Willie's mind. Never stopped evaluating the layout of the ground around him, the dryness of the vegetation, searching out escape routes should the wind change direction. A fire could suddenly flare up and begin to move with a force and rapidity to threaten the crew. Willie knew of tragic circumstances where entire crews were trapped and burned alive. One would wish the mass of air had sucked out the oxygen and made the men unconscious before their blood boiled in the flames.

"Come on, we got to get up to the ridge," he announced.

The men didn't question it. There was trust in a man who had been doing this for many years. Nobody ever asked him how many years. It just seemed like he had experience. Jeremy, too, accepted it at gut level.

Harold got up, dusting himself off. "Ok, Skipper," he said to Willie.

Ricci laughed. "Skipper, ahh, what the hell?"

"Ahh, I slipped back into marine lexicon," Harold said.

Ricci laughed again. "That's a big word for a jarhead, ain't it?"

"We're not all dumb, flyboy," Harold replied. Ricci had been air force.

Willie, watching them, grinned, shook his head only slightly at his two firefighters and moved on. "Come on, Roger, get them moving."

"Yeah, Mouse, let's go," Ricci said.

Beanpole Pendergrest had been complaining of a side ache, and now as the crew began its forward movement, he twitched, doubled over. Jeremy and Ryan Stump were on him like a bullet. Harold and Henry watched Ryan help Beanpole to the ground.

Beanpole's hand was in the dirt, digging into it, his long, goofy face folded tight with a sharp, stabbing pain. "Whadda we do, Boss?" Ryan said.

"Get him down below. Can you walk, Jerry?"

Bile dribbled down. Beanpole pushed up.

"You and Henry take him down. I'll call in, maybe they'll meet you on the trail with a litter."

"That's a long ways down."

"Get him to a clearing. I think we went by one."

"Helicopter?"

"Depends on the weather. Probably appendicitis, the way it looks." Willie's brow furrowed, hard hat pushed back. "The way the wind's shifting, I dunno."

The remainder of the crew got ready to move up again. "That Beanpole's got an albatross around him or somethin'," Harold said.

"First he hurts his leg and now what the heck is this?" agreed Jeremy.

"Feels a bit like 'Nam," Harold said. "You look for the booby traps, but sometimes you have to run through an area, you know? So you step on something."

"Must have been the shits, Murph," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, we had a guy like that, a small shit from Syracuse, New York who was always getting hurt. Got into a mess of wasps one time, another time he stepped on a mine and blew away the fella behind him. He only got a scratch. Fucker made it through his tour with minor burns and scratches. Other people who never got a scratch got killed."

"Well, here nobody gets it like that unless a tree falls on them."

"Not what I heard," Harold replied. They were humping now and speaking in lowered voices, panting a bit as they climbed. Willie was too far up the trail to hear them. They spoke in sharp whispers that can be heard nearby but not far away.

"Not what I heard at all," Harold repeated. "They's been crews got wiped out. Wan't there a big fire in Idaho up there somewheres?"

"Yeah, because there was no way to communicate back then. You know, Murph, no radios, no choppers to scout the area."

"Henry was tellin' 'bout them hot holes, you can fall into those any time."

"Up to your knee maybe," Jeremy said, "and get a bad burn. Like Beanpole the other day. Never heard of going up to your neck, though. A hothole may cripple, but not kill."

"Then, too, Henry was talking widow makers."

"That is one mean fucker, a widow maker. Nothing you can do about a dead tree with its roots burned out."

"Henry said it was like lookin' for a sniper."

“I suppose so, never having been to Vietnam myself. You got to keep your eyes peeled, Murph. All you hear is a whoosh. No tree or branches to break.”

Jeremy knew some things from the year before, things he could share with Harold. But he himself wanted more. Wanted to know things only the crew boss could answer. When he separated a little from Henry and Murph, he would ask Willie. Later in the climb when Willie came past him, he did ask him and Willie pulled out the plastic encased map and showed him. Jeremy asked him where they were in the bigger picture, what part of Montana, but it made little difference when Willie told him since Jeremy knew very little about Montana, did not know where Missoula was, nor Butte. Did not know what Willie meant when he mentioned their proximity to those cities. *Did* understand how Willie was concerned with a very small part of their world, the contours of the mountains, the curvature of the ridges, the depth of the climb. *Did not* understand how Willie was gauging the dryness of the brush, the clustering of the trees as they climbed the narrow draw to the top. Jeremy could see now what had appeared a simple gully was in fact an opening up beyond the screen of thick woods to a larger ravine looming before them. Jeremy was slowly beginning to understand how Willie was a pro and took in all these factors, and gauged the fatigue factor and experience of his crew and what they could do.

A few minutes later after Willie departed, Jeremy said to Harold. “From the plane at night I couldn’t tell if it was a lake or fog or smoke. I think Willie’s tired but will answer us if we ask. He’s a good guy.”

Harold agreed, “The old man’s just tired.”

“The wolf and his pups. Yeah, I get it.”

They doggedly made it to a clearing. When Jeremy and Harold joined the rest of the crew at the top Willie was scratching his head, helmet on the ground. “The map’s wrong. I can’t make heads or tails out of it. There’s no plateau here.”

“What is it, then, if not a plateau?” Ricci asked. He looked around spookily at the crew, grinning through his teeth.

Willie looked around, saw Jeremy and Harold had serious faces. “We’ll see.” He got his radio and called in. All he got was static. “Fine time for this crap.”

They had a line to dig somewhere near the top, but they had to get to the top past a false summit then climb down on the northeast side. And when they climbed, it seemed almost as if they had climbed too high. Ricci laughed. “Where’s that crazy Tom Hare? Crazy Rabbit? What do your books say about this situation?” It so happened Tom Hare had a fine set of buckteeth, and Ricci had found his handle. Ricci, the jokester, was irrepressible, big enough to intimidate some of the firefighters and genuinely likeable enough that the rest simply sat back to see what he would say next. “This plateau don’t exist, Rabbit? What do your books say about it?”

Hare, a third-year student at Harvard pushed his horned-rimmed glasses up on his nose. “Fuck if I know, Freddy.”

“What are we gonna do now? Boo hoo hoo! We’re in the fucking Twilight fucking Zone!”

Willie could hear them joking, just shrugged.

What to do next, he had to figure it out. In front of him was a field of thick knee-high grass folded over by its own weight and age. The ends were brown, somehow. This opening in the forest was lined with thick heavy Douglas Fir on both sides, and Willie expected another crew to come spilling out as they always did in the distance, but none materialized. The crew leader could smell the fire below him swirling around the mountain, that wood smoke you never forget. Not mild fireplace smoke or barbecue smoke but serious smoke that comes from acres of wrecked forest, a sharp acrid odor in your clothes, in your mustache, in your memory. The men stood around, now being pelted by an occasional cold rain that came with large droplets falling individually and heavily on your helmet but not heavily consistent enough to put out a serious advancing fire that raged below. The men milled around, trusting Willie but wondering what would come next.

Freddy Ricci had on his always jolly face. He joked with Harold, Jeremy and Ryan Stump. "What ja think, Stumpfucker?" he asked Ryan. "I'm not superstitious, but you think the Universe is fucking with Willie?"

"Nah," Stump said. "He'll get them on the radio . . . figure it out."

"If the universe is fucking with Willie, it's fucking with us, too," said Harold.

"You might have a point, Murph," replied Ricci. "I guess we have to figure out which one of us has pissed off the universe."

"Ahh, Freddy, you been watching too much TV," Harold said.

"Yeah, but look where we find ourselves. Lost at sea without a fucking compass. Look over at Willie twitching and startin' like he's got a buffalo hair up his ass. The man looks tortured to me."

Harold had to laugh. His soot stained face broke into merry lines of grime the rain had created. Every time he touched his face he created another smudge. And the odor of ash was around them now but the rain now suppressed that odor to a degree. Now there was a wet smell, wet ash. Harold laughed at Ricci and forgot the hunger he was feeling. He was a big man and needed to eat. Jeremy watched Ricci and watched his friend, Harold. He liked Harold, partially because Harold was a true warrior who had fought in a real war and who was a college football player, a stalwart fellow, as Jeremy saw him, but more because he was a kind soul. Harold, Jeremy thought, was a lot smarter than people thought, people like the irascible Freddy Ricci who had taken to calling him Big Harold, or Murph or even Jarhead. "Were you in situations like this in Nam, Harold?" Jeremy asked him.

"Only when we had a green lieutenant who didn't know maps."

"Willie knows maps," Ricci interjected.

Ryan Stump broke in. "He'll get it straightened out." But he shook his head. Ryan had a narrow pale face, looked rather like a calloused individual but was not. "I can't believe how out of whack management is on this. We flew over this area."

Thirty minutes passed and Willie made radio contact. He did not believe he had misread the map. He swore they had misprinted the map. The contours were wrong, he insisted. The plateau was much bigger on the map. This plateau they found was barely a cow pasture. And the men supported him, shaking their heads, looking slightly down at the ground even as he slowly shook his own head from side to side looking up at the cloudy sky smudged with smoke. The rain that had promised to fall never did break

open from the sky. It rained only enough to make the men feel slightly cold, enough to make them wonder if it would slow down the fire they were told was traveling fast from somewhere towards them. There was never much of a discussion with the rank and file like Jeremy and Harold, so they only ever had a slight idea of where they were and where the fire was. Generally, they were either in the middle of a fire, holding back its borders or in front of it involved in using flares to start a backfire. But this one felt different.

As they traveled along the edge of the open area under the giant pine, they spied a cabin with a thin curl of smoke coming from a blackened stove pipe. Ricci broke out of the line. "Willie! Didn't you see this? You ain't stoppin'?"

Willie, lost in his thoughts stopped the line. Willie was a little knock-kneed and stood like a comic character, wondering what the commotion was about. He couldn't see around the large bush where he had stopped, but he could see the men were bunching up below him. He could see Ricci, Jeremy and Harold approaching a cabin in the woods. His mind was clicking but it wasn't saying anything. He would wait. But Mickey, the squad leader began hollering. "We don't have time for that!"

"Shut the fuck up, Mouse," Ricci hollered back.

Mickey waved the other men back and started for the cabin, too. "Stay there!" They could barely hear him.

Willie, the crew leader wasn't following Mickey. He continued down the line and the rest of the men gathered around him. "Stay here, you never know. You don't just walk up on these hermits."

Ryan Stump agreed with him. "They better hope they don't get shot." He was the other squad leader and would help Willie keep the group together. "They're crazy walkin' up like that."

Some of the men who stayed were Jeffrey Morgan, Duke Rangel, Pete Bicandi, Bobby Dahl and Marv Gilmartin. There were others, but these were the ones Jeremy had gotten to know by name. The others were faces he could associate by incidents he remembered about them. Those faces were restrained now, both by the accumulation of events of this fire, the smoke, the dark clouds, the occasional rain and the sudden gusts of wind – and restrained too by the accretion of fatigue and hunger. It seemed like they hadn't eaten much. When they ate, the food had been odorless C-rations. They had been more aware of the odor of the ashen world. Now they looked to Willie for guidance. They didn't follow the four men to the cabin.

There were others. Henry Romero had stayed back. The Vietnam veteran was skeptical of a lot of the other firefighters, knew most were younger than himself. Walter Gunther was also an exception, as Henry saw it. Walter was a slightly older grad student. Henry had noticed Walter was the type of guy who watched people, observed their ways and kept his own counsel. Henry would often see Walter quietly watching the group around Willie. At other times Walter himself would be standing next to Willie. Walter Gunther probably knew more about what was going on than the two squad leaders but never let on. Henry had once pointed out to Jeremy his steadiness and lack of bullshit – a sharp contrast with Roger Mickey, the Mouse, as Henry liked to say. In Henry's eyes, Roger Mickey the Mouse was nothing but bullshit. Mickey was nothing like the serious guy, Walter Gunther. They all watched intently as the little

group of firefighters approached the rugged cabin laced with odd tools and frying pans and mule harnesses. Somebody definitely lived there, but were they friendly? Or what if they came out with guns blazing? What was the protocol in these woods? It was in the newspapers and on the radio telling how emotionally distraught Vietnam veterans from the early part of the war took to the woods. Some set up booby traps. How about Harold, the marine? Surely he would know to be on his toes.

Ryan Stump was antsy. He was the punctual, responsible type and did not like milling around with the men watching the four at the cabin. "I thought we were in a hurry to get to our destination, Willie? Shouldn't we be getting to our destination?"

"Yeah, I know. I guess they wanna check on the man lives there," Willie said.

"Well, how long can we wait?"

"He's not answering the door," Walter commented. He seemed unconcerned.

"They're knocking and yelling," Ryan said.

"Give him time," Willie said. The men could hardly hear Willie. Like he was whispering to the man inside the cabin.

OLDER MAN FUTURE

After those two years in the forests of the Northwest, Jeremy, the kid from Portland, spent decades doing other things. He aged, as everybody does, but tried for a long time to not think of himself as old. Always thought of himself instead as a little bit of a misfit. Not a crazy misfit like his cousin, Henry, not that way. His cousin had always been more direct in manner, and more stubborn. Jeremy himself did not argue directly with people, never -- unless he was pushed beyond what he understood to be fair.

One evening in the latter phase of his life while living next to a lake in Georgia, a quiet place, he found himself reminiscing about the year with the Slate Creek crew in North Idaho. He remembered back in '74 coming back from the Filer Fire, arriving to find a phone message waiting for him. It was unusual for him to get anything like this. He was a young man, unencumbered by children, pets or even relatives that were close. Henry was the closest thing he had to a brother or cousin.

It was Lisa. It had to be Lisa. She wanted him to come south to Nampa. It would be a three-hour drive. He would have to deal with whatever problem she had and drive back another three hours. It was a lot to ask him to do after returning from a fire. The firefighters wanted nothing but to get cleaned up, have a nice meal and sleep soundly in a bed. No more sleeping on a hillside, at least not for a day or two. But here was her request. He walked over to the office to call her.

"You just get back?" she said.

"Yeah, soot-stained. Gotta shower."

There was a softness in her voice. Not exactly pleading, more like a soft demand. "Can you come down here?"

"You know that's quite a drive down there," he said.

"I wish you'd find a job down here. There's a fire department in town."

"You don't just walk up and they hire you," he said. "Anyway, what's wrong? You never call up here unless you need money." He chuckled, but he was half-serious.

"I know," she said.

"I shouldn't have said that."

"Richard came by again. I wish you were down here. Then he'd see I was with someone."

"He knows you're with me. What's wrong with that guy?" Lisa could begin to hear Jeremy's frustration. He was exhausted not only from the days on the fire, he was tired of hearing about Richard, the boxer.

"I really can't make it down. I'm too exhausted, Lisa." *Maybe I'll have to confront him and get beat up, he thought. Maybe that's what it'll take. Maybe once he beats the hell out of me, he'll leave us alone.* But he didn't relish the idea of a black eye or a broken tooth.

There was a pause, but not a long one. He could visualize her leaning on the phone, how she held the phone. Always looking pleasant. He couldn't remember seeing her angry. He was sure she would be angry at times, but he was yet to see it. He was sure he would see it.

"Okay," she said. "I'll talk to him if I have too. Maybe he won't come to the house."

"Did he come down to the house?"

BACK TO FIRE

On the edge of the woods on a rocky outcropping they encountered a wiry, lanky cowboy on horseback. This rider moved up towards them up a narrow pass and loomed over them, looking tough and dismissive. Was it the long hair of some of the men that turned him off? Long hair was not common among the back-country people like it was in the bigger towns. It could have been the hair, or was it that he felt stronger and tougher than the firefighters? Here was a sharp and definite clash of cultures. Not much said as they passed each other among the boulders and pine. He loomed over them, a hard, isolated man on horseback packing a side arm. The firefighters carried the fearsome Pulaski's too, and were helmeted. It was like a medieval cavalryman encountering arrayed infantry. A modern-day encounter, but also a throwback.

The horseman said nothing. The firefighters asked him nothing. He had his task and was going about it. Then Ricci asked him about the cabin.

"He took his mule down below," the narrow-eyed man said.

"He know about the fire?" Ricci said.

"Yeah. You seen any cows?"

"No," Ricci said.

"I don't think the fire will make it here. You boys will stop it no how. Gotta find the cows. Two of em loose."

The brief encounter with this other hidden world ended as quickly as it had begun. The man wore a cowboy hat, worn leather chaps and carried a gun. Presumably for wild animals, bears, wolves. He looked perfectly comfortable as he ambled along. Representatives of different worlds, both used to the hard life though for the cowboy is was permanent. The intersection ended as quickly as it began. They each had their tasks and their own world. The firefighters continued down on the other side of the ridge. They moved down to lay down a line and tie it in with the Lolo Pass Hotshots out of Montana.

But the fire swooped down on them with profound suddenness. Willie was dumbfounded when he saw the smoke below and the flame jumping from treetop to treetop. It didn't make sense, there was little wind. It had rained a bit, but the fog had lifted. The fire had a personality of its own, as if it would describe its own life, its own pathway. "We got to get to it now, boys. Ain't no dozer up here to cut a big line. We're it!"

The bulldozers couldn't come up this high anyway. Not through all the trees and boulders.

The men begin clearing a lane. The chainsaws went to work. The crew savaged the ground, tearing at it, pushing the duff aside, hacking at branches, breaking the soil and throwing up a parapet of sorts, actually a shallow trench. They heard the air tanker approaching at their level between the two ridges and dump a plume of red retardant on the fire below. The fire was like a man spreading his arms towards them above. It was coming for them. "It means it's jumped a road. We were heading to that road to tie in with it. The fire's jumped it. I don't understand it," Willie said.

Ricci wanted to remark on that but for once kept his smart mouth shut.

"Air currents" Ricci said, finally. He was hacking at the earth, but found breath to talk to Willie. "Something to do with that, I bet."

"We don't have time. Get to it."

Ricci shut his mouth then, knowing time was pressing. The others, Jeremy, Harold, Henry, and the crew pushed along. It was a hard, steady, hypnotic hacking with the heavy, narrow Pulaski hoe, the world slipping away from you even as you could hear with your ears the fire getting closer, the wind in the trees, branches exploding with fire, and you flipping the Pulaski to use the ax blade to slash through branches, through root systems to block the fire reaching across the shallow trench. A fire would search out and follow a root system across, even after the firefighters had left. They flipped the Pulaski's back and started digging again, using it as a heavy bladed hoe. A mattock.

Willie called in to confirm his decision to continue a line right where he stood. He could see the fire coming towards them. "Keep digging, boys," he said, putting down the radio. "They got to conference, whether we stay here or egress the area."

"Shit, it better be soon they make up their frigging minds," Ricci remarked. Jeremy, who was right behind him, agreed. Up ahead he could see Harold bringing down the occasional small tree that had grown in the open field at the edge of the thickened tree line. They were moving back to where they had first emerged from the woods. Willie watched them work frantically, all of them now well aware the fire was heading up the rugged, boulder strewn slope towards them. The fire was reaching around boulders, following the lines of dried grass and scrub pine and leaping towards the taller trees. It was eating up the green vegetation, turning it into smoke and ash as it advanced. They were now the only line of defense. The average firefighter had no idea what it was they were defending. Willie had a slight idea it might be pasture lands beyond the mountain where the ground evened out and where cattle could be grazed. But it had seemed from the cowboy's unconcerned attitude that the cattle had already been moved to safer ground, perhaps across the river. A helicopter with a water bucket soon arced over the trees from the direction of the river. Having dipped its bucket in the river, it now flew over them and descended into the smoke of the fire.

Jeremy could feel the wind coming up the mountain now, feel it on his face that dripped sweat now on the fire line, it being now a shallow trench expanded through the efforts of a crew moving along like clockwork, not worried, but each man wondering where they were going. Not wondering too hard though because wherever they were going they always got there. Willie stood at the front a little to the left and conferred on his radio. Up ahead he could see two helmeted forest service managers motioning to the crew leader. Jeremy stood up to see what was going on with the boss but quickly got back to work. They were moving at a perpendicular to the fire, cutting across its front, and would presumably have an escape route at either end. Jeremy wished that were so but was not totally confident that it was a fact. He had stopped trusting these middle-aged guys with clipboards since they sat on their haunches ignoring him, not acknowledging his efforts when he felt he was going to be overcome by a fire on a ridge. Were these the same fat-assed men or another bunch?

Suddenly the fire began to roar towards them. They all looked up at what sounded like a freight train. "I'm getting the fuck out of Dodge," hollered Ricci. Willie hurried back towards the men. He hollered and waved. The other two managers had begun to run backwards. Then, swiftly, out of the woods from the vicinity of the cabin came a bearded man, gruff looking, pulling a mule. It was the hermit. "What is this?" Jeremy said. "WHERE THE HELL DID HE COME FROM?"

Ricci turned back. “The fuckin’ cowboy said the old man took that darned mule down the mountain! What’s with that fuckin’ cowboy!!!”

“Jeremy! Get going! Come on!”

“Leave him, Jeremy! Let’s go, cousin!” Henry hollered.

Walter Gunther was the steady hand again. He began walking towards the old man. The others rushed past him. Jeremy stopped and then Henry. Walter hollered at the old man, “You okay?” He hollered to be heard above the roar of the advancing fire.

“Yeah, leave me be,” the bearded man shouted, and threw out an elbow. “It had to happen. The Good Lord said it would happen. Fire in the End Days.” He moved slowly, unconcerned with the approaching disaster. A fire in his eyes to match the approaching conflagration. The firefighters even imagined they saw red in the man’s eyes.

“You need anything from us?” Walter asked him. Henry cast a hard look at the old man, thinking *this is a hard man, he knows what he’s doing, knows his mule, knows these mountains*. Walter knows these mountains, too. Why is he dilly-dallying around, what gives with this shit? He began gently pulling on Walter’s elbow. “Come on, friend, he’ll be alright. Don’t worry! He knows his mule, we got to get outta here.”

“The Good Lord said a fire would come an’ consume the earth, and it’s happening I tell ya!”

“Yeah, you bet. Get that poor animal outta here!” Henry shouted. “What’s wrong with you, old man! Walter, Jeremy, let’s go! Let’s boogie, he knows his mule.”

“Darn rights I know my mule,” the crusty hermit responded. “Damn rights I know old Mike here.” And the mule seemed to respond as it began a jog in the opposite direction to the crew. It was going the route of the cowboy and an earlier crew that had passed this way. “Good bye, fellas. Next time, stop the damn fire. I can’t build another friggin’ cabin.”

A heavy wall of fire advanced inexorably up the mountain consuming and choking every living thing. The birds either flew away or got lost circling the flames and smoke, perhaps desperate over their disoriented fledglings. Occasionally a deer or coyote would come bounding out of the smoke. The smoke was sometimes blown over the fire wall. The fire wall had built up in intensity. Jeremy and Walter and Henry now ran hard to catch up with the crew. The heat built up terrifically and slapped them in the face on their left side and they almost fell over. The noise was now deafening and all three men knew they had made a mistake in trying to help the hermit. Henry felt they had hung back too long, but in the end they all felt they had remained behind for a good reason. Even a few seconds counted here. Their bodies spoke to them with fear. Their legs moved quickly, their arms pumped desperately and if someone could have seen them now running perpendicularly to the advancing wall of smoke and flame, they would have seen how wide their eyes had opened, and how their mouths had tightened in fright.

