

Wildfire

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For months there was no rain or very little, the mountain grasses were dry, prone to lightning strikes and wildfires, and Frank could see the river far from his little cabin, just beyond Federal land, drying up before his eyes. The snowmelt had been early this year, the result of less snow and higher than normal temperatures, and the river and its inhabitants were suffering. The trout had moved downriver to the deepest pools they could and Frank noticed more tracks by the water than usual—coyotes, elk, bighorn sheep and others—all stepping on the other and not caring. Thirst will do that.

The wildfire came up suddenly, with no warning, fueled by hot, westerly winds that started in the valley and spread along the side of the ridge, far away at first. Frank could see them from his cabin. He built it after first moving to Colorado, well north of Denver, in the 1980s never expecting to actually live here. There were jobs in those days, a series of warehouses for a year or two here, five years there, and then a couple of factory jobs that lasted until the company moved. The money was good enough for a small place and a cabin, where Frank fished for trout and took his girlfriends, later his two wives. He never saw himself working with his back much but there he was, despite the books that he read, the college classes that he took. Frank hoped he would do something lasting with his life—paint some pictures maybe, write a book—something that would outlast his earthly existence. The way it was, he was prone to the vagaries of a company staying or going,

he was relying on his back staying strong, tough enough when you're a kid, harder when you're old. *I didn't mean it to be.*

After he divorced his second wife, Frank was fifty-three and he swore off women, certainly he swore off passion. *If I get married again, it'll be for a better reason than love.* He considered his past failures, all his mistakes, the children that neither wife wanted nor bore, and asked it weighed on him like some kind of rock you never let go of; his mistakes, what he could have done better, what he had done wrong and might have improved if only he did. Frank took the blame but taking the blame didn't change anything really—he was still divorced, still working at jobs that didn't satisfy him and still trying to hold down the accelerator in life. It was going too fast for him to figure it out.

After the last company went bankrupt, Frank assessed his chances, laying out the cards for his future. He was getting old for this shift work and asking around for more wasn't any easier; a foreman wanted younger men, and Frank struggled with temporary jobs for a bit before he found his dream job—at a bookstore. It was a big used shop run by a veteran of the book trade, and Frank hardly got started when his boss began to give signals.

The book business is changing. Everything's online and it's cheaper.

Frank's job really wasn't much better than a factory slot. He hauled books upstairs and he hauled them back downstairs again, he hauled them from trucks and estate sales and he hauled them from sellers and he hauled them to buyers who were always negotiating. Frank imagined that working in a bookstore, especially a used one, involved a lot of slow reading and consideration of titles but found that it was little of that; just lugging, packing and shelving, warehouse work without the wages.

After a month his boss called him over, same tired look in the eyes that Frank had seen from other bosses over the years.

“I just want to tell you, Frank, I’m selling out. The books are going to one of those mega sites in the desert where maybe they can make a living, I can’t.”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before,” said Frank.

“I know it. If you want I’ll stake you a few thousand books of your own, if you want to make a go of it. Your own bookshop. I won’t need them and what they’re paying me—”

Frank considered the offer in two seconds.

“I’ll take you up on that. Not sure when I’ll open or if I will.”

“Fine with me. Read them if you want. Point is, I’m out.”

And so a month later Frank took possession of two thousand books, more than he could haul at once with his truck but really less than he could store. They sat in his living room while he looked for work, boxed and labeled—science, poetry, fiction—this is what he took, not the others, not what he wasn’t interested in. He liked stories and he liked listening to words that, strung together, had a meaning that seemed to evade him, like chasing something in the dark, and he liked science to remind him that the dark wasn’t really so. The boxes took over his living room. It was an apartment. He sold the house long ago to wife number two and split the proceeds with her but he kept the cabin, a cabin for the future, Frank thought, but the more he struggled with finding work the more the cabin didn’t look like a distant possibility, but a reality.