Ryan and Harold began to lag behind the crew, looking out for the other three left behind with the old man. The fire was not advancing so fast here, and so they turned back to gaze at the wall of smoke, and they could see the white helmets of their three friends. “Come on, let’s go get em!” Harold said, sharply and urgently. “They’re falling down.”

The smoke had charged them and whirled around them, thermal heat raked and blew forward from the raging flame. Jeremy felt it under his fire shirt, and his face felt on fire. He was coughing handfuls of mucous now and his eyes were streaming tears. He fell, got up and fell again. Then an arm pulled him up. "Come on, Jer, come on!" Harold reached with his other arm to support Walter, and Ryan grabbed Walter, carried him leaning on his shoulder. "You crazy guys!" Ryan said.

"You okay, Walter?" the squad leader asked him. "Yeah, I'm okay now," he replied, pulling away, ashamed. "The smoke got us."

"It's right here now," Harold said, indicating with a switch of the neck. "Let's go. Everybody run!"

Henry had made it out without help, and now grabbed his cousin. "Can you run? Run!" He jerked his arm hard. All five men began a mad dash away from the flames.

In front of them, Willie stopped to turn around. The smothering smoke was less dense where he stood. He was counting heads, his face chagrined, he was reluctant to admit he had been so frightened. But now he stood, calming himself, his knock-kneed posture more erect now. The last five of the crew were coming toward him. Ahead of him, the other crew members had begun to gather, though two or three men had continued running ahead to the north. "Okay, we got to go that way," he said, "go north where those fellas are heading but stop and go down the mountain. It looks like it's blowing East. We head west, but fast. Fast!"

Jeremy remembered years later how he stood in front of Willie, his beloved, scared crew leader, and watched his face twitch, and still believed Willie would get them out alive. Jeremy knew nothing of complicated fire behavior (knew the basics, but not like Willie), did not have the years Willie did fighting fires. There was a ridge and there was an opening through which they could run, and it looked like the two or three runners were heading that way. Willie sensed it was a false summit, that the runners would find another higher ridge to climb in that direction, so he was turning the crew west to run across the advancing fire rather than from it. He didn't have the larger map, a map that would show the topography, so he was going by his best guess. He was putting his many years of experience on the line. He would get his firefighters out by running along the fire rather than from it. It was a gamble, a big one, he knew it. "Ryan!" he said, "Go catch those men and bring em back!" Ryan was his fleetest runner. Also had a voice that could carry. But all the men now began to holler at the fleeing runners.

But their hollering seemed puny in the backdrop of the roaring fire. And above them birds soared and circled, reluctant to leave their fledglings. Jeremy was watching a tragedy within a tragedy. For the birds and the animals, for many of them, it was already too late. The End Times had already arrived, as the old hermit had prophesied.

Jeremy had faced a stark choice in December at Carolyn's party, Carolyn, a friend of Lisa's. Inebriated, Richard Miracle had become abusive, abusive to Lisa, abusive to Carolyn, had even begun to push one of the smaller men at the party. The boxer had no use for small, weak, people, and he liked to fight, and knew that the quickest way to start a fight was to pick on a little guy. Inevitably, a larger friend would try to defuse the situation. That was all Richard was waiting for. Jeremy knew this, had seen it play out before. Jeremy liked parties. He liked people. He was not a physical guy, so he did not want to insert himself between Richard Miracle, the

professional fighter and the little guy. Jeremy tried to put that out of his mind for now.

They got down all right, got down safely. Willie led them down across the face of the advancing fire, staying ahead of it. He was angry the whole time, muttering to himself. And when they got down to a safe area, the Incident Commander chewed his butt royally for putting his crew in danger. Willie defended himself, "That's where they told me to be!"

"Who told you?" The IC was not a big man but he was thick-boned and did not mince words. He waited for Willie to answer. Finding Willie wouldn't, he said, "You were supposed to be south of where the fire came up?" They had a line to dig somewhere near the top, but they had to get to the top then climb down on the northeast side. And when they climbed, it seemed almost as if they had climbed too high. Ricci laughed. "Where's that crazy Tom Hare? He's your brain trust, Willy. Ask him!"

Willie didn't want to get his superior in trouble. But he didn't want to take the blame either. "We hadn't got there yet!" he said. The whole time he was looking sideways where the fire had burned its way up and northeast where the fire had spread. There was the manager between him and the IC, another line of management, who had sent him there, but sent him there late. Or had the fire thrown off the whole schedule? Was there a schedule? Who could predict the wind and the spread of a fire in dry grass and brush?

The IC sucked in breath. "Well, get your men down to the camp, you'll get helitacked to the side of the fire. Bulldozers is cuttin' it off along the Carson Road. You'll be building a handline perpendicular to the dozer and try to contain it."

At the campsite the men had time to breathe. They rested in the shade of army trucks set up among the pine. A mess had been set up for them on abandoned picnic tables. They had fifteen minutes to rest, or more if the helicopters were delayed. Jeremy was sitting with Henry and Harold when Ricci came up sticking a piece of chew in his mouth. "You know, Henry. How come you let the Mouse call you a wetback the other day?"

"Aw, shit, Ricci. Here you go again," Henry said.

"Yeah, get off it," Harold said. "We're too tired for your bullshit."

"No, seriously. Why do you put up with his shit?"

"I would be fighting every day of my life, Freddy."

Ricci spat tobacco juice sideways. "Nah, if people see you take out that sucker, they would leave you alone."

"Easy for you to say," Jeremy butted in. "My cousin gets shit you never have to think about."

"Maybe," Ricci said. "I'm Italian on my dad's side. People called me wop in the service. You know, somebody getting run over and the tire going 'wop, wop, wop.' He was thoughtful for a minute. "But if it had bothered me, I would have fought the sonsabitches."

"It's not the same," Harold said. He was deep in thought, his huge curly-headed noggin nodding in contemplation, his eyes dreamy through the smudges and smoke. "You know, in the marines the Latinos stayed apart, in their own group."

"You mean when they come off a mission?" Henry said.

“Yeah, on missions everybody was where they were supposed to be. But in the rear, they went their separate ways.”

They were getting there, the little group’s circumlocutions ready to make some breakthrough on why they thought Henry got harassed by the squad leader, Roger Mickey. Almost there, and Harold was ready to say something about what he had experienced in the marines at Con Thien when Willie approached, coming back from a meeting with his boss in the fire tent. “Let’s go boys, the chopper’s on the way.”

“This isn’t how I visualized a Montana sky,” Harold said, gazing at the smoke coming from the mountain.

“Yeah,” Ryan Stump said. “That wind’s blowing every which way.”

“And they blamed Willie for the wind changing gears,” Jeremy added. “Must be the same guys that watched me kill myself earlier on the ridge.”

“Probably Lookouts,” Stump said. “Lazy fucks are paid to watch the fire.”

“Stupid me,” Jeremy said. “I expected an ‘attaboy. Nah these guys were older than the watchers.”

“Not gettin’ no attaboys from these suckers, Jer,” Ricci said. “They’re too much into talking football. I heard em one time. Hah!”

The chopper took the crew one hundred yards in front of the fire with the wind behind them and blowing towards the line the bulldozers were cutting. A fire manager had jumped on board with his radio and pack. “They’re bringing the flares in the next flight. Little change of plan, you’re supposed to burn the area from here in front of the fire to the fire line. Maybe kill it here. Advance behind it and kill any spotfires.”

“You sure?” Willie asked.

“Yeah, you’ll be safe inside the burned area. The new Incident Commander wants it that way.”

“What happened to Howard? He was the IC this morning.”

“He’s gone.”

Willie rubbed his chin. “Okay. We’ll do it like that.” He walked into the middle of his crew. “We’re going to be lighting a backfire to this brush and small trees down here. First sign of the wind shifting we walk through it if we can, otherwise we egress east or west.”

The manager got back on the chopper and departed. Walter Gunther, the twenty nine-year old with a lot of fire experience spoke up. He pushed his helmet back. “You can’t run through that if the wind shifts. You can’t run through burning brush like that. I don’t like it, Willie.”

Willie liked Walter and respected him. “I mean what choice have we got, Walt? Depends on how fast the wind shifts.”

“Maybe so,” Walter said. “We should probably build a line behind us to give us some time to get out East or West if it shifts.”

Another firefighter agreed with Walter. He was a red-haired boy everybody called “Harvard” because of the t-shirt he wore when he was off duty. “That brush is definitely too dense, Willie.”

Ricci joined in. “We better start digging if Harvard agrees with Walter. That’s your brain trust, Willie. Two big brains have it figured out.”

Ricci’s comment didn’t bother Walter, but *Harvard* grinned. He had a glint in his eye, appreciated Ricci for his energy though he could get to you if you took him too seriously.

Willie glanced around at the others, including Jeremy, and flinched. Willie knew Walter was right as it related to safety, but they didn't have time to build a line. "The fire's coming down a narrow pathway right now," he explained. He took his time, slowed his pace. "It's going to be coming down hill, so it shouldn't gain much speed. We have time to sidestep it if it comes too fast. We got to do this backfire with the wind behind us. They aren't giving us time to build a backup line behind us."

"That's the truth of it, huh, boss?" Ricci asked.

"That's the truth of it," Willie said. Then the second helicopter showed up with the flares, and the men began torching the area. The wind gently blew the burning twigs and leaves and flared dry brush and then the bigger bushes caught fire as the men moved slowly leaning into the dry green and gold of the forest.

The air tankers and the helicopter airdrops did hold the fire long enough for the backfire to be completed and when the fire arrived, now coming at a crawl coming down the north side of the mountain, it fizzled. There was no fuel for it to burn. The crews had been deployed to build lines on the East and West side of its path, so it was finally controlled. Local crews would do the cleanup, hunt for embers, for hot holes and smoldering widow makers. The crew hiked out, taking forty minutes to get back to the camp. From there National Guard trucks took them to the airport.

Jeremy wasn't sitting with his cousin on the flight back to Slate Creek. Mostly the men were quiet. They were tired, and it was dark in the plane. They nodded off or thought about the day or what was to come. Jeremy felt the weight of the day and felt empty in the humming of the engines. The incident where Roger Mickey called his cousin a wetback came back to him. It was Jeremy's first year with the Slate Creek crew, and he wondered how the taunting had begun the year before. To Roger Mickey it was all light-hearted ribbing, but to Henry, well, Jeremy could see his cousin's stress building up. Big Harold had seen it, too. They had a shared experience in Vietnam, and Jeremy could only guess at the strength of that bond. The other men didn't see things the way Harold saw it. There was something different in their faces from what he had seen in Harold. He could see they were judging Henry. That was a problem for his cousin, and Jeremy wanted to smooth things over if he could.

The hum of the motors lulled him to sleep. He was among the youngest of the crew but there were others. There were three eighteen-year-olds, a long-haired blond kid and two Japanese Americans. He woke up again, wrestling with his cousin's problems. At the family get-together at Lakeview Park in Nampa earlier in the year, another cousin told him Henry had had a hard life. Was beaten on the playground until he learned to fight. Father was a hard worker, but not aggressive. Henry had been beaten on a weekend in the school yard. He was forced to fight, though it was against his nature. People who knew him when he was a six-year-old said that. He was tough now, in fact, Jeremy thought the army veteran could confront Richard Miracle and tie him in knots. Not boxing, but with the hand-to-hand techniques he had seen Henry practice in his off hours. Things he had learned in the army. Jeremy also recognized his cousin had a better grip on the world than he himself did. He had survived Vietnam, and had completed three years of college. He had more maturity. But he was bedeviled by the shit Roger Mickey threw at him, the seemingly random, crazy shit, fucked-up comments, meant to arouse him (and *did* arouse him) which he could not seem to counter. He had confessed to Jeremy he could not begin to be witty back to Roger

Mickey because of the content of the little jabs Mickey threw his way. It was . . . like Ricci said, *why did he put up with it?*

Jeremy's own life had been relatively uneventful until a year ago. That was when he met up with Lisa. In Henry's eyes, Jeremy had grown up with money, so why would he fall for a poor girl with threadbare clothes? He and Jeremy were cousins but had not been close, as he was only beginning to get acquainted with Jeremy. Their common grandfather was born in Mexico but Jeremy had two generations of white Anglo parents while Henry came from the Mexican neighborhood in his home town. They were second cousins but with a gulf between them.

Henry had grown up in the Chicano *onda*, as he liked to say. He felt a kinship to the neighborhoods where the Mexican Americans lived, was familiar with the *Ranchera* music and the *comidas* in the restaurants. A lot of it was new to Jeremy. He felt awkward walking into a Mexican restaurant with his cousin. He didn't know the soft bantering ways. Jeremy was dark enough to perhaps pass as a Mexican, but he could never be sure. His cousin would shake his head, and chuckle. "Don't worry about it, man."

"I'm not worried. I like it down here," Jeremy replied. "What little I see of it."

"Well, it's not Los Angeles or San Antonio, that's for sure."

"No, it's a tiny piece of it, I guess," said Jeremy. "You guys are really isolated up here in Idaho."

"Ehh, we manage." Henry was too busy eating his tacos in the only viable Mexican restaurant in town. This would change in the years that followed, as they watched the increasing migration and watched the town balloon in size.

BACK FROM FILER FIRE

“Are you scared, Jeremy? I mean, if that boxer comes after you? Are you scared? Is it something you’re worried about?” It was Harold now. They were on the flight back from the Filer Fire, and he sat himself next to Jeremy. It was dark and they could see another forest fire burning somewhere down below. That was a job for another crew, for other fire trucks and aircraft with red retardant drops. He was more focused on his friend sitting next to him who had been napping but now appeared to wake up. He was not taunting Jeremy, with this talk of fear. It was not something Harold took lightly, being afraid. In Vietnam he had been terribly afraid, and had looked for somebody to share his experience with when he got back stateside, and there had only been two people he could talk to. There was Henry because he had been there too, though Harold could not precisely tell what it was Henry had done in Vietnam, what his MOS had been, his military occupation. He was not even sure how many tours Henry had done. Henry was tight-lipped about what he had done over there. But some of the things he had told Harold made Harold suspect he was five years older than what he was putting out to be his actual age. If young Jeremy had only met his cousin a year ago, would he know Henry’s real age? And if Henry was five years older than what he was telling people, why would Jeremy cover up for him? But Harold could sort of understand why Jeremy wouldn’t question him about his true age. Maybe his cousin simply wanted to pass as a young college student, younger than what he was? Did it have to do with girls? He *did* look younger than men in their late twenties or early thirties.

“You don’t have to be scared. If that fella comes looking for you and I’m around, I’ve got your back. If Henry’s there, he’s got your back. This crew sticks together, you can bet on that,” Harold said. Jeremy didn’t answer. He really didn’t know how to answer that. He wasn’t afraid in the sense of an overriding fear like he had had as a child when he was subjected to bullying. He had gotten over that type of fear. He did consider what it would mean to get a broken nose or to have to have your jaw rewired. He had heard of a kid in college that went into the wrong bar in Boise. He did have a certain anxiety about it. He knew Lisa had grown up in the same neighborhood as Henry, a long street in a small town with teenagers furtively buying booze and looking for pot, marijuana. He let out a sigh. By now she knew he was not a streetfighter. But he was no coward. He sensed she knew that, too.

Jeremy had listened to Harold’s stories about Vietnam, and remained silent. Occasionally he asked about a military term. Harold patiently explained things. They both recognized somehow the vast gulf between what the veteran knew and what the civilian had missed. There was a pall of sadness in Jeremy’s demeanor that calmed the veteran’s nerves, and made it okay to tell him of his days and nights in Vietnam, even of the fear. Something very sad in Jeremy’s life, Harold couldn’t put a finger on it, but it was akin to the great sadness he felt about some of the things he himself had done or seen. But it couldn’t have been the war – Jeremy wasn’t there. Something very sad about him, especially when they would find themselves cut off from the group during a raging fire. Then, cut off, and desperately looking for a way out of the flames, he would

see it in Jeremy's face, the same wild look he had seen at Con Thien. Harold knew instinctively Jeremy was an old soul, somehow, knew suffering or had experienced it somehow, and Harold didn't want the kid to have to worry about mundane things like getting savaged by a professional boxer. It just wouldn't do. He had been a marine, and if he had to fight the boxer, he would pick him up like a wrestler and throw him. Not try to box him. He would pick him up in the air. Or maybe just kick him on a knee cap. His mind raced to a million possibilities, the violence resurfacing in a way it had not done in several years. But it was his young friend, younger than himself, who was tormented by this threat – well, Jeremy denied it, said he wasn't scared. But Harold did not believe it, not one hundred percent.

THE FIRE AT ROACH CITY

If the truth be told, the urgency of the next fire was never apparent to Jeremy. Yes, there was the rush along the gravel road to God knows where, and then the boarding of the plane at the Grangeville Airport. They could see the smokejumpers at their staging area milling about. They could be going to the same fire or maybe not. There were the hair-raising turns on the road squeezing around mountain outcroppings where you could look far down below and see cattle the size of mosquitoes grazing in the green meadow. Again they had arrived in one piece. Jeremy was getting used to the danger. The driver, *Stumpfucker*, had long ago learned it was the only way a strapping boy like him could drive in these mountains. Anything less would have been unmanly, and he was nobody's weak sister. Ryan Stump hadn't been at the bar the night before so he was wide awake, but several of the crew were nodding, their eyes closed, their heads rolling around on their shoulders. They would catch whatever sleep they could get before they got to the fire. Already riding in Stump's wagon had become routine. Hungover, they were not about to complain, that is unless their stomachs woke up and rebelled. So far, though, the potion of sleep was stronger than the nausea that a night of boozing might deliver. They were tired and their bodies swayed with the swaying of the vehicle on spinning tires and sliding, rolling gravel on the road. Jeremy was not from these hills, not from the recesses of these mountains like Stump. Ol' Stumpfucker lived somewhere in one of the little towns and saw his relatives often and so this job was just that, a job, and not some great adventure like it was for Jeremy. Jeremy was actually waiting for that great adventure to unfold before his eyes, having grown up in a city in a basin with nearby mountains where he could watch the fires on distant ridges. Had seen them as a young boy. He dreamt about fighting fires like some boy's dream about going out to sea, like some boy's dream of hunting a big grizzly or a moose. He did not have a predilection for violence but did sense in himself an attraction to danger. He was not a Type A, not one to hunger for the edge of danger constantly. He saw himself as a Type B, with only a mild attraction to danger. He did not see firefighting as inherently dangerous like being a marine in Vietnam, as Harold had been. But it would satisfy a childhood dream, a romantic fantasy he harbored about the fires. Attracted like a moth to those forest fires, he would go for the attraction without any deeper calculation. But the fire he was going to would teach him that the level of danger could increase exponentially without warning, that his illusion of clean excitement would be shaken.

They didn't actually talk much on the plane. Jeremy didn't know whether it was that the silent types were attracted to this type of work, or whether it was the military-like feeling about being on a fire crew that fostered this quiet. But he would always remember how no one really remarked on the awesome sights they experienced flying low between high mountain peaks. Tourists would have paid serious money to have experienced what the young men passed through on these flights. Yes, the men were generally quiet. Men, young men. Jeremy didn't actually think of this crew as men. They were, in fact, men. Some as young as eighteen, right out of high school, but some were war veterans, and others were even older, young men in graduate school, balding on top. Some already had lines on their faces, weathered looks from years working on farms under wind and blazing sun, with added years of fighting forest fires. Still, for some reason, the term "men" didn't often crop up. He tended to think of them as a "fire crew." Or in individual terms: Harold, Ryan, Henry, Willie, of course. And the men

themselves tended to refer to each other in these terms, “All right guys, we got to clear this trail along this ridge . . .”

But as it would happen, the men did on occasion fall into a conversation:

“I used to carry the M-60,” Harold might say.

“The whole thing?” someone might say, someone who did not know much about the military.

“Nah, somebody else would carry the tripod.”

“How about the ammo?” Henry might say. He had been in Vietnam, but not as a machine-gunner like Harold.

“I carried some, but other people carried some for me. They also carried a mortar shell sometimes.”

“That was the weapons platoon,” Henry would say.

“We got mixed up sometimes.”

“You guys quit talking about war,” Ricci would say, half-kidding. “Roger Mouse is a peacenik.”

The squad leader, Roger Mickey would smile, briefly stop on the trail and turn around. What had been a quiet local conversation on the trail, hiking to the staging area, had become louder once Ricci joined in. His booming voice was a claxon. Mickey grinned broadly. “Nah, nah, nah, Freddy. I’m no hippy. I’m against THIS war, not war per se. Don’t try to get me in the shit with these vets. Matter of fact, my dad landed at Normandy in World War Two. Don’t give me this crap. You know better.”

Ricci had been in the Air Force. “Don’t you live in Canada now, Mouse? How come they hired you? Hey Willie, how come you hired this draft dodger? That’s not fair to us veterans.”

“Hah, hah, hah, Freddy,” Mickey said drolly. “Shut up now. We got to make some time on this trail.”

The packs they carried never seemed very heavy. They were not army heavy. No ammo to carry. Just a pair of socks, things like that. A paperback. Decades later when Jeremy’s head had turned gray, he would have a hard time remembering what he carried in that pack. He did however remember carrying the heavy orange canteens, not the tiny ones that you carried on your belt. These were gallon-sized canteens. And the Pulaski was heavy, the mattock end heavy enough for penetrating thick soil or tree roots. And at times any one could be tasked with carrying a bundle of such axes tied together with a thick yellow tape. The climbs could be steep, and that alone ripped the muscles of your legs, or made them feel they were being shredded. The crewmen who amazed Jeremy more than anybody, more than the college athletes or veterans, were the normal guys, guys who didn’t appear to be athletic or particularly coordinated, but who quietly and determinedly plowed along, keeping a beat with the crew leader.

Later the Slate Creek crew joined other crews to blunt the fire. They could see a highway bridge below linking two halves of the town of Roach. They were walking from one staging area to another point on the line they had established northeast of the fire. They were already tired, and the sun was lowering and the dark shadows were the rule. The serious Walter Gunther, the twenty nine-year old experienced hand was talking

with Diamond Tanaka, the ever optimistic Japanese American who would soon start his sophomore year in college. He was a forestry major and could name all the trees around him, something only he could do. Walter's talking in a low voice: "Watch yourself, Diamond. If they put you up high, watch yourself. I heard they might split us up."

It came to Diamond almost as a whisper so as not to spread panic, like it was only for Diamond's ears. "Our squad leader forgot his radio."

"But we have other radios," Tanaka replied, quickening his pace to catch Walter.

"Look, Diamond," Walter said, stopping. This caused the line to bunch up behind him and Tanaka as they moved up the draw. Walter kept his voice low. "It's your nature to look at the bright side, which is why I'm warning you and not the others."

Tanaka scanned Walter's eyes for something more. *What was the danger?* Willie would not leave the squad in any exposed area without a plan. They would have a safe zone to escape to if the fire came at them. "No radio, so you think I watch my ass and I'll be okay?"

"I don't want to panic the crew," Walter said. They were walking abreast now as the trail had widened. Ahead of them Willie was on his radio. Overhead a helicopter went by with a white bucket dangling below spilling water. There seemed to be a sense of urgency because of the town they could all see, and the bridge. The bridge was the way out for many residents in the area. Police sirens pierced the air even this high up, and they could see the flashing lights. "I'm telling you, Diamond, don't trust anybody if you feel you're in danger. I know they say your crew leader and squad leaders 'll keep you out of trouble. That's what they teach. But it's your life. If you see me run, you run with me. Don't wait."

This shocked Tanaka. Walter was a very trusted crew member, somebody everybody trusted. Why he would share this piece of advice with him, he could not fathom. He didn't know much about Walter's background, knew nothing of Walter's farming family. Was not aware they had had their land worked by Japanese internees during the Second World War. Neither was the Japanese American aware that Walter's relatives had purchased businesses the Japanese internees were forced to abandoned when they were interned. Without this knowledge, Tanaka was shocked.

"We'll stick together, okay?" Tanaka said. "Sure we'll stick together."

"Yeah, if we're in this squad and they don't split us up," Walter said. "The Incident Commanders, the guys at the top, aren't always worried about us when they have a town to protect. And they have Roach City down there in panic mode. I'm sure the IC's getting an earful of crap from the town, as he damn well should!"

"But that puts us in danger?" Tanaka asked.

"Yeah. I'm not so worried about guys like Harold or Henry, they're veterans. They may notice when things begin to fall apart."

"And Harold watches out for Jeremy," Tanaka said.

"So does Henry, he watches out for Jeremy."

"Do they know about the pressure on Incident Commander?"

"Not sure if they do," Walter said. "Henry might, it's his second year."

It was a wide-ranging flare-up by the time the Slate Creek Crew got there. It had spread and swallowed thousands of acres of forest, and had been scattered in many directions by a blustery wind. Crews were being helicoptered to the larger flareups while smokejumpers were dropped on the smaller, more distant eruptions. Air tankers

were pulled from the larger conflagrations to help the smokejumpers in a desperate bid to stamp out those threatening bursts of smoke and flame ahead of the longer line of advancing fire. These efforts were hampered by the layout of the land, the way the steep sixty-degree slopes were intersected by the rushing, turbulent rivers. There was no easy way to move around in this terrain, save by a few gravel roads skirting the steep ravines. This demanding terrain ended abruptly within a hundred yards of the town they were tasked with saving.

"Walter's trying to save Tanaka," Ricci said drolly. Walter was somebody Ricci respected. "The old fucker trying to save the young pup."

"Shit, he's hardly older than you, Freddy," Murph replied.

"How do you know he's trying to save him?" Jeremy asked. They were moving faster up the mountain, breathing harder. Occasionally, Mouse would crane his neck to see who was making the noise behind him.

"He's telling Tanaka that Mouse lost his radio, how we're in deep shit without the radio."

"He didn't lose it, he forgot it," Harold said.

Walter jerked back around and said, "You guys all hear me?"

"Sound carries up here," Ricci replied. "You hear the sirens down below?"

Walter shook his head, gave a shrug toward Tanaka. "Don't worry, Diamond. Stick to the plan."

"The Mouse could hear you and I could too, and I don't have ears like his." Ricci laughed at his own words. "That fucking Mouse, he can hear you, that's for sure."

"Can he hear *you*, too, Freddy?" Harold said.

"Too far back, I'm too far back. They'll move me up when things get really hot." He laughed again, enjoying himself. He could have a soot-blackened face and feel exhausted, still Ricci would laugh.

Willie gathered them up. "Okay, here's the plan. One squad is going to the west side of this particular tongue of fire. That's you, Stump; and you got Harold, Henry, Jeremy. Half will stay here on the east side and work your way up to the top, laying line as you go. The rest of us they chopper to the top. We'll block the advance of the fire there."

"Why don't we let this fire go? This section of the fire ain't moving toward the town."

"It *could*, though," Willie responded. He glanced down at the ground, gathering his thoughts, wondering why Ricci had to be his gadfly.

"Who's staying down at the bottom?"

"Like I said, Ryan's crew works up the west side, and Roger's crew the east. Roger don't have a radio but he starts at the bottom and can egress in either direction if things get dire. He won't have the fire coming at him like we will at the top. He don't have a radio. But the fire is traveling away from him, moving north. Ryan will take his squad up the west side with Roger going up the east side."

Walter glanced over at Tanaka. "That's us. We're going up the east side. Remember what I said."

Tanaka nodded, but no longer certain he would follow Walter. It wasn't in him to desert his squad leader. It bothered him, this plan.

Jeremy would remember many years later how there was confidence at the top that everything would work out. That's how it came down to them. In his own mind, though, north was no different from south or west from east. He was not the map carrier nor a leader. He was a firefighter with only his guts and determination to get him through the long exhausting days. He was there when a team would collect at the bottom of some mountain, form a ragged line and begin a trek up a winding trail, eyes set on the three or four men immediately ahead, carrying pulaski's, chainsaws, rakes and shovels, depending on the type of terrain. Often they could count on a road somewhere at the top where a fire truck or water tender or even a bulldozer would meet them. Or they would be driven as high up as that gravel road would go and then depart from there. Or they would be sent to that very road to assist the engines in controlling a fire trying to break across the road. Or they would assist in hauling the hoses out among the trees if the goal was support a vigorous stand of trees or sagebrush against an oncoming wall of flame. So there was often confidence at the top, among the stout, older managers wearing reading glasses and carrying clipboards and short-wave radios. They, with their control over hand crews, engines and bulldozers were the fat gods of the fire-fighting world.

But at the bottom along the gravel road, among the crewmembers left behind with the wise-acre Roger Mickey, the seed of doubt had grown since it became apparent at the staging area that he had forgotten his walkie-talkie. But Roger Mickey was also nothing if not confident. He was a man no taller than Henry, and Henry was not tall, just thickly muscled. Roger Mickey, by contrast was lithe, strong enough for the work but not the poster boy of a fire fighter. He was quick physically, moved with energy and with a bounce in his step. He reminded Jeremy of actors who played sailors, actors like Gene Kelly who danced and sang his way through movies when Jeremy was a child. In fact, those movies were still being shown on TV. Yeah, Roger the Mouse moved that way, with a bounce in his step. He would never admit a mistake either; his uncle was the District Ranger so he could make a mistake and it would be forgiven. Not forgotten, surely, but, of necessity, forgiven. "Willie can't complain to his own boss about Roger," Henry was telling Jeremy. "Willie would be blamed for not doing an inventory before we left the camp."

"Yeah," agreed Harold, "What good would it do?"

"At least we don't have to stay down there in the Mouse squad."

"I agree," said Harold. "What do you think, Jeremy? We luck out or what?"

"You never know, where Willie puts us sometimes. He knows what he's doing, don't ya think?"

"I hope he does this time," Harold said. "I don't like it, though."

The winds were blowing from the southwest but they were gentle winds, hardly stirring the leaves. Willie and half of the hotshots were helitacked to the top of the ridge. They would work their way across the top West to East and then down on the East side of the fire toward the gravel road. They would meet up with Roger Mickey's squad consisting of Walter and Diamond Tanaka and two others working their way up from the road toward them. Willie's double squad and Mouse's squad would meet in the middle.

At the bottom, Walter whispered to Tanaka, "I don't like the looks of that draw, I don't like it at all. It sort of twists left and then right. I can't see all of it but it looks like it."

"I sort of see what you mean. Why don't we talk to Roger?"

"Nah, Willie's already getting on the chopper, and Roger never listens to anybody."

Walter was showing all his years of firefighting on his worried brow. Everything about his face looked darker today. He was genuinely worried. "I don't think we can make it to the top. No way."

"We don't have to, Walt," Tanaka said. "We don't have to go all the way to the top. Just part of the way."

"The whole plan seems screwed." Walter walked over to where Ryan Stump and Harold, Henry and Jeremy and one other crew member were preparing to head to the west end of the designated area just beyond the width of the fire that was climbing slowly up the draw. "What do you think, Ryan?" he asked.

Stump stood straight and tall, shoulders back but his face showed concern. "It's not so steep on our side. It's gonna take a while to work to the top but we got a gradual rise, not a sharp incline like you have. I don't know why Willie did it this way."

"We're supposed to work in parallel up the draw," Walter said.

"Yeah, both sides are steep though yours is bad steep."

"Shoot," said Walter. "Don't know what to say."

"Welcome to the Suck, what we used to say in the marines," Murph joined in, his face impassive, his large body unconcerned as if he were fatalistic. "You suck it up and do it."

"He doesn't mean it," Henry said. "It's an attitude, but you still have to be aware of your surroundings. Murph knows that. Hyperaware. That's why the *drag* marches looking backward for an ambush." He turned to Jeremy to explain it, "The *drag* is the last guy in the column he walks backward holding his weapon ready for an attack on the rear of the column. Right Murph?"

"Yeah, by suck it up I meant the attitude. It's the attitude you have to take when you face death every day. Not the case here in the mountains, but it doesn't hurt to be a little accepting that bad things can happen."

"We do what we're told," Murph was telling Jeremy. They had started up the steep incline, with Ryan heading up front, grabbing a dry limb to pull himself up, and looking around, wondering just how long it would really take them to get to the top. The west side wasn't quite as steep as the Mouse side of the draw, so Mouse would have a harder time getting to the top. He didn't have a radio, so he was actually not expected to do much except move incrementally to the top. The crew boss had faith the main crew helicoptered to the top would finish their line up there and make their way down to the Mouse. Mouse just had to keep his crew working north. Ryan knew this, Harold knew this, they all knew this. "But I do worry about the Mouse," Harold was saying between taking down a small tree on the side of the mountain, resting a bit and hauling the chainsaw to the next tree. Jeremy was accompanying him with his Pulaski. "I worry about him because of his overconfidence, you know? That can get a fella in trouble. And you can never anticipate exactly how that will happen. Nature has a way of bringing them things to ya."

“You guys quit your jawing and get a move on,” Stump said.

“Aw, Ryan. Cool it,” Harold replied. “You know we gotta go slow so we can keep an eye on ol’ Mouse. He’s liable to get hisself in trouble. You’ll have to save his ass before the end of the day, I swear!”

Stump had an irrepressible grin he tried to mask with a serious face. “You worry about yourself, Murph. Mouse ‘ll be all right. He’s got to work himself up the draw just like us.”

The fire was slowly working its way up the draw and crawling up the two sharp walls on either side, the west and the east side. And the two squads were each scratching out a line on each the west and east side both working toward the top of the northern ridge top where the helicopter was still dropping off the other two squads to work with Willie for a blocking line. That line would stop the advance of the fire at the top. The east and west squads at the bottom would scratch out lines to harness the fire on each side. At the bottom a gravel road completed the encirclement.

They worked hard but the shale was slippery and it would break off and send the firefighters sliding and tumbling down the incline. They held on as best they could. The ground was uneven, sometimes rocky, and at other times hard packed dirt. They cracked their steel Pulaski’s against the hard ground and cut into the brush and small trees clinging to the steep walls of the draw. They were sweating now as the sun rose higher and white hot. They began to smell the smoke now as little spot fires flared up again where the fire had already swept through. It was no longer simply ash and old smoke, but something more active and alive entered their nostrils. Then the wind began to gain strength and when they looked up toward the top of the gorge, they could see a deeper pall of smoke towards the top where the draw hooked left.

At the top the bigger crew had finished off the blocking line and started down the east side of the fire, working their way down to where the brush was very thick. They became entangled in the bushes where vines and saplings created a webbing on the steep ground. They could not advance much without cutting through that gripping natural barrier. It made for very slow going once they got to the middle of the rise. Roger Mickey’s squad was only about a third of the way up and had also come up against the impenetrable brushy area. Ryan Stump’s crew of Harold, Jeremy, Henry and two other men considered going across the blackened, burned over area to help them, but they were struggling with the sliding shale on their side of the fire and the smoke rising now between the two crews made it harder to see exactly what was going on. Mouse didn’t have a radio, so Ryan couldn’t talk to him. He did consider going over to talk to him face-to-face. The fire moving up between the east and west lines now began to move faster up hill. It began to climb faster toward the main crew coming down the mountain, Willie’s crew.

“I hate to think what the fire is doing east and west of the town. They say it’s spread out a lot,” Stump said. He was working and sweating along with the others but paused to wipe his brow.

Murph also paused, “Yeah look at that smoke.” To the west a smoke column was rising high in the sky. But it was south of the city, and they all knew what that meant. “Before you know it we’ll be over there on that danged fire.”

“That IS odd,” conceded Stump. “I know they have the Bitterroot and the Boise fire crews over that way.”

“Why the heck are we on this side of the city?” Henry asked.

Stump had the two war veterans asking him tough questions he couldn't answer. "Why? I haven't a clue. If the wind's blowing our section of the fire away from Roach, toward the northwest who cares where it's going? It's blowing away from the town! I don't get it either, guys."

Jeremy spoke up now, though he felt unsteady and unsure of himself. "We're on this side of the town because there's a power station or something up on the other side of this ridge. I heard Willie talk to the Ranger when we got here."

"Ah, so it's a fucking power station, not the town we're protecting. Ah, okay. I'm going to start calling you *Grasshopper*," Murph kidded. "Like in that movie, you have all this fuckin' wisdom." He was smiling big time.

"Nah, nah. he ain't got wisdom yet. What it is is Jeremy's got his nose up Willie's ass is what it is." This was the fifth member of the squad, Hector Galindo. He was a quick moving Hispanic, moderately tall, dark complexioned and appearing somehow flaccid and lazy when he wasn't moving. It had more to do with disregard for the hierarchy and regulations that made him appear like a malingerer in Ryan Stump's eyes. "Not that Stump wanted people to make anything of his being the squad leader. As far as he could tell, squad leaders were something Willie had dreamt of by watching war movies. He was an aficionado. "Hey, Stumpfucker, don't pay attention to that brownnosing Jeremy Luna," Galindo warned.

The wind picked up again and shifted from north to northeast, jumping the line. Willie and the crew at the top noticed it, heard it. Felt it, somehow. They had been working, cutting, slashing, digging as best they could on a steep, forbidding ledge suffused with brush, vines and brambles. They were intent on working their way down the slope to Mouse and his squad below. The branches and brambles were giving way but it was hard ground and the wilderness only grew thicker, more resistant. They were a tribe wading through very deep, murky, muddy water, and their legs could only move so fast, and their arms could only swing the Pulaski so much. There was no water here, only the same slowness that you get walking in deep mud. But it was the pulling of the brush, the thick brush. They were as in a dream where you cannot move but in shocking slowness. And they heard the fire coming up to meet them. Heard *that*, instead of hearing Roger and his crew – the same Roger who did not have a radio.

Freddy Ricci, Roger Leggett (the second Roger), Fernando and Cliff Bicandi were four of the men in the high-top crew with Willie hacking their way south along the eastern designated line. Moving south towards Mouse. Suddenly the smoke blanketed them. Their eyes burned. They wrapped red bandannas over their faces. No longer would they wonder about the Mouse. Where was Roger Mickey? It didn't matter, the blaze suddenly shot up below and began closing. It was six feet high now. Not a slow-moving fire. Now it leaped up and reached for them.

Freddy Ricci ran the fastest. He was the first to recognize the danger. It was a whiff of fear that he smelled first. His own fear. He took off first, throwing down his Pulaski, canteen and pack and fled with a wild-animal fear up the same line they had just dug. Two other men followed, dumping their packs and gear and racing with their hearts leaping out through eyes wide and white. Willie watched them go, calmly assessed the situation, felt with his age and bum knees he would have a better shot at making it out horizontal to the trajectory of the fire. As he moved up, keeping his pack and Pulaski, he spied a break in the heavy brush to the east, a break with the trees and saplings spread out and the brush lessened like the thinning hair on an old man. The

rest of the crew followed him, moving through the gathering smoke blowing through the heavy brush and crossing their escape route. They were scared but most were first year men and trusted their crew leader, trusted the lines on his face, his constant stubble and burning eyes. He took them to safety as the fire moved past them up the hill chasing Freddy and the other two.

“We’re safe, we’re safe,” Willie assured his boss on the radio. “Chopper’s flying north of us. Not sure he can see us with the smoke.”

Boss: “Affirmative, keep going, get away from the fire. How about the rest of the crew?”

“Happened sudden. Will call back. Out.”

Willie then called Stump on the western line. Stump and his crew had been watching the flame go north, and Stump sent Jeremy to check on Mouse and his crew across the burnt area. He would send Jeremy and he himself remain with his crew. But the fire moved in a teardrop shape away from them, leaving a burned over area. Perhaps their job would be to dampen the blackened area first. Still he kept the crew digging north.

When Jeremy arrived at the east line with the message, Mouse whipped around and stared.

“Tell Ryan we’re okay. Go on, get outta here! We got a job to do!”

“Stump wants you to know Willie probably isn’t coming. You see the fire up there? That’s where Willie is,” Jeremy hollered.

Jeremy had come scrambling across the burned, blackened ground, avoiding twisted, brittle limbs of desiccated trees, mostly small trees that had clung to the rocky soil. There was nothing for them now. It was a dead ground Jeremy had crossed.

“I know where Willie’s at!” Mouse shouted, loud and angry. “I got eyes too, and ears! Tell Ryan to let me know when Willie calls with something important. I don’t need a babysitter! Tell your goddamn squad leader that!” He was standing now, one hand on a hip, his other hand on the Pulaski like an inverted umbrella.

“Just trying to help. He’s got a better angle from where he’s at to see Willie.”

“He can’t see shit from there either,” Mouse said. He was angry now, tired.

Jeremy went running back along the slope strewn with sliding shale, dead limbs, carbonized shrubs and grass. He ran with great care, careful not to fall, not to have to break a fall on the still superheated rock and burned material. He did not want to end up with charred hands, with stumps for hands. He was glad he’d bought the White brand of fire boots. Thick soled and protected against fire and errant axe swings. They were rugged for running through burnt earth.

Astonishing how it could be so hot with a blazing sun intent on burning the earth even above the red and orange flame exploding below. Fire, smoke and sun, and yet the body sweats and survives, and Jeremy kept going, going, balancing on the incline and made it back to the west crew, at the west line.

There were three sections of the Slate Creek Crew, the first and largest being with Willie. This crew worked from the north at the top down towards Mouse, but now were fleeing east away from the blaze, the second was Ryan Stump’s crew on the western edge of the fire safely behind the explosive rushing fire as the fire moved northeast up the incline of the ravine, and the third section was with Roger Mickey, aka the Mouse, on the eastern flank but out of danger below the fire.

Ricci and the two men who fled with him managed to run like hinds and made it to the top where they found the safe zone carved out by the crew before they had initially descended southward digging the fire line towards the gravel road below. They met up with Rabbit, who had been left on the ridgetop to watch for approaching danger. The Rabbit was in contact with an approaching helicopter and knew of Willie's predicament and had called for the helicopter, but otherwise his most valuable participation was to help drag an exhausted, frantic and frozen-faced Ricci and the two into the safe zone. Rabbit did call for a retardant drop on Willie and the crew, but the plane missed its target.

The IC called Willie and directed that Ryan should continue the line on the western edge of the fire, to continue it up to the line on that ridge. Willie heard the IC refer to it as a hogback, but he didn't think it was. To him it was just a ridge. They were on the northern side of the draw. Mouse's line was to continue for the time being, but as the fire was veering northeast, a new strategy would have to be developed. Willie felt uncomfortable hearing this as he took a brief respite on a large boulder. The crew was trickling past him south to the gravel road below. The IC had not given him any specific orders other than to gather at a new staging area. Willie would get new directions there. He got up and followed the crew to the road. Behind him the fire held a steady, threatening roar. He wondered about the men at the top. He called Rabbit at the top, who had been watching the direction of the fire for the crew. "They're here," Rabbit replied. "Ricci, Fernando and Leggett, they all made it."

"Oookay," Willie said. He took his bandanna and wiped his face. "They okay?"

"Yeah, just scared stupid. Ricci i'nt lookin' real brave right about now," Rabbit said. Rabbit wasn't using his third year Harvard speech now. He was once more a farm boy from Weiser, Idaho. "He's sitting here exhausted. Hah! Hah!"

Ricci stood up and grabbed the two-way, "Don't listen to this jackass, Willie. We made it out okay. How is the rest of the crew, assumin' you're okay yourself, buddy?"

"Yeah, Freddy. We are all fine. How does it look up there?"

"It was pretty bad, Willie. Flames high, scrub trees all around us lit up, thought we were toast. Got into our shelters. Barely had time."

"They were scared shitless," Rabbit laughed in the background.

"Don't listen to this asshole. He didn't even enlarge the safe zone. It blew past us, the fire did. Somehow we're in one piece, not even singed, Willie."

Harvard, aka the "Rabbit" could be heard laughing his high-pitched squeal. "Scared shitless, he was!"

"Hey, Tom (Rabbit), how about the power station that was threatened?" Willie asked him, figuring Harvard could see it from his perch on the ridge.

"Fire veered away from it. Wind's unpredictable up here. Blew it that way. They got a crew and a cat digging a wide line around it anyway. Doubt they send us there, Willie."

"Good. Something less to worry about."

Ricci came on the line. "Want us to come down, Boss?"

"Till we get direction, work your way down on the west side to Ryan's crew."

"What with? Our hands?"

"Whaddaya mean?"

"We had to run, Boss! You ever run from a fire, with a fire on your ass?"

"No, Freddy. Got into my shelter once, though. You lose your equipment?"

“Packs, too. Canteens.”

“Well, okay, work your way down to the bottom. See how Ryan and his crew’s doing. Come on down to the staging area. There’s an engine and a tanker down here. They might have some extra Pulaski’s.”

Willie was directed to gather his crew at the staging area. Rabbit came down with Freddy Ricci, Fernando and Leggett. Willie had the remainder of his crew, including Bicandi, who had started to run uphill when Ricci panicked but had changed direction and stayed with Willie. They met up with Roger Mickey, Walter Gunther, Diamond Tanaka and two others waiting by the red engine.

A pickup crew, lightly trained firefighters, had been driven up the gravel road to replace the Slate Creek Crew. The new crew would continue the line up to the ridge, as it was no longer urgent work. The new crew would douse spot fires with water packs and dig up cinders and mix them with soil. It was tedious, boring work in the hot sun. Walking among the still burning embers was hot work, and the Slate Creek Crew was glad to be spared that task. They boarded the same National Guard 5-ton trucks that transported the replacement crew, and rode it downhill to the now endangered town of Roach. The wind had picked up and seemed to want to change direction and speed. The town was a more urgent matter than the power station, which was now fairly secure.