He went through his budget and calculated his meager savings.
At this rate, they’ll be gone in a year. I have one year and then nothing. I’ll

be nothing. Back to the library he went, back to the newspaper, where he used to get work regularly but now seldom did, and back to the computer which he found he was too old to keep up with. While he waited for work he read and while he read he also fretted; the bill for this, his life, was coming due, already mailed, and Frank could feel the postman at the door.

Work came with a temporary packing job that lasted until Christmas and then another that ran until Easter but then spring ran dry and this is when Frank made the decision: he'd move to the cabin, live off his land, read his books, maybe get a store later.

The cabin itself was sparse. There was a pallet bed built by Frank himself, raised, with a small kitchen, wood stove and space for eating plus a chair and bookshelves, lots of these, books occupied every single available space in the cabin—around window frames, in the outhouse, walling in the bed. Frank left some space for essentials of course: a couple of fly rods, his shotgun, snow shoes, rucksack, and tire chains, but mostly it was books and wood in there, and if you counted the novels and poetry between the covers, it was all wood, wood just waiting to burn.

Frank looked out one morning and saw the smoke. A thin trail, blacker than the sky at night and faintly acrid, it hung like a damp sheet over the mountains, above the valleys. It didn't worry him. The fire service acted plenty fast in these parts.

The next morning the smoke was thicker, heavier.

A man from the service drove up Frank's road with a warning.

"We're just alerting folks. Keep an eye out. You might have to move."

A few days later the smoke died down some and Frank relaxed.

Good men, these. They're working. But just in case, Frank went down to

Even a smear of water not more than a light hike from his cabin. He could see it from his window, blue ribbon trout water. The river was usually high from snowmelt and full of rainbows and cutthroats which Frank picked off for dinner but the fish were all gone, and the water was a slip of gravel twisting into sky. Not much there. A trickle, ankle deep at the head of the bank where people kept waiting for rain and the service kept waiting for it too, putting out any sparks, telling folks to be careful, increasing the alerts. Meanwhile the fires would get started, lightning strikes mostly, and these would be fought but the smoke stayed on the horizon, it kept to the valleys reminding everyone that nothing had changed. And the man showed up again, looking tired this time. He said, "There's still work up there on the stage." Frank said, "I see the smoke," and Frank said, "There'll be smoke until winter, I'm afraid."

Frank did three things: he watched for smoke, he read, and he checked on the river. Sometimes he did all three at once, sometimes he switched off. Usually he'd read by the river or he'd watch for smoke from his porch or he checked the river from the hill above. From there he could see the twist of things, the grasses creeping closer to the banks standing for who's there and the banks turning color, like clay, hard clay. When the man returned next he looked worried.

"You'd better make plans. The smoke's moving."

"I've seen it."

"Then you've seen the winds. They're shifting."

"You need help up there?"

"How's your back?"

“Strong enough.”

“We need it then.”

The man told Frank where they were, how to reach them and what to bring: pickax, shovel, saw—the tools of the firefighter out here. And then he told Frank what he already suspected. It wasn't clear they could contain it, that he had to get his place ready, water down what he could, save what he needed. Frank looked at the books. Everything else could go in the truck. His clothes, the rods and shotgun, his gear, all stored, but the books were a problem. They were tinder, they were old and a match waiting to spark.

Then he got an idea. He boxed the pile up and took them to the river where he found a gravel bar, in the middle, and he started there, stacking, one after the other then covering the boxes with a tarp. The river might give him a chance, it just might hold off the flames if the wildfire came this way. None of this was original of course. Frank read about early settlers doing exactly the same thing in novels, parking their wagons on islands and surrounding themselves with water and making fire breaks, his thought exactly. Frank burned a bit of the grass carefully around the banks, like he would on the fire patrol, and he did the same around his cabin, hoping this would do, and he left for the mountains.

The mountains were alive with men and flames. The men had come in from California and Montana and were getting the federal wage which now Frank was getting too, working and building berms and breaks, setting backfires and trying to make headway. The underbrush was heavy and dense, thick with dead trees and this made the fires angry,

coming at the men. Frank worked day and night, hardly sleeping, eating only rations when they were finally doled out, and the job never ended. Winds would shift and the men were off again, fighting somewhere else, and then counter winds would come and they'd change directions, dogs chasing their own tails.