They sat facing each other under the olive drab tarp, and heard the deep-throated engine and smelled the thick exhaust. They could feel the harsh grinding of gears as the driver made his way down the steep and winding incline to the town below. Those sitting by the opening at the back could see in the distance where smoke mingled with the red sky. It was growing dark now, and as the road wound down the ridge they would alternately see the red sky and a gathering darkness at the opposite side, and then it was the moon Fernando saw, but Rabbit told him he was crazy.

The state police escorted them through deserted streets. It was a small logging town with a few bars, a white steepled church, a few antique shops and a small cemetery at the edge of the town. Most of the residents had fled across the Harry Truman Bridge into the neighboring county. Remarkably they spied a couple of wandering dogs, a brown, short-haired mutt and a hairy little terrier. Fernando simply saw it as fate, it was the dogs’ fate. Rabbit thought the people who left them were assholes. Willie, who was riding up front with the driver and his sergeant, asked if they could pick up the dogs. The sergeant just turned and gave him a scornful look. “You don’t really mean that, do you?”

“I guess not,” Willie acknowledged. “We don’t wanna take them where we’re going, that’s for sure.” They drove past the cemetery at the edge of town, and began to go up in elevation. One more service station and then they turned into a gravel road and the driver began grinding his gears again. The overweight sergeant with the tiny mustache ordered the skinny, blond-haired driver who kept adjusting his glasses to try to do better on the gears.

The wind current carried the smoke from the south over the town, and darkened the sky to the northeast where it gathered in streaks of black on the red sky of the evening. Before this, the town had been clean, silent but clean. Only the deserted dogs and cats, and a few cattle and goats at the end of town. But as they ascended the ridge, they could see street lights still blinking and one motel still asking for clients. Riding in

the back, Stump relayed what Willie had told him, “We’re going to build a line to keep the fire from the town.”

“How about the line Boise and Bitterroot built?” Ricci asked.

“Jumped them. Big wind, I guess,” Stump said.

“Those are good crews,” Walter said. Everybody listened to his serious comments.

“Damn rights, them are good crews, what I heard,” Murph concurred.

“Yeah, sure,” Mouse said. “You can be damned good, but Mother Nature can kick you in the balls.” He had a wide but weary grin on his face. “Don’t let us get kicked in the balls, is all I’m sayin’.”

Murphy turned to Jeremy, whispered, “Mouse always knows better than anybody. What the hell, I guess he’s got the years on this shit.”

“I guess,” Jeremy said. “You just gotta do what Mouse wants, him and Stump?”

“Long as Mouse listens to Willie is what I say,” Murph said.

“That fuck don’t listen to nobody,” Henry said. He was in a foul mood again. Normally, he could control his mouth, but sometimes Jeremy noticed he let his irritable mood get away from him. Big Harold simply grinned when Henry was in a foul mood. He tried to understand his moods as best he could because Henry was a fellow Vietnam veteran. Harold Murphy understood Henry’s experience in Vietnam, that was the common denominator between the two of them, and he tried to understand that Henry had seen things to exacerbate anything he experienced on these fires. He once told Jeremy, “Maybe your cousin seen things even I ain’t seen.” He just raised his eyelids a little longer than usual when he told this to Jeremy. “Every man has his ghosts, you know? And then he’s got this damn Roger Mickey ‘the Mouse’ to deal with. This is why I’m generally on this veteran’s side, unless he’s really running off a ditch. Know what I mean, Jeremy?”

“Yeah, yeah. He’s my cousin,” Jeremy replied. “He’s my cousin. He has to put up with shit I never have to worry about. I can tell him to let this shit slide off his back, you know? But who the fuck am I to tell him to ignore Roger Mickey? The Mouse can get on your nerves, you know?”

“Even when he’s being funny,” Big Harold agreed.

“You got it, Murph. He’s being funny to the crew. But Henry ain’t laughing.”



IF HENRY HAD SURVIVED THE FIRE SEASON

Jeremy would have asked him where all that came from, all the anger he directed at Roger Mickey, Roger the Mouse. To most of the crew, Roger was this guy only a few years older than the rest. A year younger than Henry, as it turned out. Henry had seen a lot by the time he joined the Slate Creek crew, but regardless of how much of the world he had seen, and how much damage he had sustained *and* survived in Vietnam, he was unable to turn his eyes away from Roger Mickey, unable to disregard his taunts, his apparently good-natured humor. Jeremy himself had rarely encountered the same type of taunting, even though he was a shade or two darker than his cousin Henry. Jeremy had thought about this before. In the beginning it wasn't apparent to Jeremy that Henry had layers and layers of incidents he thought about, confrontations with others of Roger's ilk, incidents and reasons to resent these guys and their taunts – Henry perceived them as *cuts*, words that bled you a drop of blood at a time -- . Jeremy didn't see any of this, none at all. He had been raised in a blissful ignorance of the shit somebody like his cousin faced.

If Henry had survived, Jeremy would have asked him, "Why the bitterness?"

Henry never told him. Many times Jeremy wanted to ask him. It wasn't like Henry was a bitter person. No, rather he was a stoic guy. Not real talkative. Shoulders tense. Did not take big steps, seemed to walk carefully, expecting to fall into a hole in the ground at any minute. As if the ground would open up and swallow him. Henry did tell Jeremy there were Mexican tales, or more properly Mexican American tales, of the ground opening up and swallowing recalcitrant kids: Mexican kids who disobeyed their fathers and mothers. What this had to do with Jeremy, he could not figure out, but Henry had cast a curious glance at him when he told him this tale of filial obligation to a parent. Maybe he meant it to transfer over to a cousin's obligation to a cousin. Loyalty. But maybe not. Henry never seemed to demand much of his young cousin, Jeremy. In fact, he would often look at him with a bemused grin, as if he were looking at a ten-year-old who had much to learn, who had not really broken out to see the world.

Jeremy felt he *was* seeing the world now. Seeing the world through the eyes of his fellow firefighters, seeing it through the dust and grime and sweat and occasional fear he experienced here in the northern woods.

Yeah, Henry walked around shoulders hunched sometimes, like a boxer might walk, or someone who was on the lookout for a hothole in the forest. A hothole was a limb burned to a cinder underground, providing a fiery tomb for somebody's entrapped foot or leg. Yeah, Jeremy was beginning to see the world, to see it as his more experienced crew members saw it, taking in what they said about the world, but also seeing it through his cousin's eyes. Jeremy himself walked carefully, but it was a journey he was taking to learn about the larger world around him, absorbing the tales he heard from Big Harold, from Freddy Ricci and Walter Gunther. Picking up on the wacky humor of Freddy Ricci and Roger Mickey in particular, but with an ear to the restraint he heard in the strategic silences he did hear from his cousin.

There was something else that bothered Jeremy. It was something his cousin wouldn't do, something totally unrelated he had told Jeremy about. In college Henry had the GI Bill and at a land grant college the monthly check was barely enough to keep him going. Henry had been offered part time work at the university but he did not accept it. Jeremy said nothing when Henry told him. As inexperienced as he was about

life, particularly about the type of life Henry had lived (he had, in fact, shared some tales about street fights, girls) he knew there was something enigmatic in Henry not taking the part time work, and even more – in Henry mentioning it to Jeremy. Now, why would he do that? Jeremy would have asked him why he was willing to work in the grime and danger of a forest fire, to eat the churning smoke of a desert fire, but not willing to buff floors in a college dorm for extra money. He would ask because he could see the dearth of life in Henry's little trailer. Henry had bought the trailer the year before. Got back to the campus late in the season after the apartments had been rented, with no place to rent. Moscow was a very small northern town, ensconced in the rolling Palouse Hills with mountains not far away. No real industry in town, and Henry did not really have the confidence to look for work in town. Was that it, Henry, no confidence to look for work? Jeremy wanted to ask him.

“No confidence in talking to an employer?”

Henry wouldn't have known how to reply. Even though several years older than Jeremy, his struggle with himself kept him from resolving problems with his self-worth that Jeremy had long ago resolved. Jeremy would learn through the years that he himself never had those problems. He never had the long night of self-doubt and recrimination that Henry lived through. No, *never*. His life had been fairly straightforward.

“I never had to go through what you went through,” he would say ten or twenty years later. They would talk over a beer, fishing in Owyhee County or up in one of the mountain streams Henry favored. He *imagined* these conversations. He *never had* these conversations. Henry never made it out of the mountains that last summer. He died, trapped with the others at a dead-end road. The fire consumed them and their stories.

Only, he kept Henry's story alive in his head. His bigger story.

He learned Henry's story by speaking to Henry's other cousins. And to his brothers, his two brothers who were as different from him as they were from each other, and as difficult to unlock in conversation. Henry himself had only told Jeremy certain things that summer before he died. Not much to go on, but it was enough to raise Jeremy's curiosity.

How are you different from me?

How *were* you different, my cousin? You with your hunched over shoulders, your legs that took tiny steps until that day you stepped in for me to fight Richard Miracle?

BACK TO THE FIRES

At the fire itself back in 1974, Cousin Henry was one of the crew -- sticking around for Jeremy, a big brother of sorts, but NOT always around. In fact, Jeremy was more often aware of Big Harold than he was of Henry. Big Harold seemed to hover around almost like a guardian angel. Jeremy never asked Harold why he was always around, in fact, he was not aware of how much he hovered over him, providing a protective shield around him – not aware of it until years later. It was almost as if a fine powder had been sprinkled over Jeremy's eyes, blinding him to his protective angel. It was almost as if the big ex-Marine had been put there to watch over him.

Jeremy was not superstitious. Henry was superstitious. Couldn't help himself, no matter how he tried to deny it.

But Jeremy was not superstitious. So now he would chuckle at himself how he looked at Harold Murphy as a guardian angel. Back at the big fire in '74 he had certainly been that. Carried Jeremy out of the fire, brought him to the river and had somebody hold up his head while he went back for Stumpfucker. Ryan Stump took more effort to bring to the river, as he was a taller, bigger man. But Murph managed it. He had done the same for wounded Marines at Con Thien, though he had not been decorated for it. He said the witnesses had been killed. Jeremy believed him.

It must happen a lot like that. Who's the hero when an entire squad gets ambushed and there are no witnesses?

No witnesses to their heroics.

But in this fire there were witnesses, though it went unremarked.

Henry was lost, and he *had* violated a protocol. That had been the District Ranger's decision after a formal investigation and hearing. And the Ranger's nephew, Roger Mickey, had to be protected. It was he who had led the group down the wrong trail. Henry argued about it with Mickey, and the Mouse told him to go to hell. By the time Henry tried to go down the other trail, the wind had shifted. Harold said afterward, "Henry was a hero, trying to find a way out. He knew Mouse had led us down the wrong path. All that arguing was lost time. Then the wind changed and even the right trail was blocked, in fact, it became a trap. But it wouldn't have been a trap."

"Right," Jeremy said. "It would have been the best route. "He looked down when he said it, though. *Henry, he felt, should have anticipated the wind changing.*

"I know, Henry should have known," Harold said, as if reading his mind. "But how are you going to gauge how fast the wind's going to change? Tell me that, Jeremy."

Of course, this was days later at the hospital where Jeremy and Stump were being treated for smoke inhalation. Minor burns for Stump, too.

In the background, things had been smoldering. When they did get back from the fire the survivors, they had a lot of things to sort through. Jeremy still had Lisa to worry about, not that he had any explanations to give her. She was ethereal in a way that Jeremy, at his young age, simply could not understand. He was fresh, innocent in a way, and women were still somewhat of a mystery to him. Without Henry he felt abandoned, and was still trying to find his own one true center. *Being centered*, it was a phrase that he was only faintly becoming familiar with. He had a friend from California who used it, and people in Seattle used the term, but he was barely aware of its import. He had his own demons to deal with and all the feel-good stuff coming out of California, well, he couldn't wrap his arms around it. Later, he would find his own way, and it

turned out he never did go to those expensive workshops they had in California where they screamed and hollered anxieties, fears and demons, away. He had his own way of dealing with things. It turned out his sojourn in the mountains of Idaho and the Northwest was a good start.

He learned that things he conjectured to be real problems, things he worried about when he was in his early twenties, were simply phases of his life. They were like old musty paintings he had to look at and then walk through as if walking through a door with an opaque panel. In other words, the problems he had with Lisa in the early 1970's were things he would continue to think about, to contemplate all of his life, through the decades. It wasn't necessarily all about Lisa. Lisa was just a part of it. His meeting Lisa, talking to her, wondering about her life, it would continue long after she was no longer in his life. He moved on. The firefighting days became a blur. But, as in the case of the Vietnam War always being with his friend, Harold, and his cousin, Henry, the firefighting in the mountains stayed with Jeremy, the only real adventure he had, the only place that was truly real for him in that it nearly took his young life.

The winds had carried embers high up and scattered them among the dry brush to the north beyond the limits of the small town of Roach. Had carried the embers beyond the river. So that now the fire was ahead of them. Gone far ahead of them, leaping like it was directed by some island-hopping general from a distant war. The crew boss told them competent crews were fighting the fire to the north where they had been the previous day. The Rogue River crew was already there and the Wallowa crew was on its way. The Slate Creek crew would be joining the Bitterroot and Boise crews south of Roach. But as they made their way to the south side of the town there was a chill in the air which compounded the immensity of the mountains around them. Jeremy in particular was aware somehow that the mountains were even steeper and more difficult to climb south of the city. When the Army truck slowed he made his way to the back to the opening in the tarp and craned his neck to look up. What he saw surprised him. He saw red flame high up. It was unmistakable. He didn't want to say anything. He was new to the crew. Perhaps this was normal.

But it was like getting smacked lightly on the head.

A bump.

Or a swinging branch released by the guy in front of you barely missing your face.

He nudged the man sitting at the end of the bench. It was Rabbit, who sat chatting with Fernando. "Get a load of that."

Rabbit looked up. "Damn!"

Fernando also craned his neck. "Fire's crawling along the top. Wonder if Willie knows?"

Ricci made his way to the back, "What are you fellas up to?"

Rabbit pointed upwards into the darkness. It was pitch black now, the steep sides of the mountains blocking any reflected light there might be from the moon. Ricci stuck his head out and backed back under the tarp. "Shit, he should know. Willie should know."

The 5-ton stopped again so he jumped down and ran around the front. "Willie, you seen the shit up there?"

Willie looked at him with a wry grin. The cab light was on. He was tired with his usual blood-shot eyes, and his sly tired fox's face. He was a creature of the forest like any other. "That IS a problem, ain't it, Freddy? It's not a threat to us," Willie said.

"No? Then *you* go tell the boys at the back of the truck," Ricci shot back.

Roger Mickey was sitting in the middle where the sergeant had been. "It's a mirage, Freddy. In the dark you can't tell."

"What the fuck?" Ricci said.

"He's right, Freddy," Willie said. "It's not on this ridge, it's spreading across on the next one. They got a crew on it."

"If you say so," Freddy said. Willie clumsily put a flashlight across his face, saw Freddy's startled, embarrassed, untrusting look. "Go on back. Nothing major to worry about, okay?"

"If you say so," Freddy repeated, looking past the light at Willie and then at Mickey. "You fuckers better know what you're doing."

"Cool it, Ricci," Mickey said. "This is your crew boss. It ain't the Marines but he's still your boss."

"I was Air Force, Mouse. Not some dumb Jarhead."

"Whatever," Mickey said. "Whatever, but get on back."

"Fuck you, Mouse," Ricci said, departing.

"Guys are worn out," Willie said. "It's our job to reassure them, not boss them around."

"We have to," Mickey said.

Willie knew the Mouse had the ear of the Ranger, so he had to be careful. "He's a good woodlands firefighter. Ricci's a good fella."

Ricci went back, climbed into the back of the truck. "It's an illusion, boys."

"What the fuck, my man?" Rabbit said.

"Mouse said it's a trick on your eyes."

"What the hell does that mean, Freddy?" Jeremy asked.

"Relax, New Guy," Ricci said. He had developed a habit of seeing Jeremy as a young guy, younger than himself, and new to firefighting. And Jeremy didn't consider it worth contesting any of it. He didn't give a shit. "He says," Freddy said, pausing, as he made his way back up to the middle of the truck, "He says it's not on this ridge. There's another ridge and it's farther than we think and so that's where the fire is." He rapped a knuckle on top of Jeremy's helmet. "Got that New Guy?"

Jeremy took in Freddy's grin. "Yeah, so you ran up there and bothered Willie and the Mouse for . . ."

"For your sorry ass!" Ricci hollered back. The 5-ton army truck had started up again, so he had to holler. "You're the one that cried about the fire up high first! *Hey! Look up there! Look up there, man! We're being surrounded!*"

"Fuck you, Freddy," Murphy hollered mildly, with a kindly grin. "Mah man, Jeremy, ain't hysterical."

"Yeah, he don't lose his head, Crazy Freddy," Henry joined in.

"Well, shit I guess you got a regular chorus or cheering section, Moondog!" Freddy said.

Jeremy just shrugged him off with a handwave.

The truck stopped a half a mile from the fire. Another crew had been stationed at the line where they were headed. That crew was sleeping below the lip of a logging road. This offered protection from falling timbers and rolling rock, as the careening, tumbling debris would be tossed over the crouching men. The Slate Creek crew fanned out among the trees next to the 5-ton. A few men chose to sleep on the bed of the truck. Some slept beside it. They were tired and fell into the drowsy world. Boxes of C-rations provided a place to set their fire vests and helmets, a place to pile the canteens. A few men slept next to the chainsaws.

During the night they were awakened by loud crashes, sometimes one large break and then a cascading effect of a widow maker rolling, tumbling down the mountain. Or stones loosened by the fire. It reminded Murph and Henry of rolling artillery fire in Vietnam, or a distant B-52 strike on enemy concentrations. Henry knew those vaunted weapons high up above the clouds often missed their targets, not because the B-52's couldn't deliver on the target but because the North Vietnamese had years of warfare and knew how to make the Americans miss. Likewise he was hoping the burned, dead trees and rolling megaton rocks would come down and get stuck on fallen trees or bounce over the road harmlessly. He found it interesting, contemplated how similar Vietnam was to firefighting, similar but also vastly different. He had tried to explain it to his young cousin, who had not made it to Nam. "Here, you have the heat and the thirst and the lack of sleep, and you have it there too. In that way they are similar," Henry told him.

Jeremy nodded. "I've heard enough to know that, cous'."

"Different, though. You'll never get ambushed here."

"No but a tree might fall on you. I've got a scar above my elbow to prove it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. And a widow maker doesn't make any noise. Not till it hits the ground."

"I'll never understand how such a big tree can burn enough on the inside," Jeremy said. "I know that's what happens, and it must happen slowly. Not at once."

"That's what makes it a surprise," Henry said

"You guys talking war again?" It was Roger Mickey. "I never had any use for that. Got a low draft number, and that was good enough for me. Figure this is dangerous enough, right, Willie?"

They had been on a break. Willie blinked. He always blinked, part of it caused by the smoke, and part of it his nervous tick. "I missed Korea."

"You fellas never missed anything," Murph said. "War sucks."

Willie blinked again, grinned, looked away. "Maybe, but you guys know things we don't."

"Yeah, it keeps you guys awake, right Murph?" Mickey said.

"Yeah, sometimes," Murph said. But it made him uncomfortable. *What had he said around the Mouse? He didn't like the angle the Mouse took about his war experience, or Henry's. You never knew where the hell he was coming from. Was he going to try to understand, or hit you across the shinbone?*

Now they were south of Roach, south of the river. How many miles south? Three, four? Not sure, not good to ask too many questions. Murph knew his job was never secure. Nobody's was. And he knew not to be a gadfly. He remembered in Vietnam some Marines could get away with it, they had a natural curiosity and skill at

doing it. He never did. Here in the forest Henry could ask questions. Jeremy could too, though Jeremy normally held his tongue, being new to this crew. Henry, he was different. Just as often, one of his questions about the fire, or the humidity or where in the hell they were *exactly* got him into an argument, or even a fistfight. He himself, kept quiet most of the time.

So they were up in the morning now and eating breakfast, and getting ready to begin the climb. Then they were told to relax, the 5-ton would take them up to another fire line. The fire line would be the gravel road that wound higher up the ridge. They could have hiked up, but why argue. So they loaded themselves and their chainsaws, canteens, packs and Pulaski's on the truck. "This fire's unique, boys," Willie told them.

"Like we're fightin' it backwards," said Ricci.

"No, he means the fire configuration is different," Roger Mickey corrected. He was standing, yellow shirt resplendent while the others were soot-stained, and with his bandanna tied expertly around his neck. He stood holding his Pulaski with his thumb pointing up. "It's sending embers up high in the air, miles up somehow. Shit, the scientists don't even know how that happens . . ."

"How high?" Rabbit asked.

"I don't know, Harvard," Mickey replied. "I thought *you'd* know shit like this. You're the professor."

"Forget I asked," replied Rabbit.

Willie said, "Alright, so this fire is coming from the southwest, and sending embers out ahead of it. This is what we gotta do." He pointed up the road to where he knew there was a fire truck east of their position. "There's an engine up there. He's dousing a spot fire up there. We don't know much else right now." He held the map with one hand and rubbed his hip nervously. "I'm sending Ryan up with his squad to help the engine suppress that fire."

"Then I want you, Roger, I want you to cross the road and the stream on our south and get climbing up to that smoke. Don't see the flame yet, but it's gotta be there."

They were standing on the road. The National Guard truck had managed to turn around and departed back down the mountain. They were standing twenty yards from where another red engine was pouring water on a stubborn fire on the north side of the road. In fact, there were two engines at work there. "We're going to back up the engines, get in front of the fire and hit it with a fire line where the engines can't reach."

"They got a lot of hose, boss," Walter Gunther said. He was serious, as usual, and his thin frame looked worn out, belying the determination in his face. His helmet was pushed back on his head.

"Yeah, I know. But that's the plan. We go up and put a line in front of the fire. We block it from the top, they douse it here by the road."

So that was it, Willie would stay put with the majority of the crew to help the fire engine right where they were, and Stump would go up the road a hundred yards or so and take Henry, Jeremy, Murph and Galindo with him to support the engine with the hoses up the narrow gravel road to the east.

Roger Mickey's squad crossed the road south and waded across the stream and began climbing to find the smoke and cut everything down around it and uproot it. Two of them had portable "piss" pumps strapped to their backs to douse the ashes where they glowed red. Mouse had with him Walter Gunther, Diamond Tanaka, Tom Hare,

aka the Harvard Rabbit, and “Beanpole” Pendergrest, who was like the fuckin’ Phoenix, kept rising from the dead. That fucker had had had more accidents and misfortunes than the entire crew but here he was.

Willie watched Stump depart up the road with his squad, and Mouse and his squad move just across the road and stream. Willie stayed where he was, supporting the engine dousing the fire right there. He then started his hill climbing from where the engine stood. They would climb on its west side with the prevailing wind behind them and the fire in front. Willie had with him, among others, Fernando Prieto, aka the Lizard, Jason Otami, the second Japanese American on the crew, Jeffrey Morgan, Duke Rangel, Pete Bicandi, Bobby “Dolly” Dahl, Teddy Marquez and Marv Gilmartin. He also had Roland Garcia, who was a cousin to Richard Milagro, aka Richard Miracle, the boxer.

NO WAY IN GOD'S HEAVEN

On this day Ryan Stump took his squad quickly up the road. It turned out the lanky squad leader was locked into this work for life. He fought fires for another twenty years, handled crews both on the ragged line and on a truck and from the air. This day he was handling his squad well, prodding them to move a little faster. They had an assignment and Jeremy was again in Ryan's crew and marched along with the crew, a ragged march, remembering Ryan's obsession with work. Ryan had been born to work, learning from his father to bust his ass driving tractor over wheat fields and corn fields. When the crew had "down time" between fires, Ryan had always found "make work" for them. Make work was clearing brush and tidying up areas that looked better left alone. It kept the crew busy between fires. The crew knew it and went along with his mania for working hard but with a little bit of snickering and bitching. Back then it had been early in the season and it didn't pay to piss off a squad leader who might go talk to Willie.

But now at the Roach Fire in earnest he led the crew up the gravel road.

It was a thinly graveled road and the rains and the winter snow had broken down the edge and drained off much of the gravel. It had not been graded in years. It was not a regular road. It turned out there was not one engine up the road but two. They got to the first one as it was parked on the side of the road where rivulets had caved in small sections. The operator told Stump the second engine had gone up the road.

It was a small brush fire and not much of a challenge. The crew quickly attacked it along the sides to kill its spread, and ran up in front and built a line and widened it and pulled the brush to the sides. The engine continued to hit it with water and soon the flareup there by the side of the road was nearly quenched and they were dealing with embers. They went about turning the soil and burying the embers and stomping on them with their thick-soled boots.

Then they saw the men from Mouse's crew coming up the road. They were not running but walking fast, knees pumping uphill, bodies swaying side to side with the equipment. Stump had been standing apart talking on the radio. He saw Mouse's crew coming up the road and quickly figured something had gone wrong, then saw a finger of smoke coming up the draw behind them and twirling and growing darker and beginning to fill the area as wide as the road down below. He spoke into the radio, "There's something goin' on down there, I'll get back with you." *A big fire coming up the ravine up their asses. We gotta skiddaddle. Get over the ridge, follow the road over the ridge.* He put the radio back on his belt. "That truck that went up the road, I guess it's gotta go somewhere!

Jeremy noticed a worried look. Stump had grown up in these mountains. It did not bode well to Jeremy that he looked worried.

Murph also looked around. "Fuckin' steep ridges around us, Jer," he said.

"And the engine, where's the fire engine?" Henry added.

"You guys don't worry," Stump told them. "Stay calm. Let's wait till the fire truck comes back. It went to scout out the road, where it goes."

"Maybe we should start up the road now," Henry said.

And when the Mouse and his squad arrived, they didn't look too happy. "See that frickin' smoke behind us?" Mouse said. He was still his jaunty self, still the little bantam rooster, but there was just the slightest little crease of a worry line on his forehead. And Jeremy noticed, too, for the first time that twenty-eight-year-old squad

leader Roger Mickey had a premature dash of grey at the temples. Did it just blossom with the rise of the giant columns of smoke suddenly puffing up in the ravine behind them? Did that grey unfurl itself on Mouse's temple at the sight of those dragons, the smoke columns churching up the ravine on both sides of the gravel road? One smoke column coming up on the north ridge and the other on the south ridge on the other side of the road. Both coming on strong toward the east, churning up and rising higher with each minute, it seemed. "Okay, what happens now?" Mouse said to no one in particular.

Around them in that ravine were three fires. The nearest and biggest was the one Willie and crew tried to stop. They had the engine with them but it was a stubborn fire, fed by four-foot dry brush and by grass hidden by large boulders. The second fire was smaller and across the road and stream. Mouse and his squad had squelched that fire, barely a smoke, and departed, but the fire came back. Mouse had rushed the process, did not do enough dirt work, did not turn the soil sufficiently, or in the rush to move up the road missed a single spark that flared when the wind whipped up. But that fire Mouse failed to extinguish was small compared to what was coming up the canyon toward them. It was a strong wind coming from the west between the two ridges, a big dragon coming from beyond them coming up the canyon, it was not a normal fire. It came carrying with it two large dragon smoke columns and a fierce fire consuming both sides of the road. Trees and brush were going up like kindling, and a certain undeniable fear hit even Willie in the heart.

The driver of the engine waved Willie over. "Climb aboard, we're outta this place."

Willie motioned to the crew toward the fire engine. "If we can make the switchback down the mountain before the fire gets here."

Bicandi was the closest to him. "It's throwing cinders out in front."

Their escape route was to double back down the mountain. Those that could climbed the engine and they headed toward switchback still in front of the onrushing fire. They were rushing down the road, with the remainder of the crew running downhill to meet the winding road below. Willie was riding in the cab with the driver when he saw the bursting fire. "It's blocked the road. Turn around!"

The wind rained embers around them and the driver switched gears frantically. He jerked the engine back, back up a ways and found a flat area.

Fernando Prieto, the quiet, slightly built Mexican American bumped Otami with his elbow. Otami's round face turned. "What?"

"They're going to die down there," he said. He pointed at men sliding and dropping heavily along the ledge.

Otami began hollering. They were men he didn't know well.

He hollered, and Fernando joined in. The men turned. "What?"

They pointed. "The fire!"

The men grabbed shrubs, held on. Most of the men ran back up the hill to chase the engine. Two continued downhill. "God bless them," Fernando said to Otami. He was a devout Catholic. Otami was a Buddhist.

Willie did not hear Fernando, but muttered. "God bless us all."

"We're in the shit," said the driver. He had turned the truck around. "We get as far as we can. You sure this road goes anywhere?"

"I wouldn't swear to it."

Engine One drove to the fire engine being supported by Stump's crew. Then the radio crackled and the Number Two Engine came on. "Fuckin' road goes nowhere. We got to the end."

"Shit!" muttered the driver of Engine One. He turned to Willie. "We gonna stay in the cab? Best place middle of the road?"

Willie, sweat beading down his neck, nodded. "Stay here for now I guess."

He got out to talk to his boys. The crew now seemed like a crowd, not a disciplined unit. Pitiful standing surrounded by the dark high ridges, the steep climb. They were pitifully small and crowded together. It was horrendous to be faced with nowhere to go with the dragon smoke columns arching in the sky. Lost track of time. A darkened sky did that to you. Ryan was already leading his crew to a relatively bare area higher up, a rocky area sheltered by high boulders. "It's the best place," he hollered to Willie. "Lay out our shelters."

He opened his shiny aluminum fire shelter and his squad followed suit.

Willie had no better option, not convinced the stream running below the road was better. Not very wide and it was shallow. But the water was cold. Led a crowd of men to the water's edge. The two drivers remained in their cabs. "I don't know if these guys know what they're doing," one of the drivers radioed.

The men soaked themselves in the stream, then stood up to feel the force of the wind, tiny embers whipping past them. Two rivers of flame were approaching them along the north and south ridges coming east. In the middle of the crevice was the cold stream running downhill toward the fire. The men were in the water braving the freezing cold, hiding from the fire. North above the road, Stump's men were in their fire shelters on flat rocks on the ridge. Farther up the road Mouse's crew had realized they could not outrun the fire storm. They threw down their Pulaski's and packs and rushed into the stream. Not as deep as where Willie was but it was farther away from the tree line.

Now they waited. From his vantage point, Stump peeked out from his shelter and wondered did the men in the engine run into the creek? Did the engines simply lose their paint? He thought now like it was ten years hence.

Decades later at the lakeside where he was writing, Jeremy tried to remember Henry as he had been. Without a photograph it was hard to remember him exactly. It was hard to relive the companionship they felt those few years he knew him. Henry was the really tragic firefighter those two extended summers he fought fires. Murph had survived, and even the fucking Mouse had survived. The squad leader who was supposed to get them out of a jam had survived, quite by accident. Now in the twilight of his life, "accident" was an important word for Jeremy. He was beginning finally to let go of everything he had regretted, understanding that accidents, the accidental life so to speak, was as real as any well-planned life. For most people, that is.

If truth be told he wasn't sure it was the Montreal Creek Fire that got Henry. Maybe it was the Roach Fire, he wasn't sure. Too long ago. It was not the biggest fire, but maybe it was a wicked fire, if fires can be categorized that way.

Perhaps it was okay that he died then. He had taken care of Richard Miracle. It was funny, almost. It lasted but seconds, not even minutes. It was quick.

The boxer came at him, bouncing on the balls of his feet, but quickly retreated when Henry landed a wicked kick to his knee. He then charged, trying to pummel the ex-Army Ranger with both fists but was tackled instead. It didn't last long.

It was never clear whether the boxer had gotten on a crew nearby, one of those local crews that fought in the district and only occasionally traveled out of state like the Slate Creek Crew. Or whether as Mouse claimed, Miracle had gotten a job at local bar. Mouse claimed he had seen him serving drinks. But you never knew about the Mouse; was he baiting Henry, trying to make him paranoid? He had confided in Walter Gunther that he enjoyed seeing Mexicans fight each other. "They don't give each other any breaks. It's fierce. That fuckin' Henry is mean, I can tell." He looked Walter directly in the face, holding his gaze: "You *know* he's a mean sonofabitch! You *know* it Walter, that Henry is a dangerous guy. Shiiiiit, yes!"

Walter, always the contemplative one, the one who chewed things over in his mind before talking, *hmmmed* and nodded. "I reckon, Henry would be somebody to have on your good side, yeah, I agree with you. He was an Army Ranger, some Intelligence guy of some kind in the Vietnam War."

"Vietnam, yeah, what an awful goddamn little war, Walter. Glad I never went. Not that I couldn't have gone. Any one of us could. Most of us had the brains to stay out of that nasty little war, right?" Mouse said.

"You got to feel for the veterans, though, Roger," Walter said.

They had been back at the Ranger Station for two days and had been talking in the evening after a full day digging a new trail, pushing boulders out of the way, falling large pine. It was weeks before Henry tangled with the pro boxer. Walter had his hair slicked back, having just washed his face the second time this day. He lit up a cigarette. "I shouldn't smoke."

"Least of our worries," Mouse said. "I'd like to see Henry tangle with that boxer wants to kick Jeremy's ass."

"It may happen some day."

IN THE CANYON THE FIRE ARRIVES

When it arrived it was blinding, and the crashing roar was horrific. You could not look up for more than a second, did not dare rise up much, mostly keeping your face skimming the water even when you peeped at the roar, the red flame rushing along the ridges. In the water you had a chance. That was the feeling Tanaka had as he and Walter Gunther grabbed each other's forearms to keep from being swept down when a miraculous bounty of water suddenly rushed down from the mountain towards them. Tanaka and Walter spied the crew bobbing up and down in the turbulent water; and north above the road, still among the giant boulder, were Stump and his crew. How desperate were they?

Ryan Stump's crew was still on land above the road among the boulders. Would the wall, the rock face catapult the rushing fire over them to the brush and trees beyond their enclosure? They prayed for safety huddling inside fire shelters, but only for less than a minute. Somehow, maybe it was telepathy, maybe it was the roar and the heat, but simultaneously they all scrambled wildly out of those thin shelters. One stood up at a crouch, then another. Aluminum could not hold back the monster. Flames crept over the rocks, reaching them with long fingers -- the heat unbearable. Above them trees exploded into fulminating flame with great force, tossing rolling debris at them.

Stump was first. Ripping off his shelter he grabbed Jeremy and pulled him out, "Get to the water! Go, go! Now!"

Jeremy had been the slowest. Being the youngest, and it being his first year on this elite crew, he was obeying what had been said: "*Stay in your shelter!*"

Now he ran, and noticed he was behind the others. Galindo was already in the water, Murph looking back at Jeremy, waving him on, Henry was a little further back, reaching for Jeremy. Then Stump, feeling the crushing heat, the craze-inducing roar and wind force, rushed past them all, plunging into the saving stream now an icy river.

Above them a deafening cloud of charred trees and brush rose in turbulence and an impersonal drive to destroy. It was nature speaking with a terrible voice, speaking with an impersonality of sheer destruction. They mere mice, quivering mice in the ice water, all of them face down as if before an Old Testament God. They were scared shitless.

It seemed like the stars were revolving in a universe above him, that's what it seemed like to Jeremy. He was a small child, and he was sorry he had fucked up somehow. He cried like a child, unable to understand why. Perhaps it was the knowledge coming from deep inside that he was about to die – or more correctly, that he *might* die. There was probably more fear in the possibility of dying, than in the actual knowledge that he *definitely* was about to die. There in the frigid waters of the rushing stream where he had tumbled twice in the water and then held on to big Murph, he recognized somehow that he was going to make it. He was going to survive! Maybe it was the confidence the Marine gave him, just by quietly saying, "Hang on. We're okay here." And on the other side, his older cousin, also a Vietnam veteran, telling him to hang on.

He had been in Portland and had marched in two anti-war protests near the university, and so he harbored within him mixed feelings about the war, feelings he never expressed here among the firefighters because these were mostly conservative

guys from ranches, and small towns in the West. They were not from the big cities, not from the universities, for the most part. And if they had gone to the universities, they were athletes, not the social activists who would gravitate to the marches. With his youth and lack of friends who were socially conscious, Jeremy just never felt comfortable on either side of the war thing.

Yes, there were exceptions like Walter Gunther, like Murph who did like to read in spite of his appearance as a rough mountain type, and there was Rabbit, who was at Harvard. But even they knew how conservative the people at the Ranger Station were, and how the Ranger and Willie Sykes felt about things.

The deadly eruption passed them, was funneled uphill toward the high end where the two ridges met to form the tip of the V. There the fire seemed to blow away into the sky, high up like a flooded passing river. Below the still passing storm of smoke, the crew had begun to recover. Willie raised his head and surveyed the damage. As far as he could tell they were safe, all of the men had survived. He began a headcount. "Roger, you got everybody?"

"Yeah, boss!"

"Ryan, your squad okay?"

"Got everybody," Ryan said, rising up fierce and shivering.

Willie surveyed the men with him, the two squads he held to himself. They were moving to the road, some walking, others on hands and knees. All wet and shivering. Smudged faces now white like the dead.

"Guess we can consider ourselves lucky," Gunther told Tanaka. The various squads were now jumbled together, some of the men tumbled about downstream when the water rushed down from higher up the ridge. Tanaka nodded, busy gathering and cleaning equipment, and looking directly at Willie to see what the crew leader was going to do and say. Willie himself stared in a daze at Murph, Henry and Jeremy helping each other out of the stream now bubbling more calmly. The waters came down freezing but regular. Whatever had happened upstream had stopped. Willie was glad for that, would have hated to see his crew saved by the stream from the fire only to be drowned by those same waters.

"Darned stream, how can you thank an inanimate thing," he mumbled.

"I'd get on my knees if I could," Freddy Ricci said.

"I hear ya, brother," Murph said. He was talking to Ricci but staring at Jeremy. Jeremy himself was studying Henry's face, wondering how the army veteran had taken all this. "You okay?" Henry asked a staring Jeremy. "You not hurt or anything? I know you got knocked around out there."

"No, I'm okay. A bruise on my forearm."

Ricci: "Me and Jeremy get purple hearts for this or what?"

THIS NOT ROACH FIRE? NOT MONTREAL FIRE?

A day later they were on a helicopter going somewhere to a fire on a distant peak. Somewhere in Northern Idaho, farther north than even the Slate Creek Station. “How you gonna keep track of which fire for your diary, Jer?” Murph asked him.

“Hell, I dunno, just put down where we’re at.”

“Why not ask Willie where we’re at?” Henry advised.

“Nah, don’t wanna make a big fuckin’ deal about it.”

“You might need that information, cous” Henry said.

“Like coordinates, that kind of shit,” Murph said.

“Nah,” Jeremy said lazily. He had a little pocket-size notebook and he was writing down that the fire was in Northern Idaho, maybe somewhere near Coeur ‘d Alene. Somebody else said it was on the Canadian border. Or near Bonners Ferry or Sandpoint.

Jeremy was in a dazed mood for some reason even with the wash of the helicopter blades. They hadn’t had much of a break since the previous fire, and his bones felt like an old man’s bones, so he thought. His face felt cracked, his skin cracked. He had to force a smile over chapped lips. Yet, strangely enough he was in a somnambulant state. He couldn’t figure out why, but he was enjoying it. There was a warm feeling in his stomach, as if he had had a little too much to drink, or maybe gotten some good pot. He had had neither.

He also felt a little bit of *déjà vu*. Like he had been here on this very mountain before. Not in a previous lifetime, but in this lifetime. Couldn’t figure that one out either. So he wasn’t taking any suggestions about notetaking seriously. Eventually he wanted to write a book about his experiences, but had no idea what type of notes to take. Something told him his eyes and ears and what he was feeling at the fires would be the best notes he could be taking – if he lived long enough to marinate, to distill, what he was seeing with his own eyes.

Murph and Henry liked Jeremy, and they both considered him a good kid, a younger version of themselves before the war when they had been civilians. Murph considered that Jeremy was a softer, friendlier version of himself, someone easily acceptable to young girls, and to potential employers. He had none of the rough exterior of the tough ex-Marine, the hard charging college football player. Murph figured he himself would always play this tough guy role (when he had to, such as on a firefighting crew). Jeremy had none of that. Jeremy was also willing to listen. To *listen* to older guys like himself. That was critical. Murph liked that.

Henry liked his cousin for slightly different reasons. As they hurtled through the clouds towards the peak that once had appeared as the point of a church steeple, he was thinking how uncomplicated Jeremy’s life was compared to his own. Just a few years ago as a young guy Henry had not had a penny to his name. He’d blown all his Ranger money. The reason was his father, a simple, hard-working man, an illiterate man, had never taught him anything about money. He had had a good father. Henry knew very little about Jeremy’s father. Not sure where Jeremy got that thing about questioning authority, but doing it without offending anybody. He had only seen this in brief moments, but knew his cousin had the capacity. How he managed to do this was a mystery to Henry, it was in the realm of a mastery of something – somehow! A mastery of how to get what you wanted through cajoling and persuasion. Henry wished he had

had some of that as a teenager because he had never seriously pushed back on the demands his own father put on him; and as a result had kept himself from experiencing the full bloom of youth. In other words, he had lived in want, had lived like a penniless monk, not dating, not having a car. Not living like other teenagers. Not having a carefree life that many others experienced. Had lived within himself. Trapped within himself.

Wished he had had that quality, that ability, when he was going into the army. Maybe he would not have needed to serve Uncle Sam at all if he had had that soft approach Jeremy handled so well. Maybe he would have missed the Vietnam War altogether, that exhilarating but dreadful experience. Intense, a rush at times, devastating at other times. All in a shroud of sadness now. Maybe if he had been more like Jeremy he could have managed college money some other way. Maybe he wouldn't have had so much rage and resentment against his father for circumscribing his life so narrowly. What did his father know, after all? Illiterate, a kind man except when it came to working his sons like mules in the fields, even at the age of six. "You know, Jeremy, child labor is still the rule," Henry said.

This was another time when they were resting on a trail. They had gotten into a deep conversation, just the two of them.

"Say what?" Jeremy said, making himself comfortable against a natural bench.

"Child labor laws. They outlawed child labor. But not for Mexicans. It's a good thing they don't enforce those laws anyway, otherwise we would have gone hungry. Not that we didn't."

Henry laughed lightly, softly, like at some private, ironic joke. He leaned back against the soft dirt bank. "Life can be the shits. Not for you but for other people. You know we laugh about it. What the fuck else can you do?"

"Your life is so goddamn different," Jeremy nodded in agreement. He looked down the line at the other firefighters, wondering who else was listening but nobody was close by. Murph had gone to take a piss and Ricci was arguing with the Mouse.

"That ain't the half of it, bro'," Henry continued.

"It gets better? I mean your story?"

"Nah." Nothing to complain about, thought Henry. He had made it out of the labor camps, had survived child labor. "Nah, nothing worth mentioning, cousin."

“FUCK YOU WANT, MICKEY?”

The two Vietnam veterans were thinking about things one day out on a trail. It was where they sometimes revealed more of themselves to a buddy than they intended. Like when Murph shared with his fellow Vietnam veteran what his own personal experience had been like being ambushed by a surprisingly resilient enemy. Before he could get far, though, Henry told him he himself had “nearly bought the farm” when he was part of a small team doing recon. *“We got chased through the bush,” said Henry, “It’s only been a couple of years, maybe three, but it seems like yesterday.”*

“I know what you mean, brother, it seems like yesterday.”

Murph glanced at Jeremy, who was listening in as they took a break on the trail. The trail was fresh turned earth where another crew had been digging. Now Slate Creek was passing through. But it had been a long hike, part of it through a snag field, a difficult and arduous barrier to get through. Now they were on a trail, but they were at rest. *“They opened up on us, and guys went down around me. (Murph looked directly at Henry. Murph is telling the story.) We turned and charged the ambush. That’s how Marines are trained. You engage the target, you charge. I was carrying the pig (M-60 machinegun) running toward the trenches and guys got hit on either side. Didn’t think I would make it. People going down. Then we were in the trenches and we were throwing grenades at each other. He got me. It blew up in the trench. He was in a parallel trench. These weren’t raggedy-assed Viet Cong, they were hardened, disciplined North Vietnamese Regulars. They looked healthy, had neat haircuts. He got me. The grenade went off but it blew to the side. (Murph looked at Henry, glanced at Jeremy.) Their grenades didn’t always go off. Their quality wasn’t as good as ours. Got me in the shoulder. Blew to one side.”*

Jeremy piped up. *“What happened to the NVA?”*

“One of the other guys shot ‘im.”

That was on the trail on a fire.

This other conversation, this one involving Roger the Mouse was different. It happened in the barracks one evening. Roger Mickey, the Mouse, felt loose, was smoking a cigarette, running around in black fire pants white t-shirt and red suspenders. Had not shaved for some time. Eyes looked particularly tired. Had not showered after returning from a fire. Went by Henry’s bunk. “Henry Romero, how are you?”

“Fuck do you want, Mouse?”

“That any way to talk to a squad leader?”

“Fuck you, go harass your own squad.”

“Not here to fuck with you, man.”

“What the fuck ya want then?”

“Want us to make peace, brother. Want us to work together. You know we might need to stand by each other when the shit hits the fan some time. But I don’t have to tell you that?”

Henry was feeling it in his chest. A constriction he felt when there was danger. Others felt the stress in their heads, or in a tingling in their hands. He felt it there. In his chest. He swallowed hard. He couldn’t tell Mouse to *definitively* go to hell. He was a squad leader, after all. *What the fuck? What did he want?*

“I know I fuck with you, Henry. I don’t mean nothing by it. I’m from California. There’s a lot of Chicanos there. Ever been to LA?”