Then there was the lightning. Storms started new fires and the men began to fear the late afternoon. Frank could see them building at the high altitudes, thin wisps of papery black that would gather and coalesce into something fierce, but there was never any rain, what the men pointed out.

We need rain. Why aren't we getting rain?

Frank heard the rains were east, over the range, but never here. Something about the winds.

Until we get rain, we'll be battling this.

One week became two. The grasses were even drier, walking through them sounding like walking over chalk and the men did their best, fighting the storms, fighting the wind. It was past threatening his cabin now with all the changes but Frank stayed on anyway, part was the pay but he also wanted to see this through. Man versus nature had an allure and he was in the middle of it, digging his trenches, cutting trees, mending his back when he could.

And then they got a break. A thunderhead.

We'll get rain here, boys, for sure.

It began, steady and hard. The men worked through the rain, a turn in the battle, and they pushed to the center of the wildfire with more rain, a downpour now, sloshing on the ground, pooling mud. Frank saw what rain did, tamping everything. Soon the underbrush was

wet and the moisture acted like a collar, closing the wildfire in, cutting it off, and now there were signs of it choking.

The rain continued steady for the next day into night and when Frank got up the following morning, he told the foreman he had to go.

“The last battle and you want to go?”

“I have to. My cabin.”

“This is saving everyone’s cabin.”

“I have my reasons,” said Frank. The books.

“We need you.”

Frank considered just walking off the job, leaving the wildfire behind, but he had bonded with the men, he’d seen a larger purpose fighting this fire had, like he never had a purpose before. Frank had worked jobs, jobs that ended at dinnertime, jobs that could close up for little reason other than a change of locale. He was never needed before. Even his two wives didn’t need him. They had their own jobs, one had an actual career as a nurse, so there was something else. Frank had nothing. He had some stories, a sense that he wanted to be remembered and little else. Now he was wanted. That meant something.

“They’ll remember this, Frank, what we did here.”

There won’t be markers erected in their honor or plaques citing what they did, but people will know it, said the foreman, there’ll be a future, something measureable, with kids going to school, families happy, something that Frank will see every day.

It took two more afternoons of rain and work to see it this way. The fire died little by little, from scrub oak to scrub oak, from lodgepole to

lodgpole, until they were down to the last flames. The rain kept up, punctuating the defeat.

And still it rained.

As Frank made his way back home he knew what he would see. Already nature was flipping signals, going from fire season to rainy autumn. There was a rumor of a mudslide far up caused from the deforestation. The fire had burnt everything to the ground and now the ground was bare, unable to hold the water. It was a new problem that Frank could see walking up his road. The river was up, flowing hard, flowing madly. The little gravel island had washed away and with it everything else—the tarpaulin, the boxes of books, all gone. Now the water was lapping past the bank and over it.

Frank considered his library, now floating away, waterlogged and stuck together probably, the exposed rocks tearing away at the cardboard boxes and books, just words now, they were torn and tumbling and shearing into pieces. Nature was claiming everything here—the future, the past, every aspiration of making something last—everything was now, this minute. Frank thought about his jobs, always throwing these out into the future, hoping they'd last. It was mistake, all that. The only future was today.

For the next afternoon the rain increased, harder than before. Inches of rain. A new weather pattern, one that hadn't been seen in decades, now closed over the mountains like a tropical storm. Frank started getting ready to move to higher ground when the man came again, looking even worse.

"We're warning folks. The water's high."

"I'm moving."

“Good. We’re worried about the earthen dam.”

“The town?”

“They’re sandbagging as we speak.”

Frank looked at his cabin. He studied his land, a place he was only borrowing and then someone else would borrow and then someone after them, all borrowers, these land owners. He was just one of many passing through this life, thinking about himself mostly and maybe that was the issue. *You think about yourself so much that you can’t consider much else.*

“You need help?” asked Frank.

“How’s your back?”

“Strong enough.”

“We’ll need it then.”

And Frank packed up. He looked behind, smiled, and knew he wouldn’t be coming back. □