“I don’t much give a fuck where you’re from, Mouse.”

Mickey straightened up. Took a drag. “I guess I deserve that.”

Henry stood up, made a small circle where he stood. “You keep this shit up. Keep it up all summer, bro.”

“Nah, nah, it ain’t like that. I’m a serious student of life.” He had a halfway silly grin on his face. But it was a weathered face of a seasoned firefighter. “I’m a serious guy, Henry. You got me all wrong. I don’t go around looking for fights! Especially with somebody who can kick my ass!”

“Everybody sees you giving me shit. Everybody sees me take your shit. I’m tellin’ ya it won’t turn out like that.”

“No, it’s not my intention to piss you off, not like that,” Mouse said. “Shit, I know you were an Army Ranger. I know it wouldn’t go good for me. Fuck no!”

“What the fuck, then?”

“It’s just barracks bullshit. It’s no fucking excuse, man, but I can’t keep from fidgeting. Diagnosed hyperactive. I smoke, I crack jokes. I fuck with people. I was diagnosed that way as a kid. Even today I can’t keep my mouth shut. I chain smoke, and if I wasn’t firefighting, I would be drinking. I drink when I’m not studying for exams. That’s my life Henry.”

“THIS THE COOLEY FIRE?”

The peak on Ware Mountain was nearly vertical and the fat guy had a hard time climbing it. His partner went up the side of the mountain easily. They were both local boys, hired as professional tree fallers to help out the forest service on a contract basis, not part of any fire crew. The slender one was hardened, scorched by the sun, dark haired with stubble on his chin, sunken eyes that hid his motives. The fat one breathed hard and sweated, probably hired as part of the contract. The contract was held by a friend or relative, because no way that the fat guy could keep up. He was standing trying to catch his breath, a guy also from the poor side of some small mountain town, no doubt. The Slate Creek crew filed past the two with no one greeting the two fallers, and the fallers not even looking at the crew. Most of the crew were middle class, or working class from stable homes and plenty of food on the table; the fallers appeared to come from families that often ate cold beans from a can, and maybe baloney sandwiches. They had had hard lives, even the fat one. Jeremy recognized this.

The wiry faller, the one carrying the oversized chainsaw waited for his partner. The fat guy was not carrying anything but his bulk. He was probably wondering what he was doing on the mountain. Maybe there was no other work in the area.

Jeremy filed past them, the fourth man in the line.

He could see the valley spread out behind them. Below them the grassy meadow descended gradually to a four-lane highway that crossed from east to west. On the other side was a rock ledge and a mile to the west a bridge with two spans; it led into Cooley, a town larger than Roach of a previous fire that summer. On the far side of the highway directly to their north was a flat wide area lined by stands of quaking aspen with spotted bark and then the ground rose abruptly to a darker green of the pine covered ridge and then another higher ridge behind it. There were draws by which to climb between the vertical cliffs up to the ridges. Jeremy was taking all of this in, wondering if they would have to drop down into the valley, cross the Interstate and climb the ridges on the far side.

Standing on and around a giant boulder where the pine was sparse, the crew could all take this in. They could see helicopters with water buckets crisscrossing below. “There’s a fire to the west, but there’s a lake there,” Willie was telling them. “They’re using the water for a fire to the east.”

“Why would they be dripping water coming back?” Ricci asked.

“I don’t know,” Willie said softly.

“Yeah, who knows about these things,” Mouse said.

A large bellied transport plane crossed over the bridge. They watched it drop its red retardant over to the right in the east. But they could see no smoke in that direction. Another mystery.

Maybe their crew leader sensed something awry, maybe he simply thought it was too much information to dump on his men. “There’s a couple of fires. East and west,” he said simply.

“Why did they put us on the peak?” Ricci asked him.

“They must have got their wires crossed,” Stump answered him. It was a laconic reply. Stump was tall, sturdy, moved swiftly when he had to but he had a way of talking like a TV cowboy. Slow talking with a lazy look in his eyes. But his face was chiseled, his blond hair cut short when he removed his helmet to let his scalp breathe. It wasn’t

fashionable in the early 70's to have short hair but he was a mountain boy and didn't much give a hoot about current styles.

"I hope our radios are all working," Stump continued.

"And frequencies set," Willie reminded them all. "We don't want any problems like other crews 've had."

The three friends, Jeremy, Murph and Henry were bunched together, commenting on the sparse traffic on the Interstate and the bridge and the town of Cooley. There seemed to be a lack of direction for this particular fire. Jeremy would not record this in his journal he kept, but years later would note in the margins that a new fire manager had just taken over for that district. The fire caught this new manager as he was transitioning, bringing in a couple of people with him. This was neither here nor there for the three friends in 1974. Jeremy, Murph and Henry were young and knew very little about what went on in management positions above Willie's level. The Rangers and fire managers above Willie's level were mere cardboard cutouts as far as they were concerned.

Two crew members formerly with Willie had been attached to Stump's squad. He now had Roger Leggett and Cliff Bicandi. Jeremy would remember them because they were both religious guys, Leggett was the son of a Baptist Bible Belt preacher and Bicandi was a Catholic. Roger Leggett was not athletic at all, so Jeremy wondered how he got on the crew. They were an Interregional Crew but when Jeremy searched his notes he could not find anything about a physical test. He figured maybe having a year of experience was enough. Then in a flash he remembered doing pushups and situps and someone noting it on a clipboard. Maybe, too, the hikes through the mountains digging trail or clearing away falling trees had been the test. In any case, Leggett looked determined, but not athletic. Cliff Bicandi, on the other hand, was ripped. The guy had muscles bursting out of his work shirt. He was shorter than the average fire fighter, but was stronger than anybody with the exception of Murph and Ricci. So Stump now had in his squad Murph, Henry, Jeremy, Galindo, Ricci, Leggett and Bicandi.

The other squad leader, Roger Mickey, had with him his designated crew.

Willie, as the crew leader kept the largest group. It consisted, at least temporarily of Fernando Prieto (given the sobriquet "Lizard" by Ricci), Jason Otami (the second Japanese American on the crew), Jeffrey Morgan, Duke Rangel, Bobby "Dolly" Dahl, Teddy Marquez and Marv Gilmartin. He also had Roland Garcia, who was a distant cousin to Richard Milagro, aka Richard Miracle, the boxer.

Willie had no obligation to keep his crew in these groupings, and was known to shift people around. Sometimes the people shifted themselves around freely, as if there were no squads. The squad situation was something of Willie's own contrivance. This was what Jeremy supposed at the time.

As this fire spread it developed in ways that made it difficult to fight in the rough terrain. It was carried by winds and embers, spotting miles from the original fire, leaping over ridges and dropping from the sky. The roads only allowed for access to one of the ridges and ended abruptly where the ridge grew vertically. Loose shale made it difficult for even hand crews to negotiate the terrain. Willie heard this at a managers' meeting but shared very little about this with the crew.

"Let's see, it's ten hundred hours, ten 'o clock for you newbees, just in case. You got to start thinking how the forest service talks, so you can read reports, or hear

messages over the radio,” Willie said. “I think they’re gonna get National Guard transport for us on the one road along that ridge. There’s a small fire around the end of the ridge to the east. You can’t see it from here.”

“Where’s the fucking smoke, Willie?” Ricci said.

“I don’t know why we can’t see the smoke,” Willie replied. “Nothing about this fire is like what it’s supposed to be. Okay?”

“What else is new?” Ricci said. “Eventually we’re going to get our asses burned if we follow these guys like we don’t have a brain.”

“Now, Freddy,” Mouse said. “Nobody’s going to get burned. Me and my crew have perfect confidence in Willie. Right Tanaka?”

“Sure,” Diamond Tanaka replied. He was the eternal optimist. His father had been in one of the Relocation Camps where they kept Japanese Americans during the war with Japan. He was always an optimist. His father had taught him that. “Sure, Willie’s the man!”

“Oh, thanks, Diamond,” Willie said. Then he looked at Ricci and at Jeremy, Murph and Henry who were standing behind Ricci. “We’ll try not to get you in hot water.”

From where they stood in an open field next to the Interstate, the next fire was to their west. They were now beginning to see the smoke from that fire coming over the ridge. Ricci was relieved. The others kidded him about it

Willie shared with them that another fire had already been attacked by smokejumpers out of Billings, Montana. That fire was being contained but had not been put out, and things would depend on the wind conditions. There had been an injury. “One of the jumpers broke a leg on the shale. It’s slippery up there,” Willie told them. “Don’t be surprised if that isn’t next on our agenda. Right now, though, we’re going on an army truck to the west. There it is.”

They could see the olive-green canvas of the truck crossing the bridge from Cooley. “You’ve gotta be careful, if the jumper broke his leg, means shale ledges. When we’re climbing, make sure your footing is solid.”

“Yes, mother,” Ricci muttered.

Willie hesitated, looked at him. Avoided the others’ glances. “Just be careful, fellas.”

“You can’t tell Freddy anything,” Roger Mickey said loudly.

“Especially you, Mouse,” Freddy shot back. He had a wide, grinning mouth full of chewing tobacco.

The National Guard truck took an exit and then a gravel road to the crew. It then transported them over the bridge, through Cooley and a mile further down the road.

“This town is protected by the river and by a wide canal a mile further west behind us,” the driver was telling the men in the cab. “Never seen a town with such good luck.”

“They got the flying embers to worry about,” Willie replied. It was Willie and Roger Mickey again in the cab.

“And the wind,” Mickey said. “Keep your eye on the sky.”

“Yeah, I guess we gotta wait here. You got your own transport, though. The Guard transported supplies and cooks from the prison. Gotta take the cooks back, and equipment.”

Mickey turned to Willie. “What transport’s that -- we got?”

“Helicopters. Probably helicopters.”

“I love it,” said Mickey. “I love it how the Forest Service has everything so organized.”

“We don’t have to know everything,” Willie replied. “That’s what management’s for.”

“Don’t let the guys in the back hear that.”

Spot fires carried by a southerly wind were growing south of the highway so the driver took an off ramp that wound around it. Willie, trailed by Mickey met the crew jumping out in the rear and milling around. They carried their Pulaski’s, chainsaws, orange gallon canteens and packs. They marched a hundred yards into the trees. There Willie said, “Start here and go that way.”

Stump, the reliable one, led the crew, marking the line with a scrape on the ground or a twisted or broken branch. The crew followed along like a ravenous caterpillar, the men a rough concert of Pulaski’s breaking ground, scraping rock or thumping into larger limbs. In front chainsaws attacked the bigger trees. They were trying to avoid the smaller, less dangerous trees at that time, choosing a trail where the tree cover suppressed the burgeoning of undergrowth. “We wouldn’t have enough time to clear all the undergrowth. Would have been better to do the line at the tree line,” Willie muttered. “You know, at the edge of the alfalfa.”

“I hear ya,” Stump replied. He rarely disagreed with Willie. Never editorialized. Kept his thoughts to himself.

In the beginning there was very little danger to the crew. But the wind picked up. The wind was still a southerly wind blowing north. But it had picked up and a few embers fell around the crew. Time seemed to flow by. Jeremy didn’t carry a watch. He had left it on a ledge in the gym in Eugene in Oregon. They were always too busy, and he was always busy learning things about fire behavior or tools, or watching how other firefighters dealt with things and with each other, too busy to notice the time. In this job he was rarely bored. Rarely.

But the fire started coming on. The wind picked up and the flames in front of them began to grow, and they worried a little about the trees above them that occasionally crowned out, burst and jumped to other trees, once or twice behind them. This didn’t worry their crew boss much because here not far from the alfalfa field the trees had a good distance between them. It was almost like they were fighting a slow fire, except that the wind was picking up, and it got to where the men could feel the flames planting their thermal heat on their fire-resistant shirt sleeves that faced the fire line. Jeremy had fought fire out of Cle Elum, Washington the year before but had never had the fire coming right up above him on the fire line. Not this close anyway, although there had been other trying moments. Jeremy wondered how the flames were able to jump from the top of one towering pine to another when there was a distance of twenty or more feet between them. Maybe the wind carried little embers or sparks and they nestled there and it was like a quiet, gentle giant softly blowing the embers into flames high up.

They kept working, chopping brush with the blade end of the Pulaski and turning it to dig up the roots, and continued the line on the curve of the terrain. They worked hard because they were young, and though they lived during the 60’s youth revolution with its questioning of society, these particular young men never dug deeply into the

scene, as it was called. In the local crew down the road, Jeremy had spotted a couple of very long-haired, bearded young men in black firefighting pants and red suspenders who seemed to be comfortable in the firefighting world but looked like they may have had one foot in the world of weed, marijuana, and free sex. Jeremy had tried marijuana but only infrequently, and the sex he got had never been all that free. He had had to work for it. He knew his cousin, who was older, had had a lot of sex in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, but it had always been paid for with U.S. currency. Hard earned military pay.

"It's getting hot, boss," Ricci intoned. Jeremy came out of his world to listen in.

Mickey, who was always watching the crew closely, said, "Of course it's getting hot, Freddy! It's a goddamn fire!"

Ricci joked that Mickey had the eyes of a horned owl because he wanted ammunition to take to his uncle, the District Ranger, to push Willie out of his job.

"That's absurd!" Mickey responded when he heard about it

Ricci flipped him the bird. "Ahh, I guess I'm right."

Willie watched the burning branches fall to the ground behind the crew. The dry grass in the area between the fire line and the alfalfa field began to flame. Willie prodded Stump and then went up to Mickey. "Better move the crew out to the field." He radioed in to his boss.

Willie put his radio away, rubbed his jaw, pushed helmet back and conferenced with his squad leaders and the cluster around him. "We're going to go back across the bridge to the West fire. This one here's lost."

"I guess it's lost," Ricci said.

"Of course, it's lost, Freddy," Mickey again jabbed.

"Fuck you, Mouse," Freddy said. "Here comes the Guard to get us."

"They figure the fields and highway's a natural buffer," Willie told them.

"And when we get there maybe we'll be there in time to do some good," Stump said. Walter Gunther patted Stump on the shoulder. "That's what I want, too."

They wanted to spare the alfalfa field and began trekking to the edge of the field along a fence line but the guardsman waved them on from the 5-ton. Willie led them across the alfalfa. A sixteen-wheeler and an ambulance crossed on the highway and other cars passed like slow moving sailboats. Smoke drifted over them and across the field to the north. Jeremy wondered if the embers would come in the wind.

As they approached the truck, the driver nodded. "You boys are doing a lot of travelin' today."

Willie nodded back, glanced at his watch. Jeremy guessed it was about ten 'o clock but he didn't ask. He looked up at the sun through the haze. Smudged now. "You know," Willie said to everybody around, "it was intended to be a controlled burn. A small burn, not this thing that's spread over the hills. Something new they're trying out."

"Not very controlled now," muttered Ricci. He laughed one burst, his chew ensconced in his cheek.

"I don't see how you can laugh at this," Murph said. "But we laughed at the oddest shit in 'Nam."

"This is not that dire yet, Murph old boy," Mouse said with scorn.

"How the fuck would you know?" Henry told him. "Weren't you working in your daddy's store?"

“Goddamn flat-foot, 4F motherfucker,” Ricci said.

“Hey, hold on,” Mouse said. “I coulda gone if I’d wanted.”

“No you can’t, hammerhead. 4F means you can’t.”

“You guys spend more time scrapping over that war. Think about what we’re here to do,” Tom Hare said.

“Fuck you, Harvard Rabbit,” Ricci said.

“Yeah, Rabbit,” Murph said. “What is there to think about? We go where Willie goes.”

Stump joined in. He was more respected than Hare. “He means prepare yourself. We don’t know what these fires can do.”

“Rabbit, you’re the smart one. I guess you mean well,” Murph conceded.

“Yeah, Rabbit’s good people,” Henry said.

Everybody settled down and climbed onto the truck. Jeremy wondered how the two religious guys were coping. Was Roger Leggett holding on to his Bible? He believed in the Holy Spirit, was really devout. Did not join in the easy swearing and name calling. Bicandi was less obvious about his Catholicism. Jeremy’s mother was Catholic, and his father’s father had been Catholic but his father was not, and neither was Jeremy. But he wondered about these things sometimes. He wondered about them sometimes when a big fire hovered over him, or when they had to fear falling, burning trees at night.

They joined the slow traffic across the bridge heading west. They travelled two miles and took a two-lane paved road south and when it wound west again the driver pulled off on a gravel road that took a quick turn south then west and then began a steep climb south again. “All this grinding gears, what does it remind you of, Henry?” Murph said.

“Pleiku, when I was there for a month.”

“Me, just the mud where the vehicles got stuck in the monsoon.”

Jeremy noticed the earnest, prayerful look on Roger Leggett’s face. *What’s he got to worry about? Jeremy wondered. Maybe he’s caught the bug. Maybe a mild case of food poisoning.* He wondered what Leggett’s sallow complexion, more sickly than usual, was all about.

The driver ground the heavy gears of the 5-ton but he was a good driver, used to driving in the mountains. They passed a densely forested area, then a dry, gray-brown area of few trees and dry grass. This is where they would have expected the embers to be dropping and flaring, but it hadn’t happened. A bulldozer on the hill worked its way up one ridge, and then they came to a more rugged area. They could see fires on another distant ridge, and closer to them a bulldozer driving brush and small trees aside with a heavy blade. A skinny bearded man with a blue baseball hat, no helmet, operated it and a helmeted forestry official rode on the side. Higher up another dozer plowed another brushy area on the high ridge. Each dozer had two men.

Willie heard them planning a realignment on the radio. The dozers would be combined to go up the high ridge. This much he already knew. The plows would dig east to west to try to contain the spread of the fire. Five minutes ago he was told by radio to take his crew up to where the last bulldozer worked the ground; there, the IC would meet him, provide a map, and point him to a subsidiary ridge that veered north. Four hundred yards from the Y of the ridge they would dig a line above a draw to go down southeast again. Willie heard the radio traffic that another parallel line was planned north of Cooley. Willie had his doubts, wondered how much experience the

Incident Commander had. Bringing in the dozers and digging parallel lines didn't seem smart. It was like he was trying to anticipate the direction of the fire rather than going to the flareups. Did the Incident Commander have resources to spare like that? Later when they had jumped off the truck, Willie turned to Mouse Mickey, "You think the dozers are placed okay up on that high ridge?"

"They could do better, boss."

"They get the big bucks, Roger," Willie said. He had that twinkle in his eye but Mickey could see the worry. "Anyways we got to dig a line down that draw." He paused. "They're consolidating. Not sure what that means."

"My uncle, if he was the IC, would have better control."

"I never seen this new IC before, or where he came from -- I don't know."

They climbed the steep ridge very quickly, then got to the higher one and climbed it but it was an even more arduous climb. It took them forty minutes total. Willie and Mickey were muttering a little apart from the crew as they began their descent down. It was actually where the ridge took a turn to the north. When it turned it was no longer a natural barrier to a fire if the wind shifted from a southerly to northerly wind at night. They had to build freshly turned dirt lines west to southeast to block the fire.

The crew was ignorant of any doubts their crew leader had about decisions the Incident Commander was making. To the crew Willie was the person who knew about fires. It was Willie they looked to for direction, Willie who would tell them where to go if a fire got dangerous. For them the IC or Incident Commander was a mere phantom.

They quickly got on the line.

Two white helmeted middle-aged men came out of the woods below. Emerged from the dense undergrowth, both sweating and breathing hard, though the bigger of the two men seemed worst for wear. They had radios and one of them, the larger man carried a clipboard with green paper. They seemed lost. But they didn't admit it. Still, Jeremy who was near the front of the line snaking its way through the woods with Pulaski's and shovels tearing up the ground, heard everything, could see it. Even he could tell these men were lost. Willie obliged them. He was a kind soul, and Jeremy did not know if Willie himself had once gotten lost in the woods. Willie obliged them, told them where his crew had disembarked, where the National Guard truck was, or, more precisely, where it had been an hour ago.

One of the men was Todd Williams, the Fire Incident Commander, and the other was his second, Justin Wheeler. Todd was the bigger of the two, the man sweating profusely, his pale complexion pink with effort. Wheeler was sunburned and wiry. Todd was the stronger man, two years older than Wheeler. Wheeler was new to the area, and the IC was also new to the job. Neither of them knew Willie, and neither was familiar with the Slate Creek Crew. However, one of them, Todd, knew one of the Forest Service workers directing the operator of the lead bulldozer. Williams and Wheeler got lost when they took a shortcut looking for the bulldozers. The way the ridges turned south or north or east or west had disoriented them. And it had been difficult to communicate over the hump of the high ridge. There was no line of sight for the radios. That's why they were lost. But they would not admit this to Willie. Jeremy himself, a veritable kid in 1974, did not learn the complete story until reading the accident reports many years later.

"Totally disoriented," Willie muttered. He separated from Roger Mickey, who headed back to his squad. Stump had the front of the line, along with Murph, Henry,

Jeremy, Roger Leggett, Galindo and Bicandi. Mouse, Roger Mickey, and his squad followed. Behind them was Willie's larger squad. Willie left them in the hands of Walter Gunther. "Totally disoriented," he marveled. "That was the IC and his second, and those guys are wet behind the ears. Acting like greenhorns." He was quite unlike himself, and it didn't seem to matter who heard him.

"You send them back to the dozers?" Stump asked.

"Yeah, they'll find them. Dozers got further up than anticipated. They were supposed to wait for the IC here where the ridges branch off. They said the radios ain't pickin' up."

"Could be," Stump said. "No line of sight."

"Something about them weren't right," Willie said.

"Seemed exhausted."

"Seemed scared, Ryan," Willie said, lifting his helmet. He wanted a sip from his canteen but wouldn't do it till the crew break. "What does that tell you when the IC's face is like that?"

"That he doesn't have the resources? That he lost his sense of direction, or that he's afraid of how the wind might turn?"

"Or all of the above," Henry said, coming up on the two men. Jeremy was behind him, and then Murph.

"Oh, shoot!" their crew leader said, realizing he was talking too loud. "You men needn't worry about this crap."

But it was too late. Murph was back in Nam. In his imagination he was back in Nam. He was running again. Running towards his own death, possibly. Jeremy felt a slight stirring in his body, like an empty wind blowing through his body. Like walking on a dead street where the streetlights had been blown out by punks with rocks. A starved stray cat running around a corner. Each man wondered what it all meant, but they looked around and knew they wouldn't spread the contagion. All three friends clammed up. They would not disappoint Willie. "Zip it up," Henry told his friends. "Don't worry, Willie. We know the score."

"Thanks, guys. I shouldn't be doubting the big boys."

Stump looked down, embarrassed for Willie. "They gotta go back to the ridge, then climb to the bulldozers. Why, I don't know."

"IC's got a hard job. Fires are scattered like a bunch of islands," Willie said.

The three friends exchanged looks. The cousins wondered if they were in any real danger now. Murph was with them, and felt the same way. They could only wonder at the smoke columns coming from different directions, but blowing north. They wondered about the lost Incident Commander and his second in command, and what they would tell the bulldozer drivers and tenders. And where were the fire engines? Why weren't they here already? Well, hell, they can't drive up here without a road!

"There's a plane with the retardant," said Jeremy. The big-bellied plane was like a pelican dropping its fish. The powerful red spray dropped vertically from the plane and spread over the advancing flame beyond the ridge.

"About time." A helicopter also went by them with a white bucket on a long cable dripping water.

They didn't know it but the fire to their southwest had picked up speed. The harsh blowing in their ears increased and they could see the trees stir and the smaller branches begin to bend. A glow from the direction of the bulldozers brightened

suddenly and in the darkness of the smoke they could spy the bulldozers and the men. And across the draw and up the ridge sparsely covered with pine, the Incident Commander and his Second had passed one bulldozer on the very ridge the Slate Creek Crew had veered away from. The two were heading for the two higher up dozers.

They could see the yellow behemoths crawl past the broken trees and scattered undergrowth towards the top of the far ridge. The farthest dozer had begun to widen a safety zone at a knob near the top. It turned its blade north then east and was turning west. Behind it on the incline the second dozer climbed, tearing the ground, pushing away more undergrowth. And the crew could see the two managers, tiny in the distance, one in a bright yellow fire shirt, working their way up. But the Slate Creek Crew could not know how bad it would get, how the wind would intensify. It was a guitar string suddenly pulled and let go. Willie, Stump, the three friends, stood mesmerized by a flame suddenly on the lip of that ridge. One tongue of the fire reached the ridge below the IC and his second, and another appeared like a boogeyman in front of them. The two men appeared trapped.

To the Slate Creek Crew the two men were two lonely figures on a hillside. One appeared to take out his fire shelter while the other began running downhill.

Willie stood mesmerized. "What to do?" he murmured.

He meant it to be a thought, not something coming out of his mouth.

Jeremy turned to Henry. "Will they make it, cous'?"

Henry was in a world somewhere between where he actually stood today among the trees around him and yesterday's starkly real world of the Vietnam War. He was back in the States, had been back a number of years, but he carried Vietnam with him, and at moments like this it showed on his face. It was passive, yet sad, and quietly determined. Not to panic, but to speak truth to his younger cousin, he said, "They'll do what they have to do. The question is 'Will *we* make it?'"

Murph grinned at what Henry was saying. Something passed between the two veterans. Jeremy saw it.

"Willie's got twenty, twenty-one, firefighters to worry about here," Henry whispered. "What's *he* going to do? That fire's not behaving the way he thought, I bet."

"No shit, I bet that too," Murph said.

"We can't back up, the fire's coming for us. We could cut across the ridges just like that poor motherfucker running down the ridge." They were watching the Second in command, not the IC running in their direction. "But he's gotta go down and then climb up this incline. Poor bastard."

A helicopter came in high then swooped. It dropped the water behind the running man.

Shit, this only happens to other people, Henry thought. No, it could happen to us! *What the fuck am I thinking?* Try not to think about it. Not at a time like this. "This i'nt Vietnam is it, Murph?"

"Certainly isn't, Henry. We'll survive *this*."

"Shit, of course we will. Right Jer'?"

"Yeah, of course, what the hell do you mean? You guys see something I don't?"

"They got on the radio," Murph said.

"Why do you say that?" Henry asked.

"Here comes the retardant drop," Murph replied. "That's why."

Again, the big-bellied prop plane roared over them, and dropped the life-saving red goo. This time right over the Incident Commander hiding under his fire shelter. “Maybe called it in before he hid under the blanket,” Murph said.

Henry chuckled. Then he caught himself. “Hid is the right word, man. Bet that fucker’s sweating his ass off.”

A loud, hale voice boomed, “You fuckin’ veterans making fun of Forest Service Management again?” It was Freddy Ricci again. He had made his way up the line to Stump’s squad. “Probably that fuckin’ IC’s a veteran himself.”

“A paper pusher maybe,” Murph said.

“Maybe so,” Ricci surmised. “We might be old and fat when we’re his age.”

Ricci was taller and more muscular than the rest of the crew. Robust and full of energy usually. An irrepressible smile and joking when other men maybe worried about the fire getting ready to sweep the ridge towards them. The fire that was chasing the Second who had gotten to the bottom and was starting up the draw spotting on his heels. But the retardant drop had given him a break. He climbed now between the flareups leaping ahead of him.

“It’s time for us to go, boys,” Willie announced. “I’ll stay here with Freddy to help the Second.” He turned to Stump and then to Roger Mickey. He reflected on it. “Ryan, you take the crew, cut across to the road. It’s that way.” He pointed, and Ryan headed north hoping to make it to the gravel road. If they made it, they would take it down to the paved road. Maybe the National Guard truck would be there, or maybe fire engines they could ride out.

The crew wasn’t scared yet. Jeremy, who constantly picked up on the mood of the crew, sensed this. He was among the youngest, and realized years later, probably the most impressionable. But as he watched Murph and his cousin he sensed a sadness wrapping around both. It wasn’t like they were *afraid*, he would remember. More like they were sad, and maybe not for themselves. Maybe for the memories of people in their past. In retirement four or five decades into the future Jeremy would sit in a house by the lake in South Georgia, far from his native Pacific Northwest, sit at a desk facing away from the placid lake behind him, sit at that desk because it faced a long green stretch of grass with black pine where hardly ever a car or a stray dog passed – and he would occasionally remember his past, and he would dig back to those memories. He would remember the pall of sadness around those two. It actually drew him tighter to Murph and to his cousin, Henry.

They weren’t yet running. They moved fast, though. Ran now, not feverishly, but disciplined, staying in line. Stump was in front. They were still running due north but when the ridge turned like a horseshoe to the southwest, they would descend into a draw and climb up the far side of another small ridge. They were heading due north. No one dropped their tools, nor the chainsaws, nor their packs. They had time, they felt. But they had all seen the red glare behind the ridge with the bulldozers, had seen the running men, had seen the IC roll into his aluminum-backed fire shelter, had seen the Second in Command struggling up the draw towards them and this was in their minds as they all fought to maintain their place in line. Stump had a feeling the road they sought would cross their path somewhere to the north. The fire raged, and when he glanced behind him a giant column of smoke now blotted out the sun. He quickened his pace, wished he had stayed with Willie and Ricci, thought he could be of help. He had a small animal in his chest now, and that animal wanted to run faster; he wondered if they

were all keeping up; he turned to Murph who was directly behind him and to Galindo. “You guys keep going, I’m checking the crew.” Murph and Galindo went past him, both knowing it was his job, his responsibility to check for stragglers, even though they both sensed it was coming close to *every man for himself* time.

The difficulty in their hearts, how the crew felt about their predicament, was that they cared for each other. Not like a combat unit, they hadn’t been together that long, had not endured what combat soldiers, marines, endure, but Murph knew they were all wondering about Willie and the staggering Second coming up the steep, rocky draw, and whether Ricci would stay with Willie or say “Fuck this!” and run and desert him. No, it wasn’t the crew that was thinking this, but only Murph the Vietnam veteran, and maybe Henry. Jeremy was simply desperate to get to safety and was hoping Murph’s native ability, his Vietnam experience would serve the crew well here. *And what is a straight line? Is it a straight line in a northern direction? Are we doing it right?* Jeremy knew how the ridges and draws in the mountains tended to turn sometimes, how you could end up disoriented, end up going west or east when you meant north. Also knew the gravel road they were hoping to find might itself turn north again, or straight south and they would pass it running parallel with it but in an opposite direction. These fears swept by him.

Stump went back and got to the original spot on the ridge where the crew had watched the fleeing, panicked Second running towards them. Spot fires had grown on the ridge, and waved like long underwater grass on a seashore. They were still growing. Willie and Ricci were pulling up the Second, Justin Wheeler, to the top. He was exhausted, could not continue. Ricci picked him up like a sack of potatoes and began his run along the smaller ridge, chasing the crew that was now far ahead of them. Stump ran along with Willie. “Where’s a road . . . up there?”

Willie was intent on eating up ground. “Up there, yeah, I hope there is. Have not seen it on the map. These maps are out of date.”

“Can you call?” Stump asked him.

“Any one of us can call, but the radio traffic – it’s overwhelmed. Too many agencies. It’s becoming a big fire. Frequencies overwhelmed. Too much radio traffic.”

“Damn, Willie, we’re in a fix!”

Willie paused. He too was tired. Ricci, the natural athlete raced ahead carrying the exhausted, older Forest Service officer. Willie was breathing hard. Stump stopped too, he would not desert Willie, who was even older than the forest employee.

“This blaze is still moving northeast,” Willie told him, between gasps. Willie was bent over, hands on his knees. “We probably should turn northwest to get away from the advance.”

“That might be turning away from the road, though,” Stump said.

Willie straightened up. The black and gray smoke was churning behind them. The blaze was now leaping along the tops of trees. “Something’s got to slow down this fire,” he said. Stump waited for him. At the same time he thought of Murph and the crew out front trying to move due north. “Stump,” Willie said. “Get out there in front of Ricci. Don’t stop, get to the crew and turn them to the left, take them to the west. Maybe northwest.” He was actually speaking in a low voice. Pleading. “Get going.”

Ryan Stump was the best runner on the crew and did not wear the protective but monstrously heavy firefighter’s boots. He wore regular mid-calf lace up work boots. He

didn't have to be told twice. Like the wind he ran, passed Ricci who now stopped to catch his breath. The Second had recovered.



THE FIRE IN SPLIT SECONDS

Henry wasn't sure he had actually survived the fire. Did he really come out of the fire, or was it that he was living those last few seconds as if each second was exploded outward like a bubble, encompassing everything that he would have done had he lived a full life, and not been charred beyond recognition on that ridge. Was it an illusion that he lived a full life? Those stories about your life as a ribbon unspooled in that last moment, are they true?

When he looked back on that summer of fire, he wondered if the fires had been as he imagined them. The fires grew in size, frequency and intensity in the decades after the new century, greater fires than when he was a young man, or so he imagined, or was he really actually alive in that future? Hah! He could laugh at the possibility. How could he be dead if he knew about the forest fires that would eat up huge swaths of California in the next century? No way, could this be possible.

But, there it was. There were moments, too, when his imagination got the better of him, when he wasn't sure it wasn't all imagination.

It had all happened in a few seconds. Split seconds. You are there, and you are gone.

But in that moment you are able to see the past and the future. But Henry Romero was a future looking guy.

If he died, why did he die suddenly, and not shrivel his soul in agony as the fire ate through his aluminum shelter, peeling it away from the backing. Why didn't he die screaming as others had on other fires? It didn't make sense. He was in a predicament. But he stepped through the wall of flame. Stepped through a hall of mirrors. Each mirror represented an outcome. Which one did Henry Altimiro Romero take?

The lake behind him in South Georgia in the year 2009 was a mirror. It was peaceful, looked like a mirror but now the wind lifted ripples. A young blond girl had a dead engine on her jet ski. Henry went out to his porch in the back to see if she needed help. He could still swim to help her, if she needed it. He had access to the neighbor's red canoe. But she was okay, just stalled. Henry hollered, she hollered back with her father's phone number. He called, and the old man came by in a motor boat and he got the engine started again, and the girl waved at Henry and followed her father's boat for a ways and then shot ahead. They disappeared like ghosts, leaving a wake to rock the lily pads by the dock.

He, Henry, had not done the water sports thing. Not when he was young, not ever. He liked the water, but his whole life had been oriented toward the land, first as a field worker in Southern Idaho – one of his father's "mules" and then as a U.S. Forest Firefighter. Always the land, always working in dirt, always dealing with sweat, sun and hard work.

This worshipping of the sun, particularly in a lake or river, had always seemed a tributary he didn't want to travel. He always preferred the land. He was an inland person, though he did like to be "near" the water. Near was close enough.

Henry did worship the sun, not like a god as some ancient man might have, more as a recognition of its power, its *feel good* sense, too. Had it killed him in the end? The fires the sun supported, fires that were its vengeful children. You were in the bowels of the sun in a fire. If you were caught in the worst of it, the temperatures could be 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, puny for the sun, but monstrous for human flesh, for eyes burned

and popped in their sockets. Monstrous for hands singed then curled in death, finally stretched out.

I'm here, I'm here, he thought.

He would never stop doubting. Doubting that he had really died back then. Could never stop thinking of those others who didn't survive. Who got lost in the mirrors.

Well, back then it looked like it would be Jeremy who would live forever. Jeremy ate very little smoke during that fire season. He fought fires, what, maybe two years? Henry, on the other hand, had gone back, gone back maybe as a ghost of himself, of what he had been. Had apologized to his crew leader for some harsh words he had hurled at Willie. Accused him of the crew's entrapment at the one really bad fire. Well, Henry had gotten out, escaped the fire, as had most of the crew. Had escaped *that* fire. At least he thought so, imagined himself standing on the other side of the river. On the safe side, with the flame and smoke on the other side. There was a rope bridge across the river. Constructed there by other ghosts; it was thought to have been built by ghosts because nobody lived in the area and it wasn't a hiking trail. Forest service doctrine was for solid wooden or metal bridges, never rope bridges, unless it was to cross a stream – never on a wide river with a powerful current.

The theory of ghosts was just a fantasy of his.

Nobody took it seriously, though it was seriously discussed.

Discussed around the circle, a dry circle because they never built a campfire.

Instead the firefighters would sit or recline in a ragged circle near a tree or rock, and they would talk very slowly. It was mostly non-talk they would engage in. Maybe they were tired. Or maybe they felt out of place discussing things. You had to watch yourself. When they were sober, when they were exhausted, some of them realized they hardly knew anything about each other. Young men don't ask a lot of questions. That's because they are learning how to negotiate it all – life.

"You seriously believe that?" Rabbit said.

"Hey, Harvard, what did I say?" Henry had responded.

"Well, you're thinking mythically now. It's gotta be the woods. These fuckin' woods are enchanted," Rabbit said.

"That's it," Ricci said. "That's what it is. You cats have it all figured out." Ricci had frequented a jazz club in the Air Force so he picked up the vernacular of those years. *Cats*, was something he used, a dated term even then. He introduced *uncool* to the crew. No one ever picked it up, though. "It's *uncool* to do that." He would never say, "It's *not cool* to do that."

And Ricci sauntered like Blacks from the big cities. He joked about Blacks among the mostly white crew, but he admired all things *cool*. He admired the walk, the street patois.

"I think it's ghosts built the bridge," Henry said. This was before the incident where he fervently believed his life had bifurcated. Before one of him died at the Montreal Creek Fire and the other one went on to live past 2009. This is the year when he was looking back, remembering back vividly about *that* fire, and other fires that fire summer.

"If my buddy wants to believe it, fuck you guys if you don't." This was Murph. He and Henry and Jeremy had grown tighter through the summer. Murph and Henry

had their brooding about Vietnam that kept them watching each other's backs. It was friendly, non-serious looking, but it was there. They forgave each other when one of them fucked up. Jeremy was there, too, hanging on to their words, even while he knew that in things to do with women, sexual things too, *he* was plodding way ahead of them. Two or three years, maybe. They had known whores in the various places where they had been during the war. Of course, they didn't see them as whores in the normal sense. The girls, many of the Vietnamese, and even Koreans, had been driven to the whorehouses by hunger, theirs and their families'. That was a hard thing that Jeremy did not know, what they had over him. But some of them were whores.



Jimmy Avila, Firefighter, photo source unknown

BACK TO THE FIRE, THE PRESENT

At some point it was senseless to try to imagine where the road lay. That mythical gravel road. Or so it seemed to the crew. The crew had lost its structure, maybe its cohesion. No longer in a disciplined line of march, the faster runners surged ahead, and the men with heavier bulks, with the exception of Murph and Rabbit, began to lag. Flames leaped ahead of them now, a fearful thing. When did it begin to happen? And was the fear like that wind? It seemed to set them flying like the wind itself. It was senseless to believe a man could outrun a fire like this. But they made that calculation, one based totally on desperation. Murph was no longer at the front. Galindo and Jeffrey Morgan had surged to the front. Behind them were other fleet runners, young Duke Rangel and Diamond Tanaka. Murph was still there among them, and they did glance back at him, and he motioned them to run. Just a nod of the head. They had dropped the chainsaws and Pulaski's. Murph kept his Pulaski. He could never imagine dropping his M-16 in combat. He kept the Pulaski. So did Roger Mickey and Walter Gunther. They were the older men. Henry kept his, but thought of himself as somewhat of a fool for doing so. The Pulaski's were holding them back. They had dropped the heavier orange draped canteens but kept their packs. The packs contained the fire shelters.

And so they fled northwest, away from the direction of the flames. It was a desperate move. What had Willie told them, even Murph couldn't remember. Yes, head north, get to the gravel road. *But fuck it! he thought. That way leads to where the fire goes.* The young guys running ahead of him had already begun to turn west. Was it that the declining ridge turned west, or were they abandoning the plan?

They must have been at the edge of the fire.

No one talked much about their close call. Strangely quiet, they were exhausted when herded onto a yellow school bus later that day, and driven to a fire camp down in the valley beside the highway. No one could remember much except the color of fear somehow. It was yellow and red. Henry wondered if being yellow, a coward, was related to that. Had someone long ago *seen* fear, its apparition? The crew pivoted west and fire had swept past them going northeast but slowed at the gravel road and then stopped by a secondary line dug by contract bulldozers from nearby Cooley. The crew was exhausted, a little embarrassed. Ricci, who had saved the fire official, was deathly quiet. Not that he had been scared, he had been too busy carrying the exhausted, helpless man. But he had felt, for the first time in his young life, the enormous responsibility of saving a life. There was no humor or braggadocio in it; maybe later over beer. But sitting in that bus, and later walking around on the flat field where the grass and alfalfa was trampled by trucks and bulldozers and hundreds of firefighters, he was pensive. He had been a crewman on a B-52 Bomber during the war but had never been that close to death; now seeing the fear and hopelessness on the fleeing fire official, and then carrying the man, sometimes on his shoulder, sometimes walking him when he himself was drained of strength, no, he didn't talk much. It had been too much of a close call. The others in front had seen the flames travel ahead of them through the tops of the pine, but Ricci and Willie farther back felt trapped, and were beginning to feel a constriction around their chests. It was fear gripping them like a python.

Henry, Jeremy's cousin, also lived in the same lake house in South Georgia. But he lived there as a ghost, believing that he was the one true inhabitant of that house where the water lapped right up to the door's protruding flood frame and believed

strongly and liked it very much that his younger cousin, Jeremy, visited him. Having lost his memory of the intervening years between his firefighting days and the more recent months he felt contributed to his sense of confusion sometimes as to whether he made it out of the Montreal Creek Fire. Having Jeremy around was what enriched his narrative, a series of stories and events he recounted to himself during long and short days depending on the weather. He would talk to Jeremy about it when he was inside the house, but Jeremy had clammed up since he knew him as a young man. Henry couldn't remember much of the in-between years; it seemed like his memory was erased somehow after he had reached a certain age, probably not long after the fire season of 1974.

Jeremy would come into the driveway, and Henry would greet him, but Jeremy would seem preoccupied. "Okay, so you don't want to talk," Henry would say.

Jeremy would look around, and he would walk in, place some groceries on the counter and go in to brush his teeth. It was a strange habit Jeremy had. But it was like clockwork.

At times it would seem that Jeremy was responding, but it would be Jeremy speaking into a cell phone. Funny, Henry could never remember owning a cell phone. Tiny things.

Henry didn't mind that his cousin had become quiet.

There were times when Jeremy was gone for months.

Henry had the house to himself. He imagined conversations with his younger cousin.

"You know, the things that mattered back then that become silly now in the light of day," Henry would say. "Recognizing that we even talk in a different way than we did back then."

Jeremy, now a grizzled old guy, his hair completely grey, would grunt. "Things happen," he responded.

"That's exactly what I imagined you would say," Henry said. "Exactly as I would imagine it."

"We're not the same anymore, Henry. We don't have to fight the bear anymore."

"You mean the flames?"

"Not that we were in hell," Jeremy would laugh. "Just a tiny corner of hell, you *capiche*, bro?"

"Don't call me bro, I'm your cousin."

"Yeah, the cousin that beat the shit out of Richard Miracle for me. I'm grateful to you for that. You were a brave guy to take on the boxer. A pro boxer at that."

"Jeremy, tell me about your life. I can't seem to remember much of those years. Like what did you do after that summer in 1974? What happened? I live like in a cloud. Can't remember much."

Henry imagined that Jeremy would say this or say that. For that he would peruse Jeremy's books. Yes, Jeremy had written several books. Only one had been really successful, but Henry had seen the movie, too. It was released for television, and Henry believed it was based on what Jeremy had lived through. Jeremy had included him in the book, but only partially.

Henry was free to improvise. To improvise based on Jeremy's book. To improvise based on the things he heard people say. There had been a long period of sleep. Or was it a period of forgetfulness? Henry had come back to himself, had been

willed into a sleeplessness by the characters in Jeremy's head, Jeremy the writer. But Henry was only half-formed.

He was a free agent. He could play himself in this play he was constructing.

Henry, the Firefighter. And before that, Henry the Army Ranger. And before that? Well, that was a problem. There had been no heroics prior to that. At least nothing he could cast in a heroic light. Yet, it was what sometimes grabbed him. Those memories seemed to have a tighter grip on his heart. Memories of being little, and of mother and father.

How far back to dig? There were those who said when you died you would see your relatives, dead friends, too. When he died, would he see his mother and his father? Then – abruptly -- he realized, in a moment of clarity, that he had, in fact, *died*. What the fuck! How he reached that moment of absolute clarity, he had no idea. He had no idea how it came about. He hadn't asked for the veil to be lifted, he enjoyed the illusion of being alive.

He had lived with it long enough. *Lived* with it?

"How do you live with it, Jeremy?" he asked his cousin, wanting to believe that Jeremy was in this place, this state of being – or non-being, with him.

Jeremy, alive in the flesh, replied, "You live with it until it's time."

"What the *fuck*!" Henry replied. "You can hear me, finally! I've been pretending all these years!"

"No, you haven't," Jeremy added. Jeremy couldn't see him yet. He could only feel Henry's presence, and he could hear his thoughts. It was a gift he had recently acquired, as freely given to him, as freely as Henry's new found knowledge that physically he was no longer among the living.

"Where was I all those years, years I should have been awake?" Henry intoned, more to himself than to Jeremy.

"That – I don't know, cousin."

"How the hell can you hear me?"

"Beats me. I'm an old man now. Or so they tell me. Girl at McDonald's calls me *sweetie*."

"What the hell, I guess we've got a lot of shit to go over, Jer."

"Maybe. You don't remember where you've been? Like Purgatory or something?" Jeremy had been a lukewarm Catholic, mostly by name because he had not gone to a Catholic school, nor been Confirmed. In fact, he hardly knew what it meant, but he had heard a lot of scuttlebutt and so could guess at what it all meant. He thought Purgatory was where you went before going to Heaven or Hell.

Henry, staring at his young hands and then looking at Jeremy's wrinkled, weathered hands, replied slowly. "Have no idea where I've been."

Jeremy was beginning to slowly see Henry. He was still young. Henry was remarkably young. At the same time that Jeremy felt his heart leap with a certain joy at seeing his cousin, a certain dread nearly overcame him; it was based on his fear of losing control, not understanding what was happening to him. Henry was here from some other place, talking to him plain as day, but in appearance had not aged a day since he died in the fire. Yes, he himself was gray-headed now and wrinkled but it came with advantages. As he had aged over the decades, Jeremy had learned patience, in a way he didn't know it when Henry was still alive in the mountains of Montana. *The others did*

survive. Should he tell Henry that? No, best to hold back about that day, that night. Best to wait. Wait. Wait. Let Henry talk. Let him talk.

"I can walk through walls now, Jer."

Jeremy behaved now in a way that was almost unrecognizable to his cousin. He was no longer the eager younger guy who listened whenever he could on Murph and Henry. Maybe now he would have been bored by the conversations of the war veterans, themselves young men. Young men made old by the war, by what they had endured, what they had seen, yet still young in navigating a civilian world that would greatly disappoint them, set them back on their heels at times. Young men they still were in that way, but to Jeremy they had been stalwart guys with *experience* flowing out of their mouths, words that meant gold to him.

Now Jeremy was a man of sixty. His roundish cheeks had flattened out with the years and then hollowed out and become chiseled. His dark complexion had toughened, his face had become lined with the years he spent out West in the slant sun. "What are you thinking, Primo?" Henry asked.

Jeremy had gone to the fridge and grabbed two beers. "You can't drink them, but we can set them down together like the old days."

"Huh," Henry said. "You're older than me now."

"You'll catch up."

"Did I make it out of the fire? Or not?"

Jeremy took a swig. Let the beer quench his throat. They were at the counter, the island, by the picture window out to the lake. "Can we not talk about it yet?"

"Funny you're quiet and pondering things now. I was the angry one. You were quiet and you were my little cousin, and you never got angry."

"I got angry at the way they treated you," Jeremy replied. He stared evenly at Henry, not knowing how he would take it, whether things mattered to him. "You maybe didn't know it. But I was always angry at the way they treated you."

Henry seemed to shrink into himself, then fill out again. "I'd forgotten it. Or put it in the back somewhere. I'll bet that's why I'm here in this house, pondering all this shit. Yeah, my anger."

"Anger, yeah," Jeremy said. He glanced up, as to heaven. "But whoever runs this show should know you controlled it pretty well."

"Well, fuck, yes I did, didn't I?"

Back at the Ranger Station in the barracks it was the same thing. They were young guys isolated in the mountains. In the evening they would go into town. How did they know where to go? Whose car did they take. Jeremy couldn't remember any of this years later in that house in South Georgia. He did remember they were not greeted kindly at the local bars. Was it because the previous visitors, the smokejumpers from Lewiston, had started several fights in the little town? Was it because the local inhabitants, some gargantuan, felt threatened? Big men shaven-headed brawny with tree-trunk arms (always, right?) and pants hiked up with red suspenders (okay, they were loggers). They would try to start fights by rolling one of the pool balls to mess up your game. It never started, not with this crew. Maybe the veterans had too much to deal with in their lives; this batch did not include any with PTSD, to the degree that led some veterans to bring a gun to town and shoot up the place.

Jeremy had Lisa on his mind. Had not seen her in quite a while. She was mostly out of mind. Out of sight and out of mind. Maybe it was true as she suspected, that he didn't love her enough.

She came up to see him. It was in Riggins, that little town, or was it in another even more remote town? In a remote bar?

The giant with the small, narrow eyes didn't like Jeremy. "What ja lookin' at?" he said to Jeremy.

Jeremy squared his shoulders in mild interest. "The wall, I'm looking at the wall. And my beer."

"Yeah?" Slowly, the behemoth got up, finished his beer and walked over. He didn't look like anybody Jeremy could stop, even with one of the bar stools.

The logger took two steps toward Jeremy and Lisa's table, but he was wobbly. Wobbly but clearly dangerous, powerful. Looked like a mean bull out to do mischief. The eyes narrowed even more. The lip curled, but Jeremy wasn't sure he was grinning. Was it a friendly gesture?

"Mama, what do you think?" Jeremy said to Lisa.

Lisa half choked in her laugh. "You've never called me 'mama!'"

"That's cause he's . . . scared . . . shitless," the drunk said slowly.

"We better leave," Jeremy said.

"Yeah, you better leave," the swaying drunk said, now soaring in his pride. "Just go, go back to the goddamn barracks where they keep you little piss ant fire boys."

"Fuck you," Jeremy said quietly. "No idea why I said that," he whispered to Lisa.

"He didn't mean it," Lisa said to the logger. She put her hand on the massive chest. "Look, just leave us alone, okay?"

Logger's eyes got even smaller. Lips tightened. "You better get him out of here." It came out short and cold.

And as Jeremy and Lisa stepped out of the little bar the moon seemed full and bright. A gentle breeze blew through the dark and Jeremy could smell the pine. It so happened Murph and Henry and Walter Gunther and Diamond Tanaka were just arriving in an old Dodge. "Don't go in there," Jeremy told them.

"Why not? A big bad bear in there?" It was Henry talking. He was slightly buzzed.

"Yeah, and he's a real one. Big as a car."

"Can he take the four of us?" Murph said, with a glint.

Lisa jiggled Jeremy's arm. "Let's go."

"Ooh!" Murph said. "He *must* be big."

Jeremy shook his head. "If you guys go in there, I gotta go with you."

"NOOO! You are NOT going in there!" Lisa said.

"He's not alone. A bunch of hard-assed loggers with him," Jeremy said.

But the firefighters didn't have to go in. Time had run out on them. While they pondered the question, somebody looked out the window, and then like gunslingers gathering for a shootout, they came out. One by one they came out, and their demeanor was hard and they clearly meant to send a message. They were the roughest, toughest young men in these mountains.

It was clear what they intended. Several men removed their jackets. The biggest of them moved towards the Slate Creek men, his muscled bulk contained in a graying t-shirt. Diamond Tanaka leaped at him with a flying kick but the giant swatted him aside.

He smirked. Tanaka landed on his feet and waited. “Who’s next?” the logger challenged.

“Come on, somebody bigger. This guy’s a fly!”

Murph and Henry looked at each other. “You wanna do it?” Henry said.

Murph was two inches shorter than the logger, and did not have the bulging muscles. His body was built out of boulders but did not ripple or bulge. They were just solid, and smooth. When he hit the logger his hand broke. They all heard the crack.

Murph pivoted and kicked hard at the man’s groin, but missed.

Next, he grabbed the logger’s wrist but was thrown to the ground. He began to stomp Murph but Henry came up and kicked him hard on the side of the knee. All hell broke loose, everybody joining in. It was knees and fists and hard worker’s boots cracking bones and flesh.

The barkeep came out holding his apron. “Sheriff’s on his way. Better break it up. You Slate Creek boys best get the hell back to your barracks!”

“Sheriff don’t like you fuckers. I mean it, get the fuck out of here.”

An older man came out with a rifle and fired it into the air. The blast and the red and blue flash stunned them.



BACK TO THE FIRE IN 1974

Next day the fire climbs the foothills to the East. They are transported in front of it to build a line near a gravel road. Engines and bulldozers there, too. On the way they pass an abandoned burned bulldozer. A mystery. The day is bright and early, and yellow shirts are soot stained, and the faces have not seen water. They are young and do not feel the fatigue like they will when they are older. Rather, the adrenalin gets them up. They won't remember whether they ate breakfast, but yes there is a tent already set up and packaged army meals are being handed out. Last night they slept in a warehouse near a national guard armory. There is never the sense of urgency like the veterans had felt on occasion in Vietnam. They shared this thought with Jeremy. Yet, this time Willie, who overheard them, was tight-lipped and with a worried look guided them to the deuce and a half.

The Incident Commander walks up to Willie. The IC, an energetic man built like a penguin, is waving his arms. He talks to Willie and points to the transport vehicle. Meanwhile the men are quiet and walking somberly to the vehicle, the initial burst of adrenalin gone now. They act like men now, not like youngsters from college, from high school. They are still that-- you cannot artificially add years. But they are men now about the work, their attitudes adjusted to the situation, knowing no one will want to hear their horseplay when every ounce of strength has to go toward the fires. They keep their eye on the IC and Willy, but as they are trained to do, they wait.

It is NOT 1974 now, and Jeremy realizes looking back to that summer that his memories have been rejiggered.

What year is it?

In his memory it is 1974 but he has added romance to the story.

He sees emotion now where there was very little emotion.

He sees danger that maybe was around the bend. Two years later? Ten years later in 1984? Twenty in 1994. Was he bringing that year up to 2009? Beyond that?

Jeremy is stretching that summer forward decades.

His memory is his own. He's in that house outside of Douglas, Georgia. He lives in Douglas where Henry comes to visit. He's about to discuss this stretch of time with Henry. Henry's a ghost, ghosts should know about these things. Of course, Jeremy's an older man now (the ghost is still a young man), older than when he was living through all of the accumulated fires – and he knows ghosts don't know everything. They are fallible, maybe not like the living, the walkers upon the earth, but fallible.

He's watched Henry flinch at the fanning breeze when a tree collapsed outside. Why would a ghost flinch?

But back in 1974 there is hardly a breeze. The wind has stalled. That's good for slowing down a fire, but the heat bears down on the fields where the highway winds, and bears down on the dry grass bunched beneath the quaking aspen along the bottom and the pine that grows on the sides of the foothills and the mountains. The heat brings with it a renewed growth of the fire underfoot. The crew knows little about a destination except it's farther to the east. It makes no difference, in the morning they were refreshed, but later their arduous days and lack of sleep make them tired. Though he's the crew boss, Willie is also too tired for chitchat. He doesn't give a buffalo's ass either.

They are passing abandoned vehicles. Scattered fire packs and even a chainsaw or two. What happened here? The driver's on the radio, a worry registered on a weary,

youngish voice. “Should we turn around, Corporal?” Willie says, barely audible. Their eyes are to the front where the road winds to the right and upward. “I don’t know,” the driver says. *He’s spooked, thinks Willie.*

“They said the fire’s passed,” the driver says.

“Who the hell is in charge on this one?” Willie says.

“The man you talked to back there, the short, heavy-set guy, what’s his name? Guillefoyle?”

“Something like that,” Willie responds.

“The fire’s passed through.”

“Impossible,” Willie says. “The wind wan’t going that fast!”

“How do you know? You weren’t here to see it,” the driver says.

In the back the crew sniffs the smoke. You never forget the smoke. A gloominess pervades the air. One of the men, Rabbit, pulls apart the tarpaulin to look. “What do you see, Rabbit?” Ricci calls from the front.

“Burned to shit!” says Rabbit.

“What the hell are we getting into?” Murph says. He pokes Henry. Henry has been dozing but wakes up. “What?” He looks at Murph and turns to Jeremy. “I was dreaming of Vietnam. But the sound of the choppers – in the dream you couldn’t hear ‘em. I could see ‘em coming in after a B-52 strike to check – you know, to check out the damage, but I couldn’t hear a sound. The smell here reminds me of all that but no cordite, no smell of cordite.”

“Yeah,” responds Murph, but very, very slowly. “I try not to dream like that, bro’.”

“You woke up fast, cous’,” says Jeremy.

“It was the smell, it was the smell.”

“You guys are fucked up,” says Mouse. He’s riding in the back and the other squad leader, Stump, is riding in the cab. “Quit dreaming that bullshit, it’ll be bad luck for the crew.”

“You really are clueless, Mouse,” says Galindo.

“What? You weren’t there either, Hector,” Mouse replies. “You’re not a veteran.”

“Have some respect,” Galindo says. “You’re just an asshole who sat out the war.”

“Ok, we’re both assholes,” Mouse says, realizing his error.

“I like the way Mouse fixes his fuckups,” Murph says, smiling sideways, eyes narrowed. “You’re good, Roger Mickey, you’re really good.”

“Just trying to do my job, Big Murph. Gotta keep the crew jazzed up!”

“You’re full of shit,” says Galindo.

“You have no respect,” responds Mouse, but he has given up arguing with Galindo. He knows Galindo is a loose cannon who doesn’t give a shit about pecking order.

In any fire, the moments when the crew can talk are few. Many crews are made up of men who talk very little, farm boys used to heavy, oftentimes dirty work. Not afraid to get their hands dirty, they thrive on the smoke, sweat and grime. Other crews have talkative fellows like Freddy Ricci or Roger Mickey, or more mature people like twenty nine-year Phd. candidate Walter Gunther or Marine veteran Harold Murphy, Big Murph.

Passing more abandoned vehicles. Burnt packs are strewn about. The driver is sitting with the engine idling, loose-jawed, peering down at the detritus. Willie has slowly opened the door and jumped down to the burned soil. A partially melted white helmet is strewn beside a melted fire shelter blanket. The protective liner is ruined, the aluminum curled away from the backing. Pulaski's are there, only the blade and hoe parts, as the wooden handles were consumed by the fire that swept through this area. "We've never seen this," Willie intones. He's in a daze and Stump is equally stunned.

Two men have jumped out from the back. It's Mouse and Murph. "Whatja say, Boss? We goin' on?"

Willie stands stock still. He's looking up the road. Other vehicles have been here. "When did this happen? There hasn't been time."

"Oh, it happened," says the driver. The men have walked around to the driver's side.

"We'll go on in a bit," Willie tells him. "I just have to get my bearings."

"You're in charge now," says the driver. "This is above my pay grade, what's happenin' here."

"There had to be victims here," says Stump.

"What about the IC? He say anything?" Mouse says. He is the least disturbed by what they have found. "Call the IC."

Willie tries, but cannot reach anybody. "We're in a dead zone."

Stump walks on ahead of the truck. "More packs. Pair of glasses. Looks like they dragged a litter. I see First Aid bandages. You think somebody survived? Yeah, maybe . . . but when did the EMT's come out?"

Willie, as the leader, felt the pull to turn around. Something didn't feel right. He began to say that, but Mouse objected. "No, we gotta go on, Boss. That was the guidance we got."

Murph finally spoke up. "We had something like this in 'Nam. Where shit happens that don't make a bit of sense." Murph was not given to bragging; the crew knew this, and so were silent. "Where we came to an ambush site," he continued, "just around the bend, and we did *not* hear it. *Not a sound!* Found blood trails, yeah! bandages, spent cartridges. Could still smell it."

Willie was listening; and came suddenly out of his reverie. "Nobody around, there was nobody there, Harold?"

"Nobody, no VC (Viet Cong), no Marines, nobody. Not a water buffalo around."

"Weird shit, weird days," said Stump.

"Ahh, we're wasting time." It was Mouse. Roger Mickey. "Let's go. We got to move up the road."

It occurred to Murph that Roger saw himself as Willie's protector. Maybe his gadfly.

Willie had this vision. He was frozen in place. As clear as day he saw them arrive, the rescue crews. They were on foot. The first ones did not come in a vehicle. Why not? There was a road, but they were afraid of something. What were they afraid of? Too much to figure out. But Willie saw them, he stood frozen in time, it seemed like hours, but maybe it was a few seconds. Roger Mickey would have been pulling him by the arm had he stood there longer than a few seconds. He stood there smelling the burnt flesh, the melted plastic. The burnt forest entered his nostrils, an indescribable smell but unforgettable. Like Murph's description of the sound of the rotors of

helicopters in Vietnam, the rescue ships, the smell of the forest would forever be with Willie should he ever leave the forest. He stood there, frozen in the moment, saw the vision clear as day. Saw them come hurrying up the gravel road littered with blackened debris, the ashes still bursting in flame. Watched them pause over one body, then hurry to another body curled up against the bank by the road, the grass burnt off. Watched them work. Why was the photographer with them? He would have come later with the police when the police came to do a crime scene. How did Willie know this? He just knew it. You absorbed these things just being around fires, around forestry officials, by having a law enforcement brother-in-law. By having seen smaller disasters. But why was the photographer here photographing the dead, the curled blackened bodies? The lips bared back over gnawing teeth, bared like a beaver working a young tree. Why? Why? The photographer working diligently going from body to body and stopping to photograph an abandoned army pack and a white helmet tossed at the last minute into the ash (when it hadn't yet turned to ash, maybe a flaming landscape, though). Willie, in his vision watching the other men with their litters. They were picking them up, putting the bodies on litters. This wasn't supposed to happen till later – then it occurred to Willie, yes, it occurred to Willie standing there for those few seconds when he could hear neither wind, nor the crackling of tree limbs collapsing after having been burned, it occurred to him in a flash he was seeing the events preceding their arrival, perhaps by hours, perhaps by days, perhaps, no it couldn't be: Maybe they were yet to happen, maybe it was a window to what could happen in the future. Willie sighed. Sighed heavily. Said, "My God!" He was seeing it all at once, the discovery of the dead crew by the early responders, guys who came through the late flame and smoky mists to find the dead, and the EMT's and police who would come to gather information and take pictures and gather biological samples and other information. The forest service would also begin to interview people, the fire managers, the survivors (if there were any) and the lookout if there had been one.

Now he heard a keening in his ears, like the forest itself crying. And he stepped into a wall. Rather, he was through another wall of fire that he didn't seek. And in so doing he was in the flames gathered around him coming with a fury and force. Willie was tossed (he felt it was a dream, dreaming and fearful at the same time: he was in the fire hearing it, feeling the heat, screaming outside himself, a full-throated scream, yet outside it as an observer who is dreaming); he was tossed about and Willie was no longer Willie. He was Rabbit now, and henceforth could *think* like Tom Hare. He knew what the intellectual Tom Hare was thinking. *Why am I dying? I'm only twenty-two, for Chrissakes! I'm only twenty-two! Spare me this agony! I want to go now. I want it to be over! This fire shelter, it's stuck. Can't get it out of my backpack. Christ! In my hour of need, I believe again. I'm sorry I doubted you. But don't you see, intellectually there were many faults in the world as it unfolds. Faults with the scaffolding. The church didn't hold together, not for me. Maybe I questioned too much. Was that my fault, is that why I'm dying here, consumed by this flame? I'm lying down now, got the fire shelter out, am rolling into it, don't have time . . . is that my arm burning? My face is exploding, hair on fire beneath my helmet. Oh, God, my trousers are on fire. My hair, my beard!*

Willie sees now that Rabbit (he IS Rabbit (somehow!)) has rolled on his back, somehow the harsh terrible burning wind had tossed him about, and he is looking through flaming eyes to the sky, like he would have as a child before he began to read

Aquinas, beyond the Bible, when he had begun to question the Bible -- has gathered his strength. *Am I to die? No, I believe you God, if you are there, you UNDERSTAND everything! I don't have to beg in my final hour. I simply have to accept you if you do exist. That's how I'll go out. If you exist and are merciful, as they say, I don't have to change my views, I don't have to lie. If you live, I CANNOT lie.*

Willie came to when he got to the bus. It was a bus this time. A yellow school bus. The National Guard truck was transporting another crew. The field where they were gathered was now a muddy wallow interspersed with green alfalfa. Further back Murph kept an eye on Willie, figuring the boss man was going through what he, Murph, had gone through in the Marines, seeing his past, present and future all at once. Most GI's in combat forgot that, though they talked about it there on the line. He certainly had not forgotten, and could see it in Willie. He nudged Henry. "Do you see it in Willie?"

Henry nodded. He and Murph seemed to dredge up the past when they were together. Near the fires during infrequent breaks they would ask each other about events not discussed with others, not even with Ricci, the Air Force vet. Ricci had been a B-52 crewman but that was another world. They did let the kid, Jeremy Luna, listen in sometimes. He was Henry's cousin, Murph reasoned.

"What the fuck?" Murph whispered.

"Mouse is trying to keep him alive, pushing him to do his job," Henry said. "I don't have any use for Mouse, but he IS trying to push Willie."

"You think?"

"Something's pulling Willie down. Flattening him out, bro'."

"Like the fire, maybe?" Murph quipped. He shrugged at his own comment.

"Yeah, maybe this is when people start to die. If it was Vietnam, they would start to die. Not knowing why."

"You don't mean literally?"

"Fuck no. I mean start to doubt theirselves," Henry said.

"Themselves, yeah. I'm figuring fighting fires is nowhere as dangerous as where we've been."

"You dodged a lot more bullets than I did, bro'."

"But we had more protection. You were Recon, Henry. If they caught you, they cut your balls off."

"I saw Marines missing their testicles, when the NVA overran their position."

Murph nodded slowly, looking through an old, faded memory. "Yeah, I know."

Henry's own recent memory was of burnt trucks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, deuce-an- a-halves hit by napalm, the drivers burnt to cinder at the wheel. Henry and five other men had erased their tracks behind them in the powdery ash. It was a moonlit night and they were setting up an ambush. Intel told them the traffic would continue. Up the road where the major damage had been done by a B-52 raid (was Ricci in one of the bombers?) the road crews had quickly scurried out of underground shelters to repair the roads. Corduroy roads constructed of logs from adjacent forests hidden in caves for such an eventuality. American planes would come to bomb, and they would come again. Men would die. But the crews would come out, braving the danger of being caught in the open, braving sudden ambushes by American Rangers or LRRPs (Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrols) like Henry's team. Henry had gunned

down men and women of such work crews and had had to run long distances to escape chase teams of specialized LRRP-hunting NVA teams. In that case helicopter gunships had provided cover for them to their pickup point. But it had been a hairbreadth's rescue.

They were comfortable with each other, Murph and Henry. There was something in the eyes they both understood. They each had things they kept even from each other, though. Things too terrible that even they had not exactly understood. Things they could not face at night. When they got older, when the years mellowed them out, they both expected they would be able to figure it all out. But another part of themselves said it would be forgotten. They were still very young and had no real inkling of what the future would bring. In the bright glare of day what they had seen in Vietnam, their lives revealed in a singular moment – past, present and future – thankfully became a fantasy. Or a mirage. Only in unanticipated moments of clarity could they visit that moment, but then it would disappear like a dream you can't quite remember. You remember a piece of it, like a puzzle broken off the main piece, landing on the floor. Like a single vague incident that nibbles at the edge of a significant dream. Things too terrible to remember clearly. Maybe when they got older they would remember.

To remember a face.

A woman dead in a shallow pool after a heavy rain. A woman in black pajamas. The wrecked vehicle nearby.

Rangers hurriedly picking up notebooks if they could find them. A wallet.

Then the rain coming down. Another ambush.

Henry had been there before. But in another year, earlier. He was older than he looked. Had been on the HCM Trail when it was a bicycle trail. No, that was an uncle ten years older. The uncle, another link to the past, as he himself was a link to the past for his cousin, Jeremy Luna. Funny how in reverie you made his history your own, Henry thought. And Jeremy will make my own history his.

END



